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Nathan Lane and Brian Dennehy Star in a Brilliant Iceman

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 25th, 2015

While its demanding running time doesn't exactly fly by, Robert Falls' mammoth revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* will keep you fascinated for nearly five hours, quite a feat in our attention-deficient times. Now at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, after a successful run at Chicago's Goodman Theatre in 2012, this bleak depiction of the self-deluding drunks at a last chance saloon holds you in its hypnotic spell and doesn't release you until you're as exhausted as the pipe dreamers onstage. But you'll also be strangely exhilarated at having witnessed a great production of one of the greatest of American tragedies.

It begins, appropriately, in darkness. We can barely make out the shapes in Kevin Depinet's prison-like set (inspired by John Conklin's design) or hear the voices of the hungover habitués of the ironically named Harry Hope's bar in 1912 Lower Manhattan. Gradually Natasha Katz's eloquent lighting reveals the crew of dreamers, each repeating their personal illusion of escaping his or her rock-bottom existence. They are all eagerly awaiting the arrival of Hickey, the glad-handing salesman whose annual visit promises free drinks and feeding of fantasies. But this time Hickey brings cold, hard reality, encouraging his pals to be honest about themselves, believing it will bring them peace. But it's the peace of the grave Hickey offers, as O'Neill shows that the drunks—a microcosm of the world representing all classes, races, and political persuasions—need their pleasant lies in order to live.



Nathan Lane, Brian Dennehy, and Salvatore Inzerillo in *The Iceman Cometh*

Credit: Richard Termine

There are flaws in this giant of a play. O'Neill indulges in repetition and there's an unnecessary, parallel subplot involving the whining Don Parritt, a former revolutionary, and his father figure, the misanthropic Larry Slade. But all the weaknesses are brushed aside in Falls' masterly staging. There's enough variety and energy in the galaxy of booze-guzzlers to keep the action from flagging and each of the large cast endows their role with individual quirks and subtext.

Musical comedy star Nathan Lane may seem an odd casting choice for Hickey, but as soon as he makes his big entrance well into the first act, it makes sense. Bursting into the bar's gloomy backroom, he displays a jolly showman's slick song-and-dance, only this time he's selling his idea of peace rather than good times. When the smiling mask slips and Lane reveals the heartache beneath Hickey's whimsical façade, it's shocking. As the life-weary Larry Slade, Brian Dennehy adds another indelible portrait of devastation to his gallery of O'Neill immortals from such works as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Desire Under the Elms*. Even though Slade can be seen as

static—his main action is pushing away Hickey and Parritt and begging to be left alone—Dennehy gives him a palpable vitality and a clear objective: to kill off his compassion and retreat from life though part of him still desperately wishes to partake.

Additional outstanding performances are delivered by Stephen Ouimette as the pugnacious barowner Harry Hope, John Douglas Thompson as the rage-filled Joe Mott, Kate Arrington as the sentimental prostitute Cora and Lee Wilkof as the anarchist Hugo Kalmar who goes in and out of a drunken stupor. But the entire company brings O'Neill's hopeless souls to blazing life in this glacier-sized *Iceman*.

Feb. 12—March 15. BAM/Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn, NY. Tue.—Sat., 7 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: four hours and 45 mins. including three intermissions. \$25—\$200. (718) 636-4100 or www.bam.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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