

THE SCOTTISH ARTS COUNCIL
SPECIALIST ADVISER ARTISTIC EVALUATION - DRAMA

Organisation/Venue: Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

Title of Event: 'Death of a Salesman', by Arthur Miller

Type of Event: Performance

Date of Visit: 19th February 2004

This report has been commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to evaluate the artistic quality of the production named below. It has been prepared by either a specialist Advisor, or a Council Officer, as indicated at the end of the form. The report will be circulated to the organisation which produced the work, to the management of the venue if the venue is core funded by the Scottish Arts Council.

The report may be made available to Scottish Arts Council Officers, Council and Committee members, and specialist advisors as appropriate. It will be taken into account in assessing the work of the producing company in relation to applications for funding to the Scottish Arts Council. It may also be used by the Council to report on the overall performance of its Core Funded organisations.

Evaluators should enter their rating under each section, explaining briefly their reason for the rating with reference to their comments under each section.

Ratings should be given in accordance with the following:

Very Poor –standard falls well below what is acceptable

Poor- not attaining acceptable standards of conception or presentation

Competent– routine rather than especially interesting

Good –well conceived and executed.

Excellent –conceived and executed to a high standard.

1. Artistic Assessment

Please evaluate the **artistic quality** of the event

1.1 Vision and Imagination.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>It doesn't seem so long since the Lyceum's last production of this play, but such is the strength of it, that a good production is always welcome. The audience seemed willing to come and see it again, which suggests that it is regarded in the way that fans regard a favourite opera. As a text on how to lose yourself in consumerism, it is both unparalleled, and of crucial value in a world where the retail market has eclipsed most other sectors of business.</p> <p>It seemed that quite a lot of resources had been reverentially allocated to this production. The Loman's house is set on a revolve, with entrances that can cleverly progress from room to room in an engaging fashion. Resetting of these rooms also makes for convincing transformations to the office and restaurant, and it was good to see the production make good use of it's elaborate, and competently-operated, configuration.</p> <p>At every stage does this production convince that this is a great play, and it held the audience in a noticeably silent kind of rapture throughout.</p>
<p>Excellent</p>		

1.2 Clarity of Communication.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		<p>Arthur Miller's plays, in my opinion, require careful consideration of the inbuilt rythms, rather than radical restructuring. John Dove blocked out the scenes to let the play work</p> <p>Vocal projection was just sufficient to reach the back of the circle, and was, I would therefore say, finely judged, although I find most Broadway dramas can take musical-styled vocal projection and still be credible. Paul Jesson adopted a gruffness in his voice, which reinforced a defensive demeanour in which anger always loomed. This did not, however, interfere with his articulation.</p>
<p>Excellent</p>		

You are also asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the event with specific reference to the following:

1.3 Script (particularly in relation to new work, or second productions).

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		<p>Arthur Miller has done very well, and should be rewarded with a sexual relationship with the most attractive woman on the planet. I am reliably informed that this has already happened some time ago, so other rewards will have to be devised.</p>

Excellent		
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1.4 Direction

<p>Rating for this section (<i>Please tick</i>)</p>		<p>John Dove has produced a highly-competent, if rather plain, production of this play. The characterisations are well-sorted, and the standard of playing is remarkably even and confident, given the contrast in experience amongst the cast.</p> <p>Most of the design concept served to facilitate movement from scene to scene in a guise of realism, but of course, there are other transformations at work in this play. Willy's lapses into reminiscence build into genuine flashbacks, and in this aspect, handled with great skill by Arthur Miller, the design is not mobilised to provide much assistance. Only in the scene where Bernard arrives to tell that Biff has flunked math, is there any stylish overlaying of scenes, beautifully handled by lighting designer Jeanine Davies. This served to make me wonder whether another dimension to this play might just have been missed, and not through lack of available stagecraft. Willy's suicide, for example, relied solely on the foreboding evidence up to that point, and was executed by a vague sound cue, followed by a dismissively curt and routine scene change.</p> <p>I believe the work of Arthur Miller, and the whole tradition of Broadway drama, requires to build a sense of the mythological out of the realism, and in failing to do this, this production comes across a little bald, a little unleavened, and a little unsympathetic. This, in my opinion, would have transformed the production from being liked, to well liked.</p>
Good		

1.5 Standard of performers- where performers are not trained, please reflect this in your comments.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>. Paul Jesson milked the text mercilessly for evidence of Willy's abject desperation in clinging to his dream, and his denial of a world unsentimentally charging into the future. As such Willy's pathology is made manifest from the very beginning, and it is tempting to think he'd be better off nowadays with all these therapists around, so what's the fuss. The production took no time off from rubbing Willy's aspirational predicament into our noses, which, while entirely justified by the text, made me love Willy a little less. Surely the nature of Willy's tragedy is that he lived in a world which changed from providing success for nice people, to providing it to the hard-headed, and the amiable Mr Jesson can easily generate more warmth, you'd think, if asked. That said, he worked hard throughout, and had most convincing relationships with everybody.</p> <p>He was ably supported by Joanna Tope, who successfully embodied in Linda, a woman who had found a deep serenity in her nonetheless difficult relationship with Willy, and whose struggle was to articulate this to her sons. In losing Willy, who I was certain she absolutely adored, she presented a convincing case for being the chief sufferer in the tragedy, most productions I have seen usually propelling Biff into this position.</p> <p>Steven Duffy, who played Biff, paced himself to perfection, climaxing magnificently in the scene where he tries to articulate in all honesty his, and his father's failure. At this point, an engrossing production turned into a most moving one. I have a whiff of a niggle about his ability to throw a good pass with an American football, but was pleased to witness his performance. With Alex Hassell, who played Happy, he formed a rich brotherly relationship which seemed to encompass more history than the play portrayed.</p> <p>Tony Boncza was most impressive as Charlie, a neighbour who trickily has to love Willy enough to shell him out regular cash, and take the odd tirade from him too.</p> <p>It must be said that the accents used were rarely consistent, and one had to decide not to get annoyed with that, in order to go on following the action.</p>
<p>Excellent</p>		

1.6 Use of music – in particular please comment on the quality and appropriateness of any original music composed for the production. Please indicate whether the music was performed live or recorded, in whole or in part, and what effect this had on the quality of the production.

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		<p>I have to say the recorded music was a disappointment. The recurring, high-pitched melody was a little too busy to underscore without distraction, and evoked an idyll that seemed too pastoral for Willy’s obsession with commercial success. It was not used in a bold way, which would have strengthened and propelled the flashback moments, and there seemed to be too low a limit in how loud it could be before being deemed a distraction. The timbre of the instruments involved precluded this.</p>
Poor		

1.7 Use of Movement or Choreography

Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i>		<p>There did not seem to be much call for an ethic of movement in this show. Generally characters bore themselves well and with personality, and most had the task of appearing convincing whilst being very relaxed and also at times furious and enervated, which they all achieved. Those obliged to relish their costume did so with aplomb, and I felt that Willy’s suit was worn very much as a badge of office and a companion-at-arms.</p>
Good		

1.8 Design – including set, costume and lighting design. Please take into account how appropriate the design is in relation to the venue, and, where appropriate,

the touring schedule.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>The set, by Michael Taylor, was big, and expensive-looking, and, as noted above, facilitated a brief I found too earthbound. It was well-built, solid, in respect of the revolve, and particularly in regard to the kitchen, dressed well, even though few activities demanded the level of realism provided. At the top was a skeletal roof structure which provided just enough evocation of Willy's self-build carpentry ethic. Scene changes seemed to stop and start rather abruptly for a play whose tone is that of elegiac memory, and frequently, I feel the mood was broken unnecessarily. The lighting at times struggled to sustain the same atmosphere upstage of the proscenium as downstage of it, but was generally very good.</p>
<p>Good</p>		

1.9 Technical Standards – please comment on whether the production was professionally presented from a technical point of view.

<p>Rating for this section <i>(Please tick)</i></p>		<p>Very high production standards were on view, which would grace any auditorium in the country. Carpentry and painting were excellent. The revolve looked more solid than that viewed recently in an expensive production by the Schaubuhne am Leiner Platz, this despite the Lyceum revolve having the distinct disadvantage of being built on a raked stage. Scene changes upstage on this revolve were extensive, and cleverly executed, and a stage manager in a costume looked great. The stage manager resetting furniture under the iron wore blacks, but with a radio headset, which seemed to un-neutralise her outfit, and lend an air of the sinister. The wire recorder looked strangely military, but not unconvincing, while the fridge seemed a bit small by American standards, and perhaps too modest as a token of the Loman's aspirations.</p>

Excellent		
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1.10 **Overall production** – was the production successful overall in relation to any stated aims (e.g. in the programme or other printed material, and stated aims and objectives)

Rating for this section (<i>Please tick</i>)		Though it would seem hardly necessary, I welcomed the prominent introduction by Mark Thomson, the Artistic Director of the Lyceum, in which he makes great, sincere and appropriate claims for the play’s reputation, and how it’s relevance is undimmed, if not heightened by the passage of time. His reference to a merger of ‘Realist and Expressionist traditions’ embodied in the play, only reassures me in my notion that the Expressionist aspects in John Dove’s production were underdeveloped, but in general his case for the greatness of this text is certainly made manifest by this production. Encouragingly, his introduction seems to have been written quite late in the production process, and conveys commendable thanks to, and testifies confidence in, his production team, whilst also vividly conveying his excitement.
Excellent		

1.11 **Was the performance appropriate for the audience?**

Definitely. The people sitting on either side of me, in the Dress Circle, had seen this play before. Indeed most of the audience seemed to be people drawn by the lure of something they knew as a good play. Which is maybe to say that most of them were experienced theatregoers. I spoke to a man who had studied the play at school, some decades ago, and was now drawn to come and see it. There seemed to be a yawning age gap to the smaller amount of teenagers in the audience, who sat as silently as everybody else.

1.12 **Estimated size of audience and reaction to the production.**

I should say it was about 70-80% full, but did not observe those seated in the stalls. They applauded like thunder at the end.

2. Management of Event

Please evaluate the way the event was presented/organised by the organisation and by the venue. Please answer, where relevant, with reference to the checklist below adding any other comments/observations you may have.

2.1 Was the venue suitable for the event?

Yes

2.2 Information/Interpretive material provided at the venue (e.g. programmes, displays etc)

- range, quantity and clarity.

All very good.

2.3 Publicity/Pre-Publicity for the Event (leaflets, posters, etc)

- range, content and when and where available. Please be alert to the publicity available prior to your visit to the event. Please also view and comment on the company's website where one is advertised. Comment on the ease of use, and quality of content and presentation, and currency of information.

All seemed very good

2.4 Accessibility of the venue

- ease of payment

I phoned to reserve a ticket. They were very busy, but kindly phoned me back. Box office staff were friendly and helpful

- location

err.. fine.

- external signposting

good

1 internal directional signing

I failed to find a toilet in the stalls bar without help. I traced the source of the problem to having been a complete klutz.

- access and provision for disabled people

All-embracing and proudly-trumpeted.

- timing of event

For a performance of this duration, perhaps a little late.

2.5 Customer service

- quality and efficiency of staff (e.g. box office, front of house, bar and/or catering).

Friendly, efficient.

3. **Acknowledgement of Scottish Arts Council Funding** (if applicable)

Following is an extract from the Scottish Arts Council's conditions of grant for funded organisations:

"The company should acknowledge Scottish Arts Council funding in press releases, at launches, on all published materials (including leaflets, brochures, programmes, posters, notices display and exhibition materials, websites and advertising). Acknowledgement of the Scottish Arts Council grant must also be made in any secondary or indirect products arising from the revenue funding such as recordings, publications, video, broadcasts, and computer programmes etc. "

Please comment on whether the above conditions of grant were met, including use and prominence of the Scottish Arts Council logo on the company's website.

Yes, they were.

4. Scoring

Vision and imagination	5
Communicating clearly	5
Script	5
Direction	4
Standard of performers	5
Use of music	2
Use of movement	4
Design	4
Technical standards	5
Overall production	5
Audience reaction	5
Overall score	5

Name: Ace McCarron

Date: 1/3/ 2004

Advisor