The ideal Willy Loman?

Actor Chad Davies knows a thing or two about ‘Death of a Salesman’ character’s plight

By Wallace Baine
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Of all the men who have ever taken on the role of Willy Loman’s in Arthur Miller’s landmark play “Death of a Salesman,” Soquel’s Chad Davies may be the single most qualified man to do so.

We’re not talking about acting experience here. Davies has been around on local stages, sure. But his résumé is never going to be mistaken for Sir Laurence Olivier’s.

Davies is the perfect Willy Loman for the opposite reason. He’s walked a mile – maybe several miles – in Willy’s shoes.

“Death of a Salesman” is one of the most celebrated American plays of the 20th century, and it’s being staged now by the Cabrillo College Theater Arts Department at the Crocker Theatre. Davies, a veteran stage actor, had little experience with the play, other than having been forced to read it in high school like the rest of us.

Loman, you’ll remember, is the play’s beleaguered everyman protagonist, a long-time traveling salesman who has lost his fastball and who eventually gets fired, triggering a painful and confusing soul-searching about his identity as a worker and as a family man.

The play is set in the mid point of the 20th century, but Willy’s dire economic straits feel contemporary, particularly locally as the volatile high-tech sector has shed jobs in the last decade.

One of those casualties was Chad Davies. A dozen years ago, Davies was working in Silicon Valley when he was downsized. “My whole professional life basically vanished,” he said. “My career network vanished in a six- to nine-month time frame. And I had to reinvent myself.”

That disruptive process eventually led him to get a job at the Employment Development Department at the Capitola Career Center. That’s right, Davies has not only experienced a full-on Willy Loman career trauma, he now daily works with others who are in the middle of their own career shakeouts.

He’s even the same age as Willy.

“Frankly, I think that a lot of what your average American experiences today is really not any different than what your average American back then was experiencing five years after the Second World War,” said Davies, 60. “I see people like Willy Loman, or going through the same things that he did every day for the better part of the last five years.”

Davies majored in theater at San Jose State University back in the late 1970s, but put theater on the shelf to start a family and a career. When his high-tech career imploded in the early 2000s, he got himself back on stage taking roles in such productions as “The Laramie Project” and “Of Mice and Men” and with such companies as Jewel Theatre, Pisces Moon and Friends of Gus.

Willy Loman, however, is by far the largest role Davies has ever taken on – it’s one of the largest roles in theater history, in fact. In his view, Willy is a sympathetic character, a man undone by his naiveté about the system to which he gave the best years of his life.

“He can be clueless in how the world works,” said Davies, who plays Willy at Cabrillo through Nov. 23. “But that doesn’t change the basic sincerity in how he does his work, and his desire to leave something for his wife and two sons.

I identify with that.”

Even though Willy’s job of traveling door-to-door selling things has been rendered obsolete in today’s world, “Death of a Salesman,” said Davies, has lessons for those negotiating the uncertain and unpitying world of today’s troubled economy.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that Arthur Miller really understood, when he wrote this play, some of the essential flaws in the American capitalistic system. And this play is there to present that to people.”

ARTHUR MILLER’S ‘DEATH OF A SALESMAN’
Produced by: Cabrillo College Theater Arts Department
Directing by: Wilma Marcus Chandler
When: Through Nov. 23
Where: Crocker Theater on the campus of Cabrillo College, Aptos.
Tickets: $19 general; $17 students/seniors; $9 Cabrillo students with ID.
Details: www.cabrillovapa.com

Chad Davies tackles the complex role of Willy Loman in Cabrillo College’s ‘Death of a Salesman.’