



'Salesman' shows all its power

BY TOM BUTLER • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL • MARCH 16, 2010

"Death of a Salesman" has been a staple of the American theater since 1949. It has long been a classroom staple as well. It takes a production like the one staged by the University of Delaware Resident Ensemble Players to remind us of the impact Arthur Miller created with Willy Loman and his family.

Director Ethan McSweeney presents a clear and superbly staged rendition, emphasizing the specificity and concreteness of the period and the language. This raises the poignancy of the universal themes of generational conflict and illusions.

Stephen Pelinski gives Willy a distinct New York accent and flat working-class inflection that make the bravado of his public persona as a "well-liked" traveling salesman all the more vulnerable. Pelinski is subtle when he moves the audience away from the reality of the current struggles of the 60-year old collapsing man and into the overlapping series of memories of previous failures and omissions.

Kathleen Pirkl Tague is magnificent as Linda, Willy's enduring wife. She, too, captures the idiom of the 1940s and makes Miller's vivid lines stinging. "Attention must be paid" to Willy, and Tague keeps this motto as her focus. Her final scene at Willy's grave literally stunned the audience.

This is a play about illusion and disillusion, about dreams that are valuable and those that are crippling. Michael Gotch plays Biff, the fallen athlete who is too quick to steal what he cannot earn and too weak to confront his own limitations. His failures destroy Willy's dreams of success in the next generation. Gotch needs to be confident and engaging when he portrays the young Biff of Willy's memories but battered and defeated as the itinerant laborer who regularly wanders back home. Mic Matarrese does excellent work as Willy's other son, Happy, a philandering braggart who suffers from many of his father's follies, especially with women.

The storyline becomes increasingly painful as Willy drops deeper into his own world of guilt and imagined escape. The image of his brother Ben, played as a white-clad dandy by Steven Hauck, constantly reminds Willy that a man can walk into the jungle broke and come back with diamonds. This specter of the path not taken finally goads Willy into suicide because his \$20,000 life insurance policy might allow Biff a new opportunity. The discovery of Willy's betrayal of Linda with a woman on the road triggered Biff's long spiral into failure. Willy sees his death as a final gift to overcome that guilt.

The supporting players, particularly Summer Hill Seven as the neighbor and Cameron Knight as his son, make solid contributions. When Seven sounds Willy's elegy, including the lines about a salesman "never turning a nut on a bolt" but getting by on "a smile and a shoeshine," the fragility of Willy's dreams and much of our current economy becomes obvious.

Lee Savage creates a striking and functional two-level set including towering brick walls that create exactly the claustrophobic feel described by the characters.

This production of "Death of a Salesman" is a perfect opportunity to experience the full emotional power of this American masterpiece.