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Thursday 29 April 1976

'Salesman'—A Case of Tawdry Values

By WALTER LAZENBY

CHARLESTON — Happily, Broadway audiences are not the only ones this season privileged to see a revival of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." Local playgoers also have opportunity, in three remaining performances this weekend, to reassess this modern classic in an effective University production directed by E. G. Gabbard.

The play — which has been filmed, widely produced abroad, frequently taught in college curricula, and much discussed as tragedy or near-tragedy and was even recently involved in some benighted agitation to have certain works "banned" from the Mattoon High School — makes heavy demands on producing groups and spectators alike.

In addition to containing a strenuous major role, it requires complicated lighting for numerous gradations of effect, quick costume changes, and a poetically suggestive set with multiple acting areas.

It is a subtle ironic blend of remembered

and unfolding current action designed to turn the main character's mind inside out, so that his point of view can be presented, his case history understood, and his values exposed for their tawdriness. The stage picture must objectify the haunting memories which accumulate and eventually indict him with failure as husband and father and provider.

A Review

Some critics also see in the play mild social criticism of a system which times "those things": a refrigerator wears out just when the final payment has been made; just before time for retirement, a company fires an employee who has given it the best years of his life, in effect eating "the orange and throwing away the peel."

But essentially it is the story of a little man (Willy Loman) who can be just as exhausted as a big one, seen against a background of father-son relationships. Willy does not remember his own father; as consequences, his shadowy and death-like brother, Ben, has become for him a father-substitute and Willy has been perennially uncertain how to bring up his own sons. By contrast, neighbor Charley has been a successful father. It is Ben and all that he stands for that finally lures Willy into "the jungle."

Hence Ben seems to me crucial to full realization of the play's effect. I confess some disappointment over the character's lack of prominence in this show but hasten to announce my awareness that the actor originally cast as Ben had to be replaced late in the rehearsal period.

On the whole, delivery of the dialogue for the show is impressive, particularly where stepped-on cues build intensity.

Looking mature in the role, Steve Griffin succeeds in portraying Willy's fatigue and

confusion; and in the restaurant scene his performance is a fine rendition of Willy's deep-down resistance to truth and of the anguish of a man at the end of his rope. What is less apparent is Griffin's grasp on the poetry of Willy's dream, meager though that poetry may be.

Sincerity once again earmarks Randy Arney's acting, this time as Biff. His control makes Biff's tearful recognition of his father's phoniness a moving moment.

Jeff Eaton makes Happy the cad he should be, John Hightower creates an effective difference between the young Bernard and the older one, and Matt Friesen gives a fresh interpretation of Charley.

The women's roles are all double-cast. I saw Joan Allen as Linda and thought her portrayal solid.

C. P. Blanchette's set, with its steps and elevated acting area near stage center, helps the actors hold more dynamic positions than they would otherwise (like his set for "The Birthday Party" last year).