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## Review: Strength of 'Death of a Salesman' lies in acting talent

By [Special to The Oregonian](#)  
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"Death of a Salesman" at Hillsboro's Bag & Baggage Productions

As we're bombarded by news regarding the high rates of employment and home foreclosures as well as the growing cost of healthcare, it is easy to lose faith in the good old American dream of success. Given this context, Arthur Miller's powerful tragedy of disappointment and despair, "Death of a Salesman," resonates with contemporary significance. It may be 60 years since Miller's play was first produced, but as the emotionally taut [Bag & Baggage Productions'](#) presentation of the piece makes clear, the plight of Willy Loman and his family is, alas, as familiar today as it was in 1949.

Willy is an American everyman. His wife, Linda, puts it succinctly: "Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him." He has lived his life believing that being well-liked, handsome, athletic, and a "good old boy," naturally leads to business success. Unfortunately, at age 63 he has to come to terms with the harsh reality that, as his friend Charlie tells him, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell." It's not charm but the bottom line -- what you have in your pockets -- that ultimately matters in business.

In his presentation of Willy, Miller shows us both Willy in the world and the world in Willy. We see him interacting with his wife, Linda, his sons, Biff and Happy, and others in the present, but Miller also takes us inside Willy's head -- with scenes revealing his memories and fantasies. Willy's financial problems are intensified by the fact that the worn-out old man that he has become cannot always tell the difference between these separate levels of reality.

The Bag & Baggage production uses Ben Crop's lighting design to help us distinguish between what is "real" and what is imagined. Ironically, the "present" scenes generally are sparsely lit often shadowy while the past sequences are more brightly illuminated.

The modest scenery is not as helpful with these distinctions. Designer Drew Foster makes use of background black curtains, swaths of white fabric (frequently lit to look like surrounding apartment buildings looming over the action), and a suggestion of house walls, but primarily utilizes a number of gray-brown old

crates and chairs which are moved around the space to give a sense of particular rooms. While this non-realistic convention sometimes works rather clumsily -- the crates don't function well as the furnishings of bedrooms in the Loman house -- director Scott Palmer utilizes another non-realistic convention, the entering and exiting from and through the auditorium, more successfully. Palmer skillfully uses such entrances and exits to engulf us in the action especially of the memory sequences.

Still, production's strength lies, as it should, in the work of the talented acting company. Although some of the transitions between scenes are a bit rough, the actors as a whole bring a refreshing honesty to their character portrayals. Most intriguing is Marion Rossi's interpretation of Willy. In many Willys it is, surprisingly, often hard to see the glad-hand, salesman-like qualities of the character. Not so here. Rossi taps into the ebullient, apparently self-confident side of this salesman. On occasions when enthusiasm is in order or when doubts need to be quelled, we can see him pumping himself up with the optimistic hope and promise so necessary to his line of work. But on other occasions, Rossi reveals the other Willys who lie beneath the salesman façade -- the whiney, insecure, self-conscious child, the irascible impatient domineering Willy, and, especially toward the end, the decrepit stumbling broken old man. Most importantly, Rossi easily and fluidly moves among these contradictory aspects of the character. The rest of the cast provides strong support. Maggie Chapin ably portrays the always loyal wife Linda. She gives this long-suffering spouse an endearing girlishness as well as an unshakeable strength. Tylor Neist offers us an unflappable but ever pragmatic Happy who speaks in clipped urban tones while William Goblirsch finds the deep low resonance of long time bitterness and unresolved pain.

Willy and his family may live in a pre-television, pre-computer America, but as this production amply reveals the only innocence available to them was that of the duped.

*7:30 p.m. Thu-Sat, 2 p.m. Sun, through Oct. 11. Venetian Theatre & Bistro, 253 E. Main St., Hillsboro; \$13-\$23; [www.bagnbaggage.org](http://www.bagnbaggage.org) or 503-516-4840*  
-- **Richard Wattenberg**