

Director Burns Brings out Best in "Salesman" Cast



By Kate Forgach

Much anticipation has surrounded Bas Bleu Theatre's production of "Death of a Salesman."

At the center of this ballyhoo is an unassuming man -- veteran director Morris Burns. Recently retired after 42 years as a professor of theatre at Colorado State University, Burns has chosen one humdinger of a play for his coming-out debut.

"Salesman" productions are primarily judged by the quality of the acting. Thus an inadequate cast can't fall back on fancy sets, lush costumes or other such bells and whistles.

Burns could not have chosen a better script than Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize winner for his post-retirement debut.

Known as a consummate actors' director, Burns spent years drawing out the best in his students with his perpetual enthusiasm and positivity. That same mark can be seen here in a strong cast who have created a cohesively empathetic world.

At the center of this world is Willy Loman, a traveling salesman hustling

for a living while dangling at the end of his emotional rope.

Actor Billy Thornton's salesman is a lumpy potato sack. His end-of-day exhaustion -- with footsteps propelled by gravity -- is a weariness many of us have shared.

Willy set himself on this path when he linked his self image to his career. Facing failure, he is left without an identity and an unacceptable future.

With so many facing layoffs in Fort Collins, this theme could resonate deeply for some.

Yet we continue to reach for the American Dream, as does Willy. All his life, he has tried to imbue this philosophy in his sons, with little success.

Kurt Brighton's Biff is the eldest son, who has turned dissolute roamer. Once a high school football star, an



Frances Burns and Bill Thornton, as Linda and Willy Loman, share a rare tender moment in their tragic lives, during OpenStage Theatre's production of "Death of a Salesman."

unnamed incident has turned him against Willy and his tarnished dream.

Younger brother Happy, played here by Gregory J. Adams, maintains an external facade of a successful businessman. In reality he is a vicious womanizer who bears the marks of Willy's worst traits.

Although Adams was excellent as Werner Heisenberg in OpenStage Theatre's "Copenhagen," his Happy only comes to life in the restaurant scene.

Willy's wife Linda is the emotional core of this maelstrom. Frances Burns (Morris' wife) shines in this spotlight role. Best known for her work in Bas Bleu's "Three Viewings," Frances reveals the tough, realistic aspects of a character

too often portrayed as a martyr. Her face registers her conflicted emotions every moment Linda is on stage.

Eldest son Biff's protagonist role serves to awaken Willy's old hopes and boiling resentments. Through Miller's flashbacks, we see the years that created the father's hopes, and later dashed them.

Brighton's dynamic energy and charisma as the young Biff create a stark contrast against his failure in later life. Brighton doesn't quite connect with the same power, however, when he and Willy battle as adults.

Yet Brighton, last seen as Louis in Bas Bleu's "Angels in America," brings new insight to a memorably painful line. "Pop, I'm a dime a dozen and so are you."

In today's society, where every child receives a trophy for simply showing up, Brighton's Biff would do more than disdain such a reward. He'd quit the team.

Bas Bleu Theatre's production of "Death of a Salesman" runs through May 28. Curtain is 7:30 p.m. for Thursday, Friday and Saturday performances. Sunday matinees are at 2:30 p.m. Tickets are \$17/adults, \$12/seniors and \$10/students. Two-for-one tickets are offered for Thursdays and Sundays. Info 970.498.8949 or www.basbleu.org.

