



The Crucible (Antaeus Theatre Co/Putnam Cast)

By Dale Reynolds



"The opinions of men are not the objects of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction." -- Thomas Jefferson

Arthur Miller's luminous political drama, *The Crucible*, was written in 1952/3 after his appearance at the Republican-run House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC), under suspicion of having been a current or past member of the Communist Party.

He and his producers knew that any play he wrote which went against the conservative zeitgeist of the day wouldn't make money, so he hid his message of political intolerance under the cover of religious intolerance and, sensibly, placed it 250 years in the past. Based on the well-known witchcraft trials (and hangings – not burnings) of 1692/3 in Salem Village in Massachusetts Colony, Miller condensed and sharpened the period legal arguments – based entirely on religious dogma – to explore what happens to any society when mass-hysteria becomes a norm, even for a short while.

John Proctor and his wife, Elizabeth, run a tidy farm. But there is strife in their marriage due to John's having given in to the blandishments of their servant, the wily Abigail, earlier in the year. The play opens with Abigail's uncle, the despised minister of the village, Samuel Parris, having run across his daughter, Betty, niece Abigail, Tituba, his slave from Barbados, and nine other young girls of the village dancing, one nude, in the forest. When he bursts onto the scene Betty goes into a faint, not willing/able to come out of it. This leads to accusations of witchcraft against the terrified Tituba, who admits that she had conjured up spirits and, possibly, the devil himself. Thus, the financial and litigious tensions of the village erupt into deadly warfare, when

the higher-ups from the theocratically-run government come to hold trials into the hysteria of frightened and superstitious town-and-country folk.

This oft-produced play has been filmed successfully (once in France) and is produced all over the world. So it is hard for any professional theatre company (amateur companies aren't generally able) to make it fresh for an educated audience. Which is what the artistic heads of the lauded classical theatre company, Antaeus, did by discovering new life in it by, essentially, stripping away the historic context (modified modern costumes; simple wooden set; uncomplicated lighting) to allow Miller's psychological and political under-pinning's to shine through.

Directors **Armin Shimerman** and **Geoffrey Wade**, having cast it with exemplary actors, have made this simplified version easier for audiences to follow. Their device, which ironically doesn't work as well as might have been expected, allows most of the dialogue to be addressed directly to the audience and not to each other, except in more intimate moments. The purposed rationale, one may surmise, is to allow Miller's rage a freer flowing, so that even though they are using religion as a battering-ram against each other, Miller was making subtle comparisons to HUAC and other anti-Communists "witch-hunts", with their bludgeoning and distortions of the freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, allowing the forces of corruption to have temporary wins, but creating bigger losses in the First and Fourth Amendments that favor freedom of speech and assembly.

Being double-cast, "The Proctors" and "The Putnam's", share a same rehearsal time, but with subtly differing characterizations. In "The Proctors" cast, **Bo Foxworth** and **Kimiko Gelman** were John and Elizabeth Proctor, the put-upon protagonists, fitting nicely into their roles of a strained marriage ultimately strengthened by the hysteria of the community. The sadness of their fate and the others such as Rebecca Nurse (**Dawn Didawick**) and Giles Corey (**Phil Proctor**) are the heartbreaking core of Miller's outrage. **John Allee**'s creepy Reverend Parris was achingly accurate in his self-promotion and in his need to have power, however minute, over his parishioners.

Casting actors to play against age, ethnicity and gender also paid off best in **Ann Noble**'s conflicted Rev. Hale, **William C. Mitchell**'s pained Francis Nurse, and **Sandra McClain**'s Tituba and Judge Hathorne. **Stoney Westmoreland** was a strong Thomas Putnam, as was **James Sutorious**' Deputy Governor Danforth. **Nicole Erb**'s Abigail, as was true of the younger women playing the "afflicted" girls, was a tad too modern in her delivery and movement, although she captured the unsettling Abigail's sexiness well.

On **Stephen Gifford**'s simple wooden set, wearing **E.B. Brooks**' period-modified costumes, the company as a whole (true for both casts) exhibited quality professionalism and made this extraordinary piece of writing come very much alive, allowing us glimpses of contemporary blame-gaming and media-induced hysteria masking corrupt political demagoguery.

The Crucible plays through July 7th, 2013, at the Deaf-West Theatre, 5114 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA 91601. Tickets: 818.506.1983 or at www.antaeus.org.