

THEATER PREVIEW: The Price

By [Eric Rezsnyak](#) on March 3, 2010



Arthur Miller's "The Price" is many fine things - smartly written, thought provoking, deeply affecting, and, as staged by Geva Theatre, well acted and directed. But it is not what I would call an enjoyable play. "Dreary" is the word that first comes to mind when describing it, followed by "grim." But given that Geva's last four productions have been comedies, the theater was due for something with a bit more emotional heft. "The Price" is certainly a dramatic heavyweight; it focuses on a pair of brothers trying to cope with the failures of their father, each other, and themselves, and ultimately failing even at that.

The play opens with middle-aged cop Victor Franz returning to the attic apartment where he once lived with his father. The elder Franz was a millionaire until he lost everything during the Great Depression. After his financial ruin and the death of his wife soon after, he was left a shell of a human being, relying on young Victor to take care of him until his eventual death. To do that, Victor put aside his dreams of pursuing science and became a beat cop, while his elder brother, Walter, proceeded with his chosen career and became a prominent and moneyed surgeon.

Decades later, the old brownstone where Victor and his father used to subsist on scraps is about to be demolished, and Victor has called a furniture appraiser to make him an offer on the ornate pieces that still clutter the attic, bitter reminders of a fortune long gone. Money and class issues still linger, as Victor's wife, Esther, pressures him to retire from the force, take his pension, and finally get to living instead of merely existing. The sudden, unexpected reappearance of Walter - gone from Victor's life for nearly 20 years - stirs up decades of resentment, and the inevitable confrontation between the brothers builds to the brutal, surprising climax of the play.

"The Price" is not one of Miller's best-known works, but it's easy to understand why Geva (and co-producer Syracuse Stage) would choose to produce it now. The reverberations of the Great Depression can be felt in almost every second of the show, its characters shell-shocked from the crash even decades later. With our country dealing with the aftershocks of major financial institutions nearly toppling, and with individuals and the government itself in serious financial straits, there's a lot of resonance.

But the play has some issues. First, it's really a one-act stretched over two parts. The emotional meat is the dynamic between Victor and Walter, but Walter himself doesn't appear until the last two minutes of the first act. That means that all of Act I is spent establishing the milieu of Victor and the prickly relationship with his wife, and showcasing the antics of Gregory Solomon, the aged appraiser hired by Victor.

Here is where I confess that I probably missed much of the show's entertainment value. The crowd on opening night ate up Solomon's shtick, laughing as he rapidly switched from sweet old man to imperious deal-maker to combative curmudgeon to wise sage. I found it insufferable. I understand that there are wheelers and dealers like Solomon out there, and I think Miller's dialogue captures them authentically. And Kenneth Tigar does a remarkable job bringing the role to life, maintaining an irascible base no matter what the character's bargaining tactic. But I couldn't help but find Solomon exhausting to put up with, even as a spectator.

Which leads to the second problem: none of the characters in the play are likable. The other purpose of Act I is to make us sympathize with Victor and his plight, and we do. But by the end of the play, certain information is revealed that makes him arguably the most despicable person in the room. Meanwhile, his wife, Esther, vacillates between boozy depressive and shrewish would-be social climber. Walter ends up the most relatable of the characters, but even he is ultimately a pompous boor.

Those issues aside, I give the play enormous credit for eliciting an honest-to-god physical reaction out of me. In the middle of the second act, as Victor and Walter engage in an escalating airing of grievances that ultimately recasts their entire relationship (this is where Miller's script really crackles), I found myself making actual choking gestures, so enraged was I at the characters on stage. I can't remember the last time a play affected me that directly or intensely. Most people can probably identify someone in their lives who behaves the way at least one of these characters do - creating an elaborate latticework of white lies and fantasies that recast themselves as victims, absolving themselves of any culpability in their own personal failures. It's difficult to watch in real life with someone you care about, but it's revelatory to watch the behavior exposed on stage.

All four of the actors in the show - Richard McWilliams as Victor, Carmen Roman as Esther, Tigar as Solomon, and Tony DeBruno as Walter - do a nearly flawless job in their roles. By Act II, the proceedings on stage seem so real that it's easy to forget the illusion, and instead feel like you're watching an actual family break down right before your eyes. The performances are enhanced by **Scott Bradley's appropriately claustrophobic set** and **Thomas C. Hase's subtle light design, which grows darker as the daylight - and the hopes of familial or even personal reconciliation - fades.**

The Price
Through March 21
Geva Theatre Center, 75 Woodbury Blvd.
\$22-\$59 | 232-4382, gevatheatre.org