Appeared in - The Australian

Death of a Salesman
by Arthur Miller

State Theatre Company of South Australia

Dunstan Playhouse
Adelaide Festival Centre
30 July.
Until 14 August. Bookings BASS 131 246
Tickets $17-$45.

Arthur Miller subtitled it - “Certain Private Conversations in two Acts and a Requiem,” but Death of a Salesman has been part of a very public conversation for more than fifty years. The figure of Willy Loman, Miller has suggested, is a tragic one, his fall as great as any king, as inevitable as Oedipus. And the society which created Willy Loman, which puffed him up and fed his dreams, and then just as surely beat him down again, has much to answer for as well.

In this excellent production from the State Theatre Company of South Australia director Rosalba Clemente captures the sinewy strength of Miller’s text and justifies the playwright’s ambition for the play. Cath Cantlon’s impressive set rises from the modest kitchen, with its time-payment refrigerator, to a mezzanine where the family shares unquiet sleep, then up to vertical wire cages suggesting the skyscrapers of any metropolis. It is functional, yet nightmarish, especially with Mark Shelton’s sometimes lurid, always interrogating lighting.

No-one escapes scrutiny here, not least Willy Loman himself, played splendidly by William Zappa. He enters looking haggard and dog-tired, his dignity in peril in braces and hoisted up tweeds, his accent a Brooklyn whine with a rise of futile defiance. But just as he pummels his family - wife Linda, and Happy and Biff, those lost boys with optimistic nicknames - the world pummels him.

Stalked by the legendary success of his brother Ben (Edwin Hodgeman), incredulous that the firm he has served would cut him loose, he is oblivious to the friendship of his neighbour Charlie (Don Barker). Zappa carries Loman’s excruciation through to extinction. Everyone sees it coming and no-one can prevent it.
That is where Miller’s tragedy lies and every performance illuminates this terrible spiral. Margot Fenley is strong as Linda, especially in act two, and Justin Moore and Nathaniel Davison are also first rate. Moore captures Biff’s disillusionment while Davison’s Hap is hapless indeed. Don Barker and Edwin Hodgeman provide staunch support, as does Brendan Rock as Howard, the manager, too young to remember Willy’s accomplishments, or to care.

Miller’s play treads a fine line and this production achieves that. We get irritated by Willy’s delusions and his mulish devotion to them. We want to disregard him as pathetic and unsophisticated, but in its stature and convincing detail Zappa’s performance will not allow that. Attention must be paid, the text says. And, in the best State Theatre Company production for quite some time, Rosalba Clemente, William Zappa and their collaborators make us take notice.