Death of a Salesman brought to life

By Joel West

In 1944, Arthur Miller wrote a two-act drama about a fairly ordinary Brooklyn resident and his family. Long since recognized as a masterpiece of American literature, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Death of a Salesman is somewhat sterile on the page, and requires a good stage production to bring out its power. Audiences at MIT were treated to such a production last weekend, at the hands of the MIT Community Players.

Willy Loman is the aging patriarch, a traveling salesman who covers the New England region. After 34 years with the firm, he grosses $70/week (perhaps $10k/year in today's money) and has suffered the indignity of having his salary taken away and being put back on commission only. At 60, he is forced to borrow money from his neighbor Charley to support himself and his loving wife Linda. Loman is a perpetual dreamer; never having known his father, he relies on tales told by his brother Ben, who romanticizes their father as successful and far more creative than an thousand other men; Ben, told by his brother Ben, who romanticizes in a typically Freudian son vs. father conflict. Also, unlike the rest of the male line, Loman and his dissatisfaction with his life. Equally important is the complicated inter-relationship of Willy, Linda, and their two sons Biff and Happy; indifferently, Miller unambiguously shows us the complex relationship of this seemingly simple family. Easily missed is the intricate duality: identical phrases are used by Biff and Willy in a context that does not call attention to this link between father and son.

The primary emphasis of the play is on these two characters; if either is weak, the play fails miserably. However, from his very first moment on stage, Sci Schwade captivates the audience with his moving portrayal of the tired old father. Exhausted after a long trip, excited about an imagined future for his two young "Adonises," violently angry when he can't understand his younger son's actions or motivations, Schwade conveys the entire range of emotions as the ostensibly fallible Willy. It is fortunate that the actor is not as old as the character he portrays: few men as tired and worn-down as Willy could deliver the intensity that he does.

Dan Genetti as Biff is somewhat enigmatic at first, not inappropriate for a confused, 34-year-old boy who has yet to settle down. But Genetti brings through the character as he really is, a man who is like his father, but resents him terribly, locked in a typically Freudian son vs. father conflict. Also, unlike the rest of the male line, Biff accepts his failings and attempts desperately to treat life as it is: his line "we put up with the truth for 10 minutes in this house" is the most truthful in the whole play.

Like his younger brother, Happy (Jim Cusano) was a strapping young athlete in high school. Lacking his brother's idealism, he has gone into business with success comparable to his father's. Cusano plays the part to the hilt, convincing in his cynicism, lack of principles, and almost compulsive philandering. He easily disagrees with what his father says, and shares the elder Loman's self-delusion. At first, Kathy Kariotis Reilly has trouble with the part of Linda, later on, as her suffering increases, she is able to bring out what is largely a passive part. She patiently puts up with her husband's failings, attempts to prevail on her favorite son Biff, and tries to control their heated arguments. Living her life only through the men in her life, Kariotis interacts well with those characters with whom she is forced to deal.

Of the other parts, Charles Berney brings the necessary mixture of wit and wisdom to the shadowy character of Ben. As the other woman, Deborah Crockett does her best after ego of Willy's, much as Bogie was to Woody Allen in Play it Again, Sam. Miller's play operates on several levels. The focus of the play is, of course, on Loman and his dissatisfaction with his life. Miller's work with polish and consistency. Of all the principals, only Kip Reilly (a last minute addition) performs spottily as Willy's only friend, Charley.

Director Carol Melcher has aimed high in choosing such a serious and complex play. From the question of why Biff gave up on life at 17, to the ultimate fate of the elder Loman, her players carry the ideas of Miller's work with polish and consistency. About the only "amateur" thing about this play is the set, which was effective in spite of the obviously low budget.

For $3, students will have four more opportunities to see a truly fine performance of Death of a Salesman. October 26, 27, 28 at 8pm and at 3pm on the 28th. Ten or more theater-lovers can obtain their tickets at a reduced rate of $2.50 each.

---

XEROX EMPLOYMENT SEMINAR

Xerox Corp. will conduct a pre-interview seminar for MIT students interested in employment opportunities in the Rochester, New York, and Los Angeles, California areas. Students graduating this year in Electrical Engineering & Mechanical Engineering, Computer Science, & Physics (BS, MS, PhD) are encouraged to attend.

This seminar will be held on Thursday, October 26, 1978 at 4:00 pm in room 12-182 and will last about 1 hour.

Xerox will be on campus for interviews on November 7th, 1978.

Interested students should sign up at the Career Planning and Placement Center.

Xerox is an affirmative action employer (male/female).