

"Death of a Salesman" Offers a Rare Opportunity

Written by Jill Walsh

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Once in a while a script lingers in a realm of such greatness that it demands the patience, creativity, and collaboration of the most dedicated and talented individuals in theatre to do justice to the playwright's original intentions.

In 1949, Arthur Miller (then in his early 20s) wrote *Death of a Salesman*, expressing his version of the crumbling American dream through the eyes of his protagonist and tragic hero, Willy Loman. Audiences responded to the intense drama, which explores relationships, trust, adultery, and work in a demanding, relentless world. More than 50 years later, St. Ambrose University theatre alumni, faculty, and students are working together on Miller's classic Pulitzer Prize-winning script. And this won't be like any other show Ambrose has produced in the past.

Salesman will star some of the university's best-known stage talent and designers, who have gathered in the Quad Cities to honor 35-year Ambrose educator Michael Kennedy with this monumental collaborative performance. While Kennedy is recognized as an actor in the Quad Cities area, director and actor Matt Speak teaches and directs in Los Angeles; lighting designer John Pomeroy is the department chair of the theatre program at Drake University; the work of costume designer Brian Hemesath has been seen on NBC's *Today* show, as well as on Broadway stages; and scenic designer Frank Schneeberger currently designs for the Overture Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

Ted Stephens III, an alumnus of St. Ambrose and marketing director and stage manager of *Death of a Salesman*

, said the show has been no easy task for the nationwide cast, which has had only two-and-a-half weeks to work together on-stage. But, he explained, "all of them are volunteering their time to the production and covering their own travel expenses, which is a testament to how much people wanted to be involved. People from Los Angeles, Chicago, and elsewhere are staying with family in the area or, in some cases, with other cast members. People are taking weeks off work and out of their family lives to be here. This is a great example of alums giving back in another way other than just handing over a check. It's really invigorating to see them living their lives as professionals in the theatre."

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So why *Death of a Salesman*, such a tragic and symbolic American script that boasts the challenging character of everyman Willy Loman and has starred decorated thespians from Dustin Hoffman to Lee J. Cobb?

Stephens said the decision to produce Miller's drama started with the prompting of Corinne Johnson (playing Linda Loman in this production), who regularly suggested roles for Kennedy. "Last fall, her survey of theatre class read *Death of a Salesman*, and after they finished, she marched into Kennedy's office again and said, 'You need to play this role,'" Stephens said. "He responded that he would when she produced it. He was probably kidding, but a year later, here we are."

In his program notes, director Matt Speak, who is also playing the role of Biff Loman, explains that despite its 1940s setting, *Salesman* is still relevant. He writes: "At its heart, the relevance ... lies in the relationship between a family and its father at the moment of his fall. ... It is a love story in which we find the characters not at the beginning, but at the end; not at the moment of joy, but at the moment of regret. It is a moment in which each member of the family must choose between dreams: the right ones, and the wrong ones. Seeing the difference is where we find the relevance we seek."

While Kennedy is not retiring yet, *Death of a Salesman* seemed the perfect way for alumni to honor his work at the university. Arthur Miller is Kennedy's favorite playwright, which made it easy for the veteran actor to read the script every night last winter, memorize his part, and basically dedicate this year to inhabiting Willy Loman. The show will also serve as a fundraiser for scholarships, and will benefit the three students involved in the production as an academic learning experience.

Stephens said those involved dedicate about six hours a day on weekdays and nine to 11 hours on the weekends. With so much time and passion put into a single production of the classic tale of the downfall of a tragic American protagonist, *Death of a Salesman* – not often performed outside of Broadway – is a rare opportunity for Quad Cities theatre-goers.

Death of a Salesman will be performed at the Galvin Fine Arts Center of St. Ambrose University from Thursday, September 9, through Sunday, September 12. Curtain is 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and 3 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$10 and can be reserved by calling (563)333-6251 or visiting (<http://www.sau.edu/galvin>).