

March 30, 1984

Hoffman, 'Death of Salesman'

By FRANK RICH

As Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," Dustin Hoffman doesn't trudge heavily to the grave - he sprints. His fist is raised and his face is cocked defiantly upwards, so that his rimless spectacles glint in the Brooklyn moonlight. But how does one square that feisty image with what will come after his final exit - and with what has come before? Earlier, Mr. Hoffman's Willy has collapsed to the floor of a Broadway steakhouse, mewling and shrieking like an abandoned baby. That moment had led to the spectacle of the actor sitting in the straightback chair of his kitchen, crying out in rage to his elder son, Biff. "I'm not a dime a dozen!," Mr. Hoffman rants, looking and sounding so small that we fear the price quoted by Biff may, if anything, be too high.

To reconcile these sides of Willy - the brave fighter and the whipped child - you really have no choice but to see what Mr. Hoffman is up to at the Broadhurst. In undertaking one of our theater's classic roles, this daring actor has pursued his own brilliant conception of the character. Mr. Hoffman is not playing a larger-than-life protagonist but the small man described in the script - the "little boat looking for a harbor," the eternally adolescent American male who goes to the grave without ever learning who he is. And by staking no claim to the stature of a tragic hero, Mr. Hoffman's Willy becomes a harrowing American everyman. His bouncy final exit is the death of a salesman, all right. Willy rides to suicide, as he rode through life, on the foolish, empty pride of "a smile and a shoeshine."

Even when Mr. Hoffman's follow-through falls short of his characterization - it takes a good while to accept him as 63 years old - we're riveted by the wasted vitality of his small Willy, a man full of fight for all the wrong battles. What's more, the star has not turned "Death of a Salesman" into a vehicle. Under the balanced direction of Michael Rudman, this revival is an exceptional ensemble effort, strongly cast throughout. John Malkovich, who plays the lost Biff, gives a performance of such spellbinding effect that he becomes the evening's anchor. When Biff finally forgives Willy and nestles his head lovingly on his father's chest, the whole audience leans forward to be folded into the embrace: we know we're watching the salesman arrive, however temporarily, at the only safe harbor he'll ever know.

But as much as we marvel at the acting in this "Death of a Salesman," we also marvel at the play. Mr. Miller's masterwork has been picked to death by critics over the last 35 years, and its reputation has been clouded by the author's subsequent career. We know its flaws by heart

- the big secret withheld from the audience until Act II, and the symbolic old brother Ben (Louis Zorich), forever championing the American dream in literary prose. Yet how small and academic these quibbles look when set against the fact of the thunderous thing itself.

In "Death of Salesman," Mr. Miller wrote with a fierce, liberating urgency. Even as his play marches steadily onward to its preordained conclusion, it roams about through time and space, connecting present miseries with past traumas and drawing blood almost everywhere it goes. Though the author's condemnation of the American success ethic is stated baldly, it is also woven, at times humorously, into the action. When Willy proudly speaks of owning a refrigerator that's promoted with the "biggest ads," we see that the pathological credo of being "well liked" requires that he consume products that have the aura of popularity, too.

Still, Mr. Rudman and his cast don't make the mistake of presenting the play as a monument of social thought: the author's themes can take care of themselves. Like most of Mr. Miller's work, "Death of a Salesman" is most of all about fathers and sons. There are many father-son relationships in the play - not just those of the Loman household, but those enmeshing Willy's neighbors and employer. The drama's tidal pull comes from the sons' tortured attempts to reconcile themselves to their fathers' dreams. It's not Willy's pointless death that moves us; it's Biff's decision to go on living. Biff, the princely high school football hero turned drifter, must find the courage both to love his father and leave him forever behind.

Mr. Hoffman's Willy takes flight late in Act I, when he first alludes to his relationship with his own father. Recalling how his father left when he was still a child, Willy says, "I never had a chance to talk to him, and I still feel - kind of temporary about myself." As Mr. Hoffman's voice breaks on the word "temporary," his spirit cracks into aged defeat. From then on, it's a merciless drop to the bottom of his "strange thoughts" - the hallucinatory memory sequences that send him careening in and out of a lifetime of anxiety. Mr. Rudman stages these apparitional flashbacks with bruising force; we see why Biff says that Willy is spewing out "vomit from his mind." As Mr. Hoffman stumbles through the shadowy recollections of his past, trying both to deny and transmute the awful truth of an impoverished existence, he lurches and bobs like a strand of broken straw tossed by a mean wind.

As we expect from this star, he has affected a new physical and vocal presence for Willy: a baldish, silver-maned head; a shuffling walk; a brash, Brooklyn-tinged voice that well serves the character's comic penchant for contradicting himself in nearly every sentence. But what's most poignant about the getup may be the costume (designed by Ruth Morley). Mr. Hoffman's Willy is a total break with the mountainous Lee J. Cobb image. He's a trim, immaculately outfitted go-getter in a three-piece suit - replete with bright matching tie and handkerchief. Is there anything sadder than a nobody dressed for success, or an old man masquerading as his younger self? The star seems to wilt within the self-parodistic costume throughout the evening. "You can't eat the orange and throw away the peel!," Willy pleads to the callow young boss (Jon Polito) who fires him - and, looking at the wizened and spent Mr. Hoffman, we realize that he is indeed the peel, tossed into the gutter. Mr. Malkovich, hulking and unsmiling, is an inversion of Mr. Hoffman's father; he's what Willy might be if he'd ever stopped lying to himself. Anyone who saw this remarkable young actor as the rambunctious

rascal of "True West" may find his transformation here as astonishing as the star's. His Biff is soft and tentative, with sullen eyes and a slow, distant voice that seems entombed with his aborted teen-age promise; his big hands flop around diffidently as he tries to convey his anguish to his roguish brother Happy (Stephen Lang). Once Biff accepts who he is - and who his father is - the cathartic recognition seems to break through Mr. Malkovich (and the theater) like a raging fever. "Help him!" he yells as his father collapses at the restaurant - only to melt instantly into a blurry, tearful plea of "Help me! Help me!"

In the problematic role of the mother, Kate Reid is miraculously convincing: Whether she's professing her love for Willy or damning Happy as a "philandering bum," she somehow melds affection with pure steel. Mr. Lang captures the vulgarity and desperate narcissism of the younger brother, and David Chandler takes the goo out of the model boy next door. As Mr. Chandler's father - and Willy's only friend - David Huddleston radiates a quiet benovolence as expansive as his considerable girth. One must also applaud Thomas Skelton, whose lighting imaginatively meets every shift in time and mood, and the set designer Ben Edwards, who surrounds the shabby Loman house with malevolent apartment towers poised to swallow Willy up.

But it's Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Malkovich who demand that our attention be paid anew to "Death of a Salesman." When their performances meet in a great, binding passion, we see the transcendent sum of two of the American theater's most lowly, yet enduring, parts.