

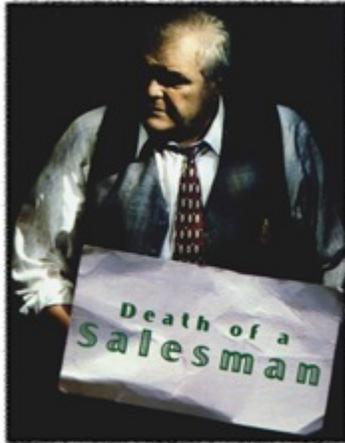
Talkin' Broadway's



Broadway Reviews

This is a *Salesman* you will remember forever.

Theatre Review by Fergus McGillicuddy



Since its first opening night 50 years ago *Death of a Salesman* has, for better or worse, become an icon of American theater. The reason is simple and straightforward. *Salesman* was and is still a powerful play. It has survived 50 years of adequate, possibly even competent productions in schools and community theatres. It has survived being included in the standard curriculum of every known English speaking educational institution. And, it has survived 50 years as the subject of analysis, interpretation, and general literary, academic and critical masturbation from both the usual suspects and - surprisingly - its author, who at times appeared not to understand the play himself.

Miller has never written elegant, polished plays, as recent Roundabout productions of *All My Sons*, *A View From the Bridge*, and the Signature Theater Company's retrospective of his work have clearly shown. *Salesman* though, most successfully transcends its faults: the imperfectly presented psychology of the characters and its awkward and at times clumsy construction. Time has also taken its toll. The technique of fluid or bent time, so theatrically innovative in the original production, is now a fairly common, possibly overused technique. Guilt, dreams and regrets are common currency in any off Broadway season.

Robert Falls, the director, has handled *Salesman* in the only way it can be effectively presented these days, as a dark portrait of a father and son's love, ever at odds with the inherent trauma, resentment, and unrealistic expectations of such a relationship, downplaying Miller's habitual speeches about What It All Means. I would be more impressed with his work here if it were not for the

physical production he offers, which is problematic.

Mark Wendland's scenery makes entirely too much noise as it moves about the stage while adding little of note to the proceedings. **Michael Philippi's** lighting aspires to the evocative and atmospheric, but ends up only annoying. **Richard Woodbury's** sound design is anemic and his original music is jazz - at least, that's what I've been told by reliable sources. Of the design team, only **Birgit Rattenborg Wise's** costumes, simple and appropriate, seem to add anything to this production.

In spite of its dismal physical production, *Salesman* - indeed, any play - needs only two things to succeed: a good script and a group of actors willing to take risks. This production has, despite its faults, a good script and is blessed with astonishing performances.

The actors attack the script as if it were fresh and slightly flawed. By ignoring *Salesman's* long and weighty history, they free themselves to make new choices, to compensate in unexpected ways for creaky techniques, and to redefine and reinvent the characters, heretofore forever frozen in time. In such a way is a powerful play - the words they speak, not the literary tradition - made even more compelling.

With this Willy Loman, **Brian Dennehy** - a damn good actor to begin with - enters the pantheon of theatrical gods. His is a performance destined for legend. This Willy Loman is a big man who can be gentle and quiet one moment, only to explode in Shakespearian anger and rage the next. This Willy Loman is an intelligent man who foolishly believes the myths he has created himself. This Willy Loman is at once brave and cowardly, aggressive and timid, loving and vengeful. This Willy Loman is a man complete unto himself. Dennehy reaches out from the stage to grab us by the throat, daring us to look away from what we see. It's not a pretty picture, for what we see is ourselves and our fathers. And we laugh and cry.

As Biff, **Kevin Anderson** matches Dennehy blow for blow. This Biff is indeed Willy's son. Where Dennehy's performance is a multifaceted crystal spinning and glittering in the dark, Anderson's is one of sustained nuance, finely colored variations on a theme of discovery and discredited illusions. Anderson shows us a son at the moment the boy becomes a man and at the moment the man, with painful and shattering results, refuses to become his father.

As Happy, **Ted Koch** ably plays the second son, the apologist eager for recognition. In a role which could too easily be played for sympathy, Koch is all the barking terrier, fighting to be allowed to play in the same game as his brother. Koch gives a bold, compelling performance which ably complements and completes this portrait of a father and his sons.

As Linda, **Elizabeth Franz** has the unenviable task of holding this production together, of channeling the energy of Dennehy, Anderson, and Koch and focusing it, giving it meaning and substance. This she does with such subtlety, such quiet assurance, and such an air of hopeful resignation I can only think of it as a performance the likes of which I will not be privileged to see again in many, many seasons.

The supporting cast, led by the sublimely incorrigible **Howard Witt**, are all top notch. Of particular note, **Richard Thompson** and **Steve Pickering** have an impact making the size of their roles seem much larger than they really are.

This is a *Salesman* to see more than once. This is a *Salesman* to recommend to friends. This is a *Salesman* you will remember forever.

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller Directed by Robert Falls Starring Brian Dennehy, Elizabeth Franz, and Kevin Anderson. Also starring Ted Koch and Howard Witt. With Chelsea Altman, Kate Buddeke, Barbara eda-Young, Allen Hamilton, Kent Klineman, Stephanie March, Steve Pickering, and Richard Thompson. Running Time: 3 hours, including one 15 minute intermission.

The Eugene O'Neill Theatre, 230 West 49th Street, New York, NY 10036
(Between Broadway & 8th Ave)

Tuesday through Saturday at 8 P.M., Wednesday and Saturday at 2.P.M.,
Sunday at 3 P.M.

Added performance Sunday 2/14 at 8 P.M. and Monday 2/15 at 8.P.M.

Curtain time exception Sunday 2/14 at 2.P.M.

No performance Thursday 2/11 and Tuesday 2/16.

May be appropriate for children 4 and older. Children under 4 are not permitted in the theatre.

Tele-charge: Voice: (212)239-6200, or outside the NY metro area Voice: (800)545-2559, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. (Customer Service: Voice: (212)239-6210, or outside the NY metro area Voice: (800)543-4835, Monday through Saturday 9 A.M. to 9 P.M., Sunday 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. EST.)

Online: NetTiks at <http://www.telecharge.com/>

Box Office Hours Monday through Saturday 10 A.M. to 8 P.M., Sunday Noon to 6 P.M.

Mail Order: Death of a Salesman, PO Box 998, Times Square Station, New

York, NY 10108-0998. Must include \$1 (per ticket) Restoration Charge.

Rush Tickets: \$25 Rear Mezzanine seats are available from the Box Office on the day of performance only, subject to availability.

Standing Room: Standing room tickets are available at the Box Office only, and only if the performance is sold out.