Relocate the Tragedy

Sean Graney’s intelligent rethinking brings *Death of a Salesman* back to life.

By Kerry Reid

Director Sean Graney manages to make *Death of a Salesman* young again, freeing it from the burden of audience fatigue with the familiar speeches. It’s a script well suited to the Hypocrites’ artistic director, addressing the ephemerality of success and the dangers of seeking it at any cost (Graney was recently awarded a prestigious career development grant in directing from the National Endowment for the Arts). Where many productions of Arthur Miller’s play focus on the dashed dreams of middle age, Graney locates its tragedy in Willy’s original sin: insisting on molding his elder son, Biff, into a big man on campus. Cast adrift, incapable of seeing himself whole in the world, Biff is alone with his hazy but aching desire for freedom and authenticity.

Graney weaves together Willy Loman’s past and present with a tensile intelligence and visual elan, thanks in large part to the clever metaphorical set he designed with Jim Moore. Mismatched doors hung at odd angles encircle the small playing area, representing all the missed opportunities and badly concealed lies that plague Willy and Biff. The Loman kitchen is a white-tiled oasis of reality in Willy’s rapidly deteriorating mental world. And thanks to Charles Cooper’s graceful lighting and Michael Grigg’s increasingly uneasy sound cues, the shifts between Willy’s memories and his present-day life are seamless. The design isn’t the only element that makes this production fresh. Graney cast real-life couple Bill and Donna McGough as Willy and Linda, a choice that might have backfired: not all married actors are as good together onstage as the Lunts. But the McGoughs bring a lived-in believability to the script’s small domestic moments. When Willy pulls Linda onto his lap for a brief canoodle before heading out to what he (mistakenly) believes will be a great day, it allows a glimpse of why Linda fights so hard for him. Though Willy is sometimes harsh to Linda and stinting with his emotions, he’s also capable of revealing his vulnerabilities in a way that she alone understands, and McGough’s Linda makes it clear that she treasures that intimacy, giving the famous “attention must be paid” speech a natural fire and clarity.

When Dustin Hoffman played Willy on Broadway in 1984, he restored the character to Miller’s original vision: the playwright described him as “a very small man who wears little shoes and little vests.” Still, the dominant image of Willy as a slouching behemoth was established by Lee J. Cobb on Broadway in 1949 and recently reinforced by Brian Dennehy. McGough is tall but not broad, and he looks younger than Willy’s 60 years. Still, the actor’s thinning hair, pinched voice, and beginning of a stoop signal Willy’s waning pride and ultimate defeat. When Willy complains about their overbuilt Brooklyn neighborhood, saying “You gotta break your neck to see a star,” McGough can barely rotate his head skyward. Donna McGough’s Linda is smaller and more patrician than “the big and broadhallowed” aunt Miller used as the model for Linda (a model demolished when the birdlike Mildred Dunnock played opposite Cobb). But many of McGough’s readings have a spitfire intensity, and her cataclysmic second-act confrontation with the anguished Biff and his callow younger brother, Happy, is remarkable. So remarkable, in fact, that Graney’s decision to repeat it as a dumb show immediately afterward, as a backdrop to Willy wrestling with the impulse to kill himself, doesn’t feel precious or self-indulgent. Instead this choice allows the play’s two
The Invisible Woman

In Clint Sheffer’s new play, two men connect over a mutual love interest.

By Kelly Kleiman

Poor Man’s Amos could have been a disaster: one man, Clint Sheffer, is the playwright, the other, Seth, is the other two characters, played by Robert McLean and Christopher Meister as Charley and Bernard, the father-son duo whose easy affection stands in stark contrast to the tension between Willy and Biff. The emotional palette of the Hypocrites’ production tends to be muted and strained rather than expansive, which makes the play’s spiky outbursts all the more effective: there are many unlooked-for erudition as well as profane, inarticulate speeches that communicate more than the characters realize or intend. The show’s many strengths is that it’s bare-bones in the best sense, complete with snatches of language and displays of a portrait he’s painted of her vagina. At first blush Seth seems more intellectual: wrapped in a trench coat, he’s grading papers from the class he’s teaching on dream interpretation when Reggie interrupts him. But over the course of the play the two men trade status, once Reggie publishes a graphic novel and Seth loses his job. They also trade, and ultimately share, an obsession with Chrissie, who’s never seen. Though her actions, especially her choice of bedmate, drive the plot, the play is less about her than about the men’s idea of her. Roughly a Madonna/whore, she also seems more complicated and textured than that thanks to Sheffer’s writing. Whatever else they might be doing, Reggie and Seth are always hailing around the concept of Chrissie, and the weight of that baggage gives the play its title: Amos was the biblical prophet whose name means “burden bearer.”

What saves this odyssey from grimness is Sheffer’s wit, less a matter of slogging funny lines than appreciating absurd situations, like Reggie’s cell-phone call to Chrissie in which “you’re breaking up” morphs into “we’re breaking up.” Though the play sinks into melodrama in the last two scenes, with a shade too much bonding between the men, Sheffer’s genuine emotion is better than the sterile cleverness he might easily have fallen into. The melodrama is a shame, though, because it undercuts the power of the final scene, in which the two men find the compensatory power of male friendship.

In Mary Foster’s directorial debut, Andy Schoen as Reggie captures perfectly the person who’s so busy complaining about what he didn’t get that he loses the things he has. Sheffer as Seth is nerdy and defeated without being maudlin, and as the men’s friendship grows, he’s adept at conveying the character’s battle between discomfort and relief. Anthony Churchill’s simple set—two huge boxes serve as el plat- forms, pews, tables, and every- thing else that’s needed—is com- pletely suited to the lean text and direction. The entire enterprise is bare-bones in the best sense, tight and flawlessly shaped.