**THEATER REVIEW**

**Intimacy battles with grandeur in ‘Death of a Salesman’**

By Joanne Engelhardt

There’s no getting around the fact that Arthur Miller’s remarkable angst-ridden 1949 play “Death of a Salesman” is one about everyone should see at least once in a lifetime. It’s an essential part of the great American playbook and is as relevant today as it was when it won both the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play.

That said, the production now playing through Nov. 23 at Cabrillo College has many of the ingredients of Miller’s masterful work, while sometimes trying too hard to make it memorable. In other words, it didn’t need quite as many bells and whistles.

What it needed, perhaps, was a smaller venue like Crocker’s Black Box Theater next door to the main stage. The expansive main stage is wonderful for big, bold musicals. But “Death” is a sensitive, intimate drama and Willy Loman’s sad, downward spiral into oblivion is best when seen and felt up close and personal.

Nevertheless, the cast tries mightily to emblazon every nuance of Miller’s revered story onto our collective psyche. This is a dysfunctional family of the first order.

Willy (a commendable, all-out effort by Chad Davies) has been a traveling salesman for 36 long years, but at age 63, his mental state is now fragile, and he’s just as likely to be walking around talking to his dead brother Ben or convincing himself that son Biff is on the verge of fulfilling his youthful potential than doing his job. In fact, his complete exhaustion (and recent car accident) influence his decision to ask his boss for a desk job so he won’t have to travel anymore. He is, simply, a spent man.

Lisa Hadley is flawless as Willy’s wife, Linda. Her well-worn face shows love, pain, anger, sorrow and loyalty after a lifetime of living with her dreamer husband and two sons who, with their careless selfishness, make Willy’s life seem all the more insignificant. This is a woman who gives and gives without expecting anything in return. Hadley is simply splendid, perhaps nowhere more so than when, at play’s end, she kneels down at Willy’s grave and says, “Forgive me, dear, I can’t cry. I don’t know what it is, but I can’t cry.”

As Biff, Lucien Leutzinger effectively navigates a fine line between wanting to please Willy while also showing that he is never going to be the success his father wants him to be. Leutzinger has a way of running his fingers through his unruly hair that demonstrates both his restlessness and his disillusionment with the man he once idolized. Nat Robinson as the second (mostly forgotten) son Happy exudes just the right mix of cockiness, caring and support so that he easily comes off as the most normal member of this very messed-up family.

Both Martin Kachuck as good neighbor Charley and Brian Spencer as Willy’s white suit and hat-clad dead brother Ben also provide solid support in smaller roles. This is clearly a thoughtful, perceptive production, yet director Wilma Marcus Chandler and set designer Skip Epperson make some curious choices that sometimes get in the way. For one, why have two other actors portray “young” Biff and Happy when Leutzinger and Robinson are easily capable of handling both roles.

Then there’s the multi-level set that extends to both sides and goes up into the rafters as well as down into the orchestra pit. It’s all a bit much, because the audience sometimes must look from one area to the other, occasionally missing something happening on the other side of the stage. At times it is difficult to see what’s going on in that orchestra pit. From some seats, only the upper portion of the deliciously laughing other woman (Hannah Eckstein) is visible, and it’s virtually impossible to see what Leutzinger is doing when he finds the dreaded hose down in the basement.

Then there are the two hulking panels depicting the encroachment of the city on Willy’s Brooklyn neighborhood. Done in an abstract style, the jagged buildings seem out-of-place with the intentional ordinariness of the rest of the set.

The result is that all the characters seem dwarfed by their surroundings. Perhaps this is intended because certainly most of them are dwarfed by life as well. But with all that grandeur, it’s harder to recognize the poetry, the inevitability, the quiet despair of the Loman family. “Death of a Salesman” is an elegy, really, and quiet introspection is necessary. As the indomitable Linda admonishes her sons, “Attention must be paid.”

**ARTHUR MILLER’S ‘DEATH OF A SALESMAN’**

Produced by: Cabrillo College Theatre Arts Department

Directed by: Wilma Marcus Chandler

When: Through Nov. 23

Where: Crocker Theater on the campus of Cabrillo College, Apts

Tickets: $19 general; $17 students/seniors; $9 Cabrillo students with ID

Details: (831) 470-6154 or www.cabrillovapa.com

Steve DiBartolomeo — CONTRIBUTED