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## Blah Bas Bleu

**The Fort Collins company fails to squeeze any juice from *Death of a Salesman*.**

BY JULIET WITTMAN

In the last few years, Bas Bleu has become a beacon of theatrical inventiveness and energy in Fort Collins. Play selection is always intelligent and sometimes daring, and execution is usually exemplary. The company began this season with an ambitious endeavor: In conjunction with Openstage, they presented *Angels in America* in two parts, each overseen by a different director; in the process, the variegated strands of Tony Kushner's shining and evocative piece were illuminated. Bas Bleu has recently moved from a tiny jewel of a theater and is personalizing a larger new space, with moody photographs in the lobby and little jokes on the walls of the restrooms. So it gives me no pleasure at all to say that the company simply can't afford a production as flat as this *Death of a Salesman*.

The play comes weighted down by its own significance and fame. Arthur Miller's death in February inspired encomia in all the serious newspapers here and overseas, as well as extensive examinations of his work and his place in the literary pantheon. Miller brought a distinct sensibility to American culture: Jewish, far-seeing, humanistic. *Salesman*, written in 1949, electrified the theatrical world for several reasons. It tossed aside the conventions of the well-made three-act play years before they were finally laid to rest in the rebellious mid-'50s. It criticized the post-war myth of the American dream -- the idea that any citizen, no matter what his class or status, could find success and that his children would be even more successful. It revealed the shallowness of the materialism and commercialism that were beginning to define American culture (and that have accelerated to such a degree that it's now impossible to separate art from advertising, profound personal belief from speeches crafted by pollsters and marketers, and a politician from a product). *Death of a Salesman* was also notable because it challenged the conventional definition of a tragic hero as a man who has fallen from a great height. Miller's protagonist, Willy Loman, may share Greek heroes' flaws (blindness, pride, self-delusion), but his life and his losses are mundane. Still, Miller insisted that they were consequential; they mattered. "Attention must be paid," says Loman's wife, Linda. And later, neighbor Charley delivers the famous eulogy about a salesman riding into the blue "on a smile and a shoeshine." When customers stop returning the smile, Charley adds, "that's an earthquake...and you're finished."

But viewing the play through cynical contemporary eyes, it's hard to find anything to admire in Willy Loman. He's petulant and ill-tempered, so full of idiotic fantasies that he ignores his wife and is blind to the needs of his two sons, each of whom he damages in a different way, but with equal severity.

William A. Cotton



**Frances Burns and Billy Thornton in *Death of a Salesman*.**

### Details

#### ***Death of a Salesman***

Presented by Bas Bleu Theatre Company through May 28, 1-970-498-8949,

[www.basbleu.org](http://www.basbleu.org)

**Where:** 401 Pine Street, Fort Collins

The play is heavy with symbolism and the protagonist's self-pity; there's not a single moment of irony or humor. When it begins, Willy is pretty much at rock bottom, and there's little suspense or uncertainty about how he'll end up. The sons' ideas and aspirations may have seemed fresh fifty years ago, but they're well-worn tropes by now. Biff is the lad whose only success was as a high schooler on the football field, but who has achieved nothing since and dreams of a clean, new start in the West. Happy, neglected by his parents, has become a pinched version of his father, a self-absorbed self-deceiver, but with no dreams of transcendence.

*Salesman* also has its strengths -- moments of poetry and passion, a free-flowing, expressive structure that interweaves dream, fantasy, memory and reality and was form-breaking for its time and place. To succeed now, it requires incisive direction and a very strong cast. These elements are lacking at Bas Bleu.

Billy Thornton captures Willy Loman's pathos, and some of his scenes are quite moving. But he finds no contrasts in the role. He never communicates the excitement of the fantasies that keep Willy going, instead sounding one plaintive, tired note throughout. Linda Loman is a depressing limp rag of a woman as written, risk-averse, mindlessly supportive of her husband and uninvolved with her sons -- except when she rebukes them for neglecting their father. Frances Burns lacks the energy to vivify this role, and it doesn't help that, as directed, she almost never engages in any independent physical activity. She just hangs on her husband or kneels by him or sits at his side -- all the while gazing at his face with open-mouthed adoration. Kurt Brighton has some effective scenes as Biff, though he could be more emotionally invested in the role. (At the moment when Biff actually broke down and wept, I kept trying to figure out if those were real tears. They didn't seem to be.) I'd like to see Gregory J. Adams -- whose emotions you can sometimes see churning beneath Happy's practiced smile -- in the hands of a stronger director. Marlin May is pleasant as solid, good-natured Charley, but the playing in some of the smaller roles is at no more than a high school level.

Almost twenty years ago, I saw *Death of a Salesman* at Germinal Stage Denver, with Ed Baierlein as Willy Loman and a promising young actor called Conor O'Farrell as Biff. (O'Farrell, who trained at the University of Denver, is now working in Hollywood.) The play seemed dated then. But although I've forgotten almost every detail of that production, I'll never forget the interaction between Willy and Biff -- Baierlein's wily, fluid shiftings, the stifled, furious, anarchic energy of O'Farrell. There's no question that *Death of a Salesman* still has juice. It's just that you won't find it at Bas Bleu.