Studio’s ‘Salesman’ palpable, relatable

BY STEVE PARKS
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A ny American actor worth his dramatic salt wants to play Willy Loman at some point in his career. Was it prescient of Philip Seymour Hoffman to play him at such an early age — 44 — in 2012?

The brilliance of Arthur Miller’s 1949 Pulitzer- and Tony-winning “Death of a Salesman” is that Willy Loman is someone we know, whether we’ve ever known a traveling salesman, much less one for a father or husband. Anyone who saw Hoffman in this role felt as if we knew that guy.

At BroadHollow’s Studio Theatre, Scott Hofer, known recently for roles in cross-dressing farces, embodies a more age-appropriate Willy, washed up at age 62. As directed by Marian Waller, Hofer’s Willy is as palpable and knowable as any I’ve encountered. That includes Long Islander Brian Dennehy’s fiercely angry Willy and Dustin Hoffman’s defeated characterization, both on Broadway, and that of Jack Howell, a former salesman, at BroadHollow. At Studio, Howell plays Willy’s neighbor and friend, Charley, with a cynical yet sympathetic tone.

He gets Willy, like no one in his family — not even his wife, Linda, and especially not his sons. Willy, haunted by the success of his older brother — a smug told-you-so-as played by W. Gordon Innes — is weary of traveling. The sample cases he totes are loaded with the baggage of unfulfilled dreams, if not for himself, then for his firstborn, Biff, onetime football hero. Hap, the younger son, is chomped liver. And his wife has become the default refuge whose solace no longer suffices.

Hofer’s Willy isn’t so much angry at the world that’s discarded him as he is delusional about Biff’s prospects. His hopeful countenance deteriorates into an abysmal blank — convincingly evolving, perhaps, the onset of Alzheimer’s.

When your sons are bums? Which brings us to Evan Donnellan as Biff. Indifference morphs into anguish on Biff’s shoulders and Donnellan makes us feel the weight. We sweat tears for Biff and for Willy. Bryan Nee as the misnomered “Happy” is the bystander, unable to make his father care.

Linda May as the torn mother and wife captures the agony of having to take sides among these men in her life. “Attention must be paid,” she says without scorn — only compassion for her doomed husband. That’s not a spoiler. The title is, after all, “Death of a Salesman.”

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