

TA's classic 'Death of a Salesman' has timely themes: director



By Brock Weir

It wasn't always on his radar, but for the past few months, Arthur Miller's classic play, *Death of a Salesman*, has become a way of life for Shawn Rocheleau.

Earlier this year, Mr. Rocheleau stepped up to the director's chair for Theatre Aurora's production, which kicks off its 59th season this Thursday, October 19, unfamiliar and mildly unenthusiastic about this dark slice of Americana.

That, however, was just on the surface.

Delving deeper, he discovered themes set down in the late 1940s that now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, are more relevant now than ever before.

First performed in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* centres on Willy Loman, a down-on-his-luck salesman in his early 60s, along with his family, who begins a rapid descent.

An enduring classic, but one which has, since its inception, conjured up mixed emotions among theatre-goers.

'When I tell someone I'm directing *Death of a Salesman*, I have had a few people say, 'That's great, but I don't want to see it,' because it is not a fun play, it is a serious play; there are moments of levity and moments of lightness, but there are heavy issues,' says Mr. Rocheleau.

There was a time where he might have felt the same way, but after accepting the role as director, he took on his new subject with gusto, reading, re-reading, and reading the play some more, researching the life of Arthur Miller, immersing himself in the time period, and what he found surprised him.

'The reality is that even though the play is almost 70 years old, it is also incredibly current,' he says. 'I find the more I read it, the more I see Willy Loman as that person who is just desperate to get that foothold but nothing is working out for him. There is a lot of currency in the play.'

This currency, he says, is particularly present in the current climate in the United States.

'From where I am sitting, it seems to me that Americans have been sold a bogus, false bill of goods,' says the director. 'There is the idea of the American Dream that if you just work hard enough you will succeed and have a good life. Americans believe this to a point where they don't want help and they don't want social assistance and this play is all about the falsehoods of the American dream.'

'Nothing Willy does he thinks is enough. I feel like Americans have been tricked into thinking that if they are poor it is their fault and this play works on that. Willy really believes that if you are liked enough and you work hard enough and you devote your life to a company that they are going to take care of you and none of that is really true. When I look at what is going on in the states today, a lot of the problems we see going on in the south have to do with the fact a lot of white, lower middle class people feel like they are doing everything right yet it is not working. But, instead of looking at how the system is stacked against them they start blaming other people. That doesn't come to bear in the play but I think that is where it is.'

When Mr. Rocheleau looks at Willy Loman in today's context, he says he could see him among those 'trying to reclaim their space.'

As Canadians, he says it is important to examine these themes because it helps us understand what is going on. This is a conversation he has had with his actors, actors he says who are 'blessed' with an incredible intelligence to bring the play to life. Each came into the project with completely open mind, and the director hopes this open mindedness will be shared by audiences starting this week.

'It is a good story that is told well and is well performed,' he says. 'We have attracted some incredible talent from, perhaps, outside our regular bank of talent, so it is a great show, it is well acted and even though it is not a happy play, I still think it is a great play. Part of theatre's job is to make people think and hopefully give them cause for discussion after they have seen it.'

Theatre Aurora's production of Death of a Salesman opens this Thursday, October 19 at 8 p.m. and runs on select days and times through Saturday, October 28. For further information, including tickets, visit www.theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3669.