

Select Reviews



Review: Ensemble Theatre Brings New Life to  
'Death of a Salesman'



From left, Alex Nee, Gigi Bermingham, Paul Michael Sandberg, Henry Woronicz and Trevor Peterson star in the Ensemble Theatre production of "Death of a Salesman." (David Bazemore photo)

By Judith Smith-Meyer, Noozhawk Contributor | February 19, 2019 | 3:24 p.m.

*Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy. And not in the vein of an epic historical tragedy, where danger lurks in the hands of malicious characters and kingdoms hang in the balance. It's a personal and preventable tragedy in which a man betrays himself, and his family, by aspiring to what he thinks society demands and will reward.

If you're a fan of theater, the 20th century "canon," or critical reflection on mainstream values, the [Ensemble Theatre Company's](#) current production offers a thoughtful treatise on the cost of conformity.

Played true to the original script and setting, Ensemble's production transports us to a bygone era with on-point acting, spare, innovative scenery, effective costuming and an original score performed live on stage.

Clearly, 70 years ago it would have been revolutionary for a playwright to unflinchingly deconstruct the American Dream, and [Arthur Miller](#) having done it colloquially and eloquently warranted the [Pulitzer Prize](#), [Tony Award](#), innumerable revivals and ubiquity in high school curricula.

It tells the story of traveling salesman Willy Loman's blind devotion to a societal promise that never comes to fruition.

In honor of ETC's 40th anniversary, founding artistic director Joseph Hanreddy directs, returning to the Santa Barbara stage after 17 years as artistic director of Milwaukee Repertory Theater and teaching at [Northwestern](#) and the [University of Wisconsin](#).

A skillful cast led by [Screen Actors Guild](#) actors featured [Henry Woronicz](#) as Willy and [Gigi Bermingham](#) as his enabling wife, Linda, who accepts her role as the person Willy constantly interrupts with reprimands for interrupting.

Trevor Peterson is Biff, the firstborn on whom all Willy's hopes rest, and Alex Nee is younger son Hap, who, being nearly invisible to his parents, turns his energy to the come-up, at work and with women.

Biff's work as a ranch- and farm-hand out west, though dismissed by his family as failure to measure up, mirror Willy's own youthful love of the outdoors and plans to strike out for prospects in Alaska with his successful brother Ben.

Nature images and references come to the surface throughout the narrative and repeatedly in the scenic design.

Se Hyun Oh's simple set features a movable surrounding wall that rises above the stage to display projected images of flora, seasons, spring, hope.

Three musicians-cum-actors provide a minimalist soundscape on cello, flute, saxophone, clarinet and bass clarinet from risers on either side of the stage. They also rotate in and out of the plot in smaller roles.

Having suffered through a man forsaking his own and his children's dreams (not to mention showing no signs of recognizing that his wife might have thoughts or dreams of her own), I wanted to think *Death of a Salesman* was no longer relevant, that we've evolved as a society and become more introspective in the 70 years since it premiered.

But have we? In an era where social media likes and online reviews drive ever-expanding consumption and can create idols or end careers, Willy Loman's fixation on being "well-liked" above all feels as pertinent now as it may have all that time ago.

The play and this production stay with you, and provide an opportunity to review, and maybe renew, our convictions about what's important for each of us as individuals and for the collective us as well.



## BWW Review: DEATH OF A SALESMAN at Ensemble Theatre Company

by Maggie Yates Feb. 14, 2019



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Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* isn't about the life (or death) of a salesman, per se; it's about the mentality of the hardworking American and the anticipation of the sometimes-unattainable greatness internalized within the culture as an entitlement. Willy Loman, an aging travelling salesman, is a man of deep pride and intense expectations. These qualities create an emotional roadblock that plunges him into an existential detour when he can no longer earn enough to support his family. Loman is wrapped up in the pyramid scheme of the "American Dream"--he bought in, and has been selling the lifestyle to his sons despite lacking returns on his own investment.

Ensemble's production of *Death of a Salesman*, directed by Joseph Hanreddy, is a funeral procession toward the inevitable fall of the spiraling Willy Loman (Henry Woronicz). The cast provides live music on stage (music direction by Barry G. Funderburg), a melancholy soundtrack to Loman's last days. Set mostly in the Lomans' home, Ensemble's production features a bare room with furniture basics to create a space of undeniable discomfort. It feels more industrial than homey, which mirrors the distress rising in Willy as the years turn their Brooklyn neighborhood into a high-rise jungle.

The Loman family includes Linda (Gigi Bermingham), Willy's supportive but frequently disrespected wife, and their two sons. Biff (Trevor Peterson) is in his 30s and roams the mid-west taking labor jobs. A former high school football hero, Biff's life changed drastically when he failed to make up a math class that cost him a high school graduation and college scholarships. Younger son Happy (Alex Nee) lives a frivolous, playboy life in a low-level sales position. Both boys' lifestyles are a disappointment to their parents. Though the story takes place in the mid-20th century, Willy's relationship with his family speaks to the timeless tendency of parents to entwine their own sense of self-worth with the accomplishments of their children.

While travelling salespeople have been rendered mostly unnecessary by the changing modes of wholesale and retail, the emotional crises Willy and his family face--fear, shame, ambition, denial, and frustration--are certainly not antiquated. An interesting connection between the play and the current culture is Willy's obsession with being "well-liked" while ignoring that "liked" and "respected" are not synonymous--a concept everyone on social media should consider as they watch the "likes" tick upward on a post.

Willy's awareness vacillates between the desperation of his present-day identity lost, in which he's borrowing weekly from his neighbor to make ends meet, and memories of an idealized past, in which he's a provider and patriarch that handily navigates the road to success. His inability (or unwillingness) to avoid losing himself in these flashbacks is manifested with lights, sound, and projections that fill the emptiness of his current existence with specific sensory details. When the veil between the present and the past is lifted, the walls of the Loman home rise to become an overhead canvas for projections that set the tone for his life remembered. Reminiscences of a forested Brooklyn lost to development are highlighted with an autumnal halo of foliage, the last leaves before the long winter to come. Loman's desire to reinvigorate his life is complemented by a vision of sprouts--sprouts that will never grow in a backyard blocked from sun by buildings on all sides. These nostalgic fantasies are isolated on stage with pools of light, and sometimes involve the appearance of Uncle Ben (Paul Michael Sandberg), Willy's long-estranged older brother, a man of wealth and achievement. Willy holds his brother in worshipful esteem, and yearns for the advice and approval that the ghost of Ben will never offer.

Ensemble's production of *Death of a Salesman* is intimate and Willy's final sacrifice is tragic and inevitable. The production offers high-caliber performances and a unique visual narrative, and it engages the audience with timely questions about inter-generational disconnect, the definition of success, and our relationship to the expectations and entitlements ascribed by our culture.



David Bazemore

*Death of a Salesman*

## **ETC Presents Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman'**

**Theater Company Crafts a Vivid of American Tragedy**

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Monday, February 11, 2019  
by CHARLES DONELAN (CONTACT)

This powerful production of Arthur Miller's enduring American tragedy could hardly come at a better time. The question at the heart of the story — "What is the emotional catastrophe that haunts so many American men?" — has never been more urgent. The fluid new score by Barry G. Funderburg complements Joseph Hanreddy's propulsive direction perfectly, and the fine cast comes together in a cascading fugue of contrapuntal voices to create the mystical "single chord" of Miller's imagination.

At the center of *Death of a Salesman* lies the unresolved conflict between a broken man and his damaged eldest son. Henry Woronicz plays Willy Loman with a noble directness that reveals the character's deep compulsions. As Biff, the former football star-turned-ranch hand and sometime jailbird, Trevor Peterson drives the plot forward with the force of his reluctant yet inexorable need to face the truth about his family and his life. Gigi Bermingham is splendid as Linda Loman, deftly slipping from the past of Willy's memory into the desperate

present of her own fears and back again as the winding path of Miller's script leads her. Alex Nee picks up on the subtleties in his portrayal of Hap, the shallow younger brother who sees no need to deviate from the salesman's formula for life that has proven to be so deadly to his dad. Sergi Robles is fine as Bernard, the observant and decent son of Willy's kindly, gruff neighbor Charley (John P. Connolly). Michael Bernard, Sarah Saviano, Paul Michael Sandberg, and Jenn Chandler all do outstanding work in distinguishing the vivid secondary characters without which Miller's awesome vision would be incomplete.

MONTE  ITO  
MISCELLANY   
*by Richard Mineards*

*Death Gets New Life*

Arthur Miller's classic Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Death of a Salesman*, which debuted on Broadway 70 years ago, has been given a sparkling makeover in the revival by the Ensemble Theatre Company at the New Vic. The production from founding director Joe Hanreddy is set in Brooklyn, New York, in 1949 with Willy Loman, wonderfully played by Henry Woronicz, dealing with his family and career travails. Using a new score by Barry Funderburg and a great supporting cast, including ETC veteran Michael Bernard, Gigi Bermingham as his wife, Trevor Peterson and Alex Nee as his sons, John Connolly, Sergei Robles and Paul Michael Sandberg, this show hits all the right notes. It runs through February 24.

Select Previews

Santa Barbara  
**Independent**

## ETC Presents ‘Death of a Salesman’

Arthur Miller Classic Gets a Reboot at New Vic

Monday, February 4, 2019

by CHARLES DONELAN (CONTACT)



David Bazemore

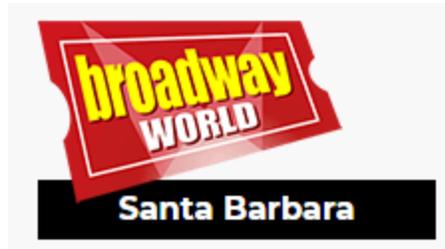
Trevor Peterson as Biff Loman eyes his father and mother as played by Henry Woronicz and Gigi Bermingham in Ensemble Theatre Company's revival of *Death of a Salesman*.

“Where did it all go wrong?” This plaintive question lies at the heart of the hero’s dilemma in Arthur Miller’s classic play *Death of a Salesman*. For Willy Loman, the promise of the American dream appeared to be a sure thing, safe as a three-score lead at the two-minute warning. But as the years have passed and his athletic star sons, Biff and Happy, have turned out to be less than stellar when it comes to earning a living or settling down and raising families, Willy has learned the hard way that his vaunted likability no longer guarantees an income, or even a welcome. While the pain of middle-class disenfranchisement may have been a new subject for tragedy when *Death of a Salesman* premiered in February 1949 (new enough to require Miller to write a famous op-ed in the *New York Times* to justify it), 70 years later it is a driving force in popular culture and national politics, the sad and angry face that launched untold thousands of bright-red MAGA hats.

It is entirely fitting then that Ensemble Theatre Company (ETC) should choose to revive the play in 2019 and attempt to bring it fully into the 21st century through a combination of craftsmanship and theatrical imagination. ETC founding director Joe Hanreddy will helm the production, which opens this weekend and runs through February 24 at the New Vic. In mounting a fresh version, Hanreddy told me that although the play requires “past and present to live simultaneously in the mind of the protagonist,” his team aims to “escape the weight of tradition” when it comes to imagining how the work should be staged. In what is perhaps the most radical of the new production’s features, three of the cast members who are also musicians — Sarah Saviano, Sergi Robles, and Jenn Chandler — will perform a new original score live onstage during the performance. Alex North’s dramatic modern music was a key element in the play’s 1949 Broadway production under director Elia Kazan, and Hanreddy expects that the new score by Barry G. Funderburg will play a similar role in distinguishing the show’s shifting modes from conventional stage naturalism.

For Henry Woronicz, the actor who will play Willy Loman, the role represents the culmination of an impressive lifetime in the professional theater. An accomplished director as well as an outstanding performer, Woronicz spent many years at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, where he served as artistic director from 1991 to 1995. He describes his character’s moral arc as “Willy looking back to see where he took the wrong turn.” Plagued by mental confusion that contemporary audiences may interpret as incipient dementia, Loman struggles to reconcile his younger expectations with the grim reality of his present helplessness. Although “the family issues that Willy faces strike us in a universal, contemporary way,” according to Woronicz, the play also “probes the contradictions of capitalism” with a political combativeness that springs from the specific circumstances of postwar American life in which Miller wrote it.

Given *Death of a Salesman*’s acknowledged status as an all-time American classic and a staple of high school English curricula, it’s easy to forget that the play represents a significant formal experiment on the part of the playwright. Billed as *Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* in the script’s subtitle, it contains many subtle shifts in time and perspective. Director Hanreddy said that he has worked with scenic designer Se Hyun Oh on a set that will make these changes from past to present “as visceral as possible.” Combined with the use of actor/musicians and what are sure to be fine performances from a cast that includes area favorite Michael Bernard, this promises to be a very special experience in the theater, and one worthy of taking its place in the canon of great *Death of a Salesman* productions.



## BWW Previews: DEATH OF A SALESMAN at Ensemble Theatre Company

by Maggie Yates Feb. 6, 2019



*Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller's American tragedy, equates the worth of a man's life with his earning potential and forces characters and audiences alike to examine their expectations around the idea of "success." Struggling travelling salesman Willy Loman deals with the harsh realization of his life's failings when he loses his job and discovers he's worth more through his life insurance policy than he is alive. The play flashes between the past and present day as Willy considers the value of his life and the role he's played in the lives of his wife and two sons. Ensemble Theatre Company presents a new production of this classic play for their 40th-anniversary season, directed by Ensemble's founding Artistic Director, Joseph Hanreddy.

Says Hanreddy: "I started (Ensemble) Theatre with some friends 40 years ago, in 1979. We used a church hall as a space to perform, and then moved into a larger, more formal theater (the Alhecama), which had 150 seats. We refurbished that, and I stayed with the theater another five years." Three decades later, much has changed in Ensemble's world. "They're in a wonderful new facility. Way back when I left, that was something we had our eye on, the Victoria Street Theater," he says. "We circled it for a long time, and it didn't look like it was going to happen soon. So I went on with my life and career." Hanreddy became the Artistic Director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and taught in graduate theatre programs at Northwestern University and the University of Wisconsin.

Mirroring the play's simultaneous portrayal of two time periods, Ensemble's production of *Death of a Salesman* respects the artistic intentions of Miller's work (first performed in 1949), while also including new, non-traditional elements, such as projections and live music played by the performers. These sensory factors work to enhance the layers of illusion Loman has been balancing against the disappointing realities of his life.

Hanreddy calls *Death of a Salesman* an epic play that explores the relationship between fathers and sons. "The play has all sorts of social and political ramifications, but it's all based in the family and the family dynamic." Beyond Willy's difficulty in recognizing his life's

failures, he also contends with his disappointment in his sons' lives-- and their disappointment in him. "Miller used to say that any time he gave a stage talk ... somebody would say to him, 'my father was Willy Loman,'" says Hanreddy. "So there is something really iconic and universal about this."

*Death of a Salesman* features Henry Woronicz, Gigi Bermingham, Trevor Peterson, Alex Nee, John P. Connolly, Paul Sandberg, Michael Bernard, Sergi Robles, Sarah Saviano, and Jenn Chandler. Music Direction and sound design by Barry G. Funderburg.



## Gerald Carpenter: Ensemble Theater Company Bring's Miller's Masterpiece to New Vic

By Gerald Carpenter, Noozhawk Contributing Writer | [@noozhawknews](#) | February 6, 2019  
| 1:29 a.m.

Feb. 7–24, the Ensemble Theater Company (ETC) will offer its new production, in the New Vic Theater, 33 W. Victoria St., of [Arthur Miller's](#) Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning play [Death of a Salesman](#) (1949), with Henry Woronicz as Willy Loman, and a cast that includes Gigi Bermingham, Michael Bernard, Jenn Chandler, John P. Connolly, Alex Nee, Trevor Peterson, Sergi Robles, Paul Sandberg and Sarah Saviano.

The production is directed by Joe Hanreddy, with scenic design by Se Hyun Oh, costumes by Dianne K. Graebner, and lighting by Jean-Yves Tessier. The original music, which will be performed live, was composed and produced by Barry G. Funderburg, who also served as sound designer.

Historically, only plays that chronicled the death of a king were worthy of the name "tragedy."

It was one of Arthur Miller's greatest services to theater to have wrested tragedy from the royal domain and applied it to the stories of ordinary people, as subject to emotional storms and destructive obsessions as the great of this world, but whose dramas play out beneath the radar of the public's attention.

Speaking of another of his great plays, *A View From the Bridge* (1955), Miller observed that a key feature of tragedy is betrayal, but that the

essence of a drama, what makes it a tragedy, in his view, is that the audience member wants to pull the protagonist aside and warn him of his impending destruction at the hands of fate.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman is reaching the end of his rope. He feels that his one great gift — what sets him apart from his contemporaries — that is, his ability to sell, is slipping away from him.

His world has begun to disintegrate, and there seems to be no way for him to stop it, or even slow it down. When we first meet Willy, he has already passed the point of no return. His last few hours, full of fear and desperation, are an indelible chapter in American drama.

Miller's politics, like his heart, were on the left, but *Death of a Salesman* is neither a critique of capitalism nor a call to arms for the masses. It is the story of one individual — Walt Whitman's "single, separate person" — and the choices he made.

I have seen productions in which Willy was played by Frederic March, by Lee J. Cobb and by Dustin Hoffmann, and each was totally convincing, yet different from the others. Willy is one of the essential characters of the American Theater.

### Select Audience's Comments

“Outstanding performance tonight of *Death of a Salesman!*”

“Marvelous performance!”

“Great interpretation and I LOVED the use of live music that reflected the emotional tones on stage.”

“I was just about to write to you and tell you how much we enjoyed this play. Fabulous acting, sets, music, etc. Couldn't have been better! THANK YOU!”

“How spectacular and amazing the play was last night! We were just stunned. It was so good! I'm still thinking about it and haunted by it quite frankly. It was just a great great play!”

“Superb theater, talented actors, heart-wrenching story. The Vic is my favorite venue in town.”

“It was a dramatic performance by ALL of those involved: actors, director, lighting, instrumental performers, producers, sales, volunteers, and all the others.”

“The show was fantastic. The lead actor has stamina! I don't know how he did that but we were impressed. The musical instruments were a nice touch too.”

“How much we enjoyed this play! Fabulous acting, sets, music etc. Couldn't have been better!”

“A remarkable and memorable production. Don't miss it!”

“The play was brilliantly done!”

“The actors conveyed such intensity and projected their craft superbly to us. We are still talking about the play. Season ticket holders for life!”