

Buy Buy Salesman

Bas Bleu tackles Arthur Miller's not-so-modern-day classic.

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Willy Loman is liked, but he isn't well liked. He's a man full of contradictions but little else, a pessimistic optimist, a good but terrible father, a devoted cheating husband. His best friend can barely stand to be around him, and though he makes a (clear throat here) living as a salesman, he can't sell ice cream to a fat kid.

If there's one thing unequivocal about him, it's that he's a failure. Even his suicide attempts turn out to be nothing other than cries for help—until his final act. You almost wish he'd die sooner, to put himself out of his misery, along with everyone that is subjected to his heartrending optimism.

Day in and day out for over half a century, Willy has been dragging his sorry ass across the stage. His ragged suit was worn by countless well-known actors—Dustin Hoffman, George C. Scott, John Goodman and Brian Dennehy (!?!)—all of whom somehow managed to take Loman's *Everyman* of 1948 New York and infuse him with both regret and pride.

In Bas Bleu Theatre's faithful version of the late Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Billy Thornton (no, not the famous Billy Bob, but there's a thought) is no exception. His hand-dog demeanor and blubbery proclamations make the pathetic palpable. Thornton resembles a dejected Donald Rumsfeld—who himself is quite the seller, making millions in his glory days at Searle taking poison and passing it off as sugar—a ghost of a capitalist wending his way through hard reality and fuzzy reverie.

What exactly Loman is selling isn't clear (though it's not cars or refrigerators), and that's part of the timelessness of the

piece. It could be iPods for all we care, but what he's really trying to do is sell his version of the American Dream to his sons, who aren't buying.

Biff just wants to work out on a ranch in the wide-open spaces, and Happy seems, well, happy to spend his meager salary wining and dining and you-know-what-else-ing the local harlots. It's not that Biff's a klepto or Happy casts his seed too widely; they're getting by just fine. It's Willy's dream that is to blame, a vision with a tragic factory flaw.



Billy Thornton (right) as Willy Loman.

The point you're missing, Willy, is you don't have to be well liked, hardworking and honest—or almost honest—to make it in this

world. In fact, it's detrimental. Look at your late brother Ben, for chrissakes, he was loaded and he was the biggest dick on the planet. This is a dog-eat-dog system, and the nice dogs get mauled.

In the director's notes, Morris Burns stresses the familial, which is a solid theme. Oddly, he neglects to mention that this play, moreover, is a lasting indictment of capitalism at the same time that it nonetheless sympathizes with the common man caught up in its web of desire. But perhaps that would be too obvious, akin to coming right out and calling Miller a commie.

Still, the message is too clubbing-you-over-the-head insistent not to mention it, even though its wit is dampened amid the absurdity of our own hyper-consumer, Wal-Martesque ownership society: A man's skill as a hunter is substituted by a man's ability to figure wealth out of a widget. This primitive past is latent in the stark sales lingo: "slaughtered them," "knock 'em dead," "business is...murderous," even Uncle Ben's famous phrase, "When I was 17 I walked into the jungle, and when I was 21 I walked out. And by God, I was rich." The only way physical prowess pays off is if you work for the New York Giants.

Miller's play reeks, just a tad, of a Soviet parable on the inherent evils of corrupt capitalism. And though I'm all for the common man, I'm also aware of the risk playwrights take putting your politics where your pen is. Mostly, but not always, Miller avoids the threat of one-dimensional characters in a two-dimensional world. And he does it with a dash of existentialism and a touch of Freud—a confounding love affair here, a daydream sequence there.

Perhaps Burns' sentimental angle helps it to avoid this pitfall and lend the characters a greater sense of humanity amid Miller's inhuman world, though some of the acting was glaring in this respect. Kurt Brighton as

Biff and Gregory J. Adams as Happy had their inconsistencies, but it's hard to blame them, as Miller forces them to play the part of Wally and Beaver Cleaver concurrently with the role of a criminal and a gigolo.

Willy is most in danger of flat-lining, as he fits too neatly into the stereotype he ironically helped create, filled by characters from Jack Lemmon in *Glengarry Glen Ross* to poor ol' Gil in "The Simpsons." But Thornton manages to escape by playing along and not exaggerating an already slightly hyperbolic character.

And Frances Burns does a lot with what little Willy's wife, Linda, has been given to work with—including brains—as have all of the woman characters in the play, which is a shame. Perhaps Miller saw in them what he'd later see in Marilyn Monroe.

All of the actors managed to handle well the difficult scenes (like the card game with Charlie, played by Marlin May, where Willy lives a reality and a dream at the same time), the tough transitions (mostly those in and out of Willy's fantasies, which are bathed in an uneasy green light), and Miller's intricate dialogue.

The director deserves commendation—a raise, perhaps?—for bringing it all together in a fairly seamless fashion. And though there were some minor defects in the execution, like an occasional slip-up in lines, I still bought it, and I was pleased with it, like a good capitalist.

Death of a Salesman is showing at the Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins, on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and on Sundays at 2:30 p.m., through May 28.

