

The sum total of one's life

Soulpepper revives
The Price and does
so with humanity



ROBERT CUSHMAN

Once upon a time there were two brothers and their washed-up father. Or, in the corpus of Arthur Miller's plays, once upon several times. *The Price*, first staged in New York in 1968 and now revived in a very fine production by Soulpepper, has Miller revisiting the territory he had earlier marked out in *All My Sons* and, especially, *Death of a Salesman*. Only in this play the father is already dead. In his time he had been a big shot. Then came *The Crash*. Which is another departure for Miller. It's reasonable to assume that the dreams and fears of Joe Keller and Willy Loman were partly fuelled by their having lived through the Depression. But their plays never mention it. *The Price* never stops mentioning it.

Old man Franz's two boys are Walter, who got out of the family home and became a very successful surgeon, and Victor, who sacrificed his own scientific ambitions to look after their widowed dad and who became a cop. Victor is now wondering whether to take early retirement, maybe pursue his old dreams. Another part of his past is more surely about to disappear. The old building on whose top floor he and his father used to live is about to be demolished; the physical evidence of their existence there — everything from a harp to a fencing-foil — is up for sale. Victor has found a dealer in the phone book, one Gregory Solomon who claims to be 90 years old; we believe him, not that he doesn't look in great elderly shape, but because he's the kind of man who could, and does, make anything sound believable. Which doesn't make him a cheat. Waiting impatiently with Victor is his wife Esther, who longs for a more comfortable life than they have ever had and who, in the meantime, would like to get out to a movie. For both these reasons, she hopes that Solomon will hurry up and give them a good price. The title, needless to say, has other reverberations, as in: What does a man's life add up to, and what value can you put upon it? Most of the play's second half is a bitter debate between the brothers, who haven't met in 16 years, on precisely these matters.

The first half belongs, really, to the dealer, who is a virtuoso creation. Miller was not previously known for being funny but in this character, who makes us crack up practically every time he opens his mouth, he seems to be gloriously compensating for a lifetime of sobriety. Solomon's also a breakthrough in another, though related, way: He's the first explicitly Jewish-American character in any Miller play. To be sure, much of the salt in Miller's earlier work, as in much American writing, comes from its use of Jewish idioms, or just Jewish word order, but this is the first of his plays in which it's out in the open (though the Franzes themselves still seem to be passing). Solomon, we learn, has been through three wives (he later, chiding himself for his absent-mindedness, amends this to four), several countries and uncount-

able careers, including an early one as a circus acrobat. He also, having seen and done it all, functions as a moral barometre; he sizes up Victor's marriage at a glance, and whenever Victor and Walter say, or seem about to do, something truly unpardonable or irretrievable, he steps in. Or rather, he slumps back, as if about to have a heart attack, as indeed he may; at his time of life, should you expect any different? Even when he's technically offstage, he seems to be keeping tabs on what's going on. The part is a gift for any actor, but it's hard to imagine it better done than it is by David Fox who, like his character, is both cunning and honest: a secular holy fool. For an actor with so strong and idiosyncratic a presence, Fox is remarkably versatile; this performance, wizened and stooping, has nothing in common with his beaming farmer in *The Drawer Boy* or his vulpine Rumsfeld in *Stuff Happens* beyond their completeness.

He does not, however, steal the show, which under Diana Leblanc's direction, is beautifully measured. Michael Hanrahan's Victor, wearing his uniform like a slightly uncomfortable second skin, is to-the-bone believable, right from the play's silent overture in which he lovingly lifts the dust sheets from the attic furniture that Paula Wing's program note aptly describes as "imagined in luxurious detail by designer Phillip Silver." (I'm not sure that it's the program's job to do the critics' work for them, but thanks anyway, Paula.) Hanrahan is quiescent, tolerant, almost genial when dealing with the dealer, or even with his own semi-alcoholic wife whom Jane Spidell somewhat underplays, perhaps in tactful self-defence; when Canada's own Kate Reid created the role on Broadway, one ended up disliking the actress for the faults of the character. It's only when his brother appears that Hanrahan begins to explode; trying through long habit to rein his anger in, this Victor looks as if he may burst a blood vessel.

Walter's arrival is the play's first-act curtain, and Stuart Hughes, transformed in camel-hair coat and tortoise-shell glasses and slicked-down hair, makes it an event. The character is in fact a lifelong self-transformer, and he has a tempting offer or two for Victor. Meanwhile, he taunts him with having thrown away his life for a selfish old man who could have fended for himself. ("What was he? Exiled royalty?") There is admittedly something dramatically unsatisfying about all this: As one recrimination and revelation leads inexorably to another, it all begins to seem a little too neat. And of course the real protagonist, however artfully Leblanc focuses on his empty chair, isn't there. But the author plays fair; there's little doubt where his deepest sympathies lie, but both combatants are given a fair shake; all their accusations strike home and Hanrahan and Hughes make the contest devastating, the more so for the tantalizing hope that these brothers may somehow act brotherly.

"Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing!" Willy Loman shouted at his son, wrongly in that case. But it's right enough in this one. It isn't, though, the play's last word; that goes to the wisdom of Solomon. He also gets the last laugh: a living example of the play's humanity and also, for reasons it would be unfair to reveal, of its craftsmanship.

■ *The Price* runs to Oct. 22 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts. Visit soulpepper.ca or call 416-866-8666 for ticket information.

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T.O.DO THIS WEEK

1 While cinephiles jockey in lines for that other movie shindig, the Toronto Urban Film Festival (TUFF) returns with its slate of one-minute silents screening on monitors throughout the city's subway stations. Atom Egoyan will choose the top three flicks, and there's a TUFF-themed art talk at the Drake on Sept. 14, too. Sept. 9 to 18. TTC platforms. Free; torontourbanfilmfestival.com.

2 "Unlike any other series in cinema," Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colors Trilogy: Blue, White and Red* will screen during the Roncesvalles Polish Festival. The films are self-contained masterpieces yet linked, with the third garnering three Oscar nominations back in 1994. Sept. 16-18, 7 p.m. 400 Roncesvalles Ave. \$10; revuecinema.ca.

3 As taste buds turn to harvest treats, get inspired and enter Chudleigh's 2nd Annual Apple Plectest. Held at the apple blossom maker's farm, the contest is open to all, and you could win a season's pass to the farm, in addition to more delicious pie! Sept. 17 (deadline for entry: Sept. 15). 9528 Hwy 25, Halton Hills. Free; chudleighs.com.

4 Toronto Sudanese rapping sensation Reema Major is only 16, but she's garnering plenty of buzz and will headline the urbanNOISE Festival. With a new mix tape (*I Am Legend*), Major leads a stellar lineup for the festival, which seeks to unite communities against violence. Sept. 10, 3 p.m. 8 p.m. 1515 Albion Rd. Free; urbannoise.ca.

5 Elisabetta Fantone's stylized celebrity portraits capture the likes of George Clooney, Sophia Loren and Johnny Depp in *Now and Then*, an exhibit of the Québécois artist's non-



TOM BLANCHARD 2011, O'BORN CONTEMPORARY; PETER LYNCH

Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatsky's *Road Movie*, top, and Peter Lynch's *Buffalo Days*.

ART THAT MOVES

BY LEAH SANDALS

What's the difference between art and movies? To many, one is ivory-tower academicism, the other populist popcorn. But TIFF curator Andréa Picard says the genres are closer than you might think.

"Dialogue has always happened between film and modern art," she said this week while installing the fest's gallery-based program, Future Projections.

"Gus Van Sant was a painter, Abbas Kiarostami is a photographer, Peter Greenaway came from an art background. There's these interdisciplinary minds at work, but sometimes they become known in one discipline and not the other."

With that in mind, here are some white-cube tips for our darkened-cinema bash, with all shows running to Sept. 18.

FOR SUBSTANCE SEEKERS

There's serious, yet seriously enjoyable, works at Future Projections this year — many by Toronto artists. At the top of the heap is Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatsky's terrific *Road Movie*, showing at 51 Woleseley St. Demonstrating that there's often more than two sides to every story, *Road Movie's* layered look at life in Israel and Palestine unfolds across six screens on three wall-like structures. Though some might find the premise heavy-handed — one side of the "walls" features stories from travels with Israelis, the other side tales from journeys with Palestinians — this duo weaves an experience that is elegant and unexpected.

Also strong is Nicholas and Sheila Pye's show *Light as a Feather Stiff as a Board* at Birch Libralato (129 Tecumseth St.). The Pyses may have split romantically, but their collaborative art practice continues to chug along here with a characteristically dreamy brew of sensual and painterly psychic dramas. In the central work, *The Flower Eaters*, one artist eats a rose, while the other plucks petals from their mouth — a mythical, ancient-seeming premise remade Gen Y style.

Finally, veteran filmmaker Peter Lynch's *Buffalo Days* gives the ROM's gloomy Spirit House (100 Queen's Park) some much-needed, well, spirit, marrying views of Alberta landscapes with an evocative soundtrack of Blackfoot drumming. Also promising: When David Rokeby's electronic installations work (like his light cube at Telus House) they're wondrous. When their technical glitches, not so much. Fingers crossed

Idaho (at the Lightbox lobby, 350 King St. W.) focuses on a third megastar, River Phoenix, melding River-centric outtakes from *My Own Private Idaho* with pics of the Portland street hustlers that inspired that movie role.

Offering a decidedly different spin on celebrity homage is *Mr. Brainwash*, the satirical, commercialization-loving street artist who won fame in the 2010 documentary (slash mockumentary) about Banksy, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. Brainwash's kitschy show at Yorkville's Gallery One (115 Scollard St.) is almost like a meta-commentary on the art world — an experiment in who will buy bad work if a big name is attached, whether it's Brainwash's or that of a subject like Charlie Chaplin or Michael Jackson. (An exception: prints that steal Warhol's soup-can motif and revamp it as a spraypaint can to poke directly at capital's sway on street art.) A surer Brainwash/Banksy bet is the outdoor mural on tap for the side of Gallery One's building and stencils planned for Pecault Square, which Brainwash (?) told me could include Toronto police officers wielding boom mics and spotlights.

FOR CINEMA GEEKS

Best known for staging elaborate, psychologically probing scenes, acclaimed U.S. photographer Gregory Crewdson turned his lens recently to an unexpectedly documentary-style project: shooting the Italian Cinecittà film studios where majestic old Fellini sets have been left to rot. His pics in delicate black and white — on view at the Contact Gallery (80 Spadina Ave.) — evoke Roman ruins, underlining that way of filmmaking as something from another era. Award-winning U.K. artist Ben Rivers is also enamoured of the old ways; his enigmatic *Slow Action* at Gallery TPW puts a massive 16mm anamorphic projector prominently on display. Also promising: Cannes darling Duane Hopkins, who brings his *Sunday* to MOCCA (952 Queen St. W.) during the fest.

FOR ART ADDICTS

There's plenty in TIFF's regular program for art lovers, too. Fans of vanguard German painter Gerhard Richter, whose survey opens at the Tate next month, won't want to miss the doc *Gerhard Richter Painting*, screening Sept. 10, 12 and 18. Before he made it big with *Hunger*, Steve McQueen's films haunted art museums worldwide. His new flick *Shame* focuses on appetites of the carnal nature (Sept. 11 and 13). Guy Maddin's *Weekend Update* sees the renowned Canadian