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Concept hampers 'Death of a Salesman'

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With any proven theatrical masterpiece, there is always the temptation to experiment ... like Shakespeare set in modern times or "The Glass Menagerie" with an all-black cast. Sometimes these concepts are intriguing, and sometimes they let down their stellar source material.

In Lakeland Theatre's production of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," director Martin Friedman depicts Willy Loman as an older man suffering from dementia who cannot differentiate between past and present, memory and reality. It's a bold leap, but it doesn't work.



Willy Loman (Mark Cipra), center, is deteriorating before the eyes of his wife (Maryanne Elder) and sons (Joe Pine and Christopher Richards, right). Photo/Kathy Sandham

The audience is witness to the disintegration of Willy's mind, like a split personality who hears all kinds of voices in his head. To dramatize his concept, Friedman uses a second set of younger actors to portray Willy's wife and sons at an earlier stage in life.

This merging of past and present in the same physical space is bewildering, especially for people coming to the play for the first time. It crowds the proscenium and muddies the action. In this instance, more is less.

Trad A Burns's bifurcated stage represents Willy's confused state. On one side is Willy's house. Opposite lies a duplicate image of the domicile whose skeletal framework teeters on collapse. As a result, the family home looks truncated (the boys' bedroom and the kitchen are practically on the same plane), while the flimsy structure to its right conflates all the action in one place. It proves distracting.

Although the conceit fails, it is not fatal. Both play and production rise above artifice to remind me once again why "Salesman" is, and will forever remain, an immortal work of art.

For those unfamiliar with the story, Willy Loman, at 63, is facing obsolescence as a traveling salesman after 30 years on the road. Unable to cope with the present, Willy increasingly retreats into the past. Like their father, Willy's adult sons cannot face the reality of their ordinary lives. When Willy is fired, it sets in motion tragic events. The play takes place in the last two days of Willy's life.

"Death of a Salesman," which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1949, is Miller's most important play. It contains many of the playwright's themes: tension between father and son; materialism and lure of the American Dream; the common man as tragic hero; and the

influence of memory on personality. While Willy is not Jewish, there can be little doubt that the Jewish beliefs that nurtured Miller also inform Willy's character.

Willy's tragedy is that he never found or accepted his true self – a man who loved to work outdoors with his hands, the kind of man that his eldest son Biff comes to accept as his real self by play's end.

Mark Cipra's portrait of Willy Loman is clearly that of a man losing his grip on life. Cipra makes Willy's mental deterioration almost painful to watch at times. At once explosive and angry, weary and depressed, Cipra captures the psychology of someone in physical and emotional meltdown, struggling to hold on while he deteriorates mentally and contemplates suicide.

As Linda Loman, Maryanne Elder personifies the long-suffering wife who worries over her husband, loving, babying and protecting him, even when Willy treats her with contempt. Linda sees Willy for what he is and accepts him, something Willy cannot do himself.

Christopher Richards triumphs as the troubled Biff Loman, a drifter and habitual thief. Biff is the only one in the family who frees himself from the shackles of self-delusion that enslave his younger brother Happy (a carbon copy of Willy) and his father.

Cipra and Richards fully convey the volatile relationship between Willy and Biff. Watch the alteration in Biff's face, from innocence to physical repugnance, upon realizing his father's infidelity and during the tearful confrontation when father and son make final amends – both are shattering emotional highs of the production.

Joe Pine's portrait of Happy Loman captures the shallowness and unethical side of his womanizing character. As Willy's boss Howard Wagner, Stuart Hoffman projects the cold and unfeeling corporate type for whom the bottom line is not loyalty but usefulness. Seeing Willy grovel for a desk job as Howard casts him aside is brutal.

Michael A. Green as Willy's gruff but well-meaning neighbor and friend Charley, Matt Goins as Charley's successful son Bernard, and Robert McCoy as Willy's adventuresome, rich brother Uncle Ben are sufficient in their roles.

The requiem is always wrenching. When Linda tells her now-deceased husband, "I made the last payment on the house, and there'll be nobody home," it's heartbreaking.

Despite the intrusion of a theatrical device that did not work for me, I found much of the play, when left alone, very moving.

WHAT: "Death of a Salesman"

WHERE: Civic Theatre, Lakeland Community College, 7700 Clocktower Dr., Kirtland

WHEN: Through Feb. 21

TICKETS & INFO: 440-525-7526

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