

THE CRUCIBLE @ DEAF WEST THEATRE

A politically charged classic for our politically charged times.

By Ernest Kearney | May 28, 2013



When it comes to theatre, and especially the classics, history is the danger. To thrive, the stage demands immediacy and relevance, two qualities that suffer from an accumulation of dust which, sadly, a reverence for history can bring.

Shakespeare perhaps benefited from Cromwell's victory at Naseby in that the Puritans' 18-year ban on "the godless stage" broke the "chains" of history and freed the Bard's work from its "traditions". Hence, today seeing the plays of **Shakespeare** can involve a Wild West setting, a futuristic post-apocalypse wasteland or an abstract construct consisting of various levels and trapezes. Whereas in France, which suffered no such similar interruption of their theatrical traditions, seeing a play of Racine more often than not means having to endure a stuffed, catalogued and mounted museum piece.

Arthur Miller wrote "*The Crucible*" in 1953. Originally entitled "*The Chronicles of Sarah Good*", Miller took the Salem Witch Trials, which racked the Province of

Massachusetts Bay in 1692, and forged those events into a razor sharp allegory against the Red-baiting hysteria of McCarthyism.

Some of the characters Miller chose to use in his play were based on actual personages; Reverend Parris, Abigail Williams, Rebecca Nurse, Giles Corey, John Proctor. For his purposes, however, Miller did not feel the need to adhere too closely to the historical facts. The slave Tituba, who was among the first to be suspected of witchcraft, was an Indian not an African, and there was no relationship between Proctor and Abigail; he was in his 60's at the time, she was 11. Abigail did disappear from Salem as the hysteria faded, and though there is no solid information concerning her fate, tradition has it she fell into prostitution and died before the age of 17. So "*The Crucible*" carries with it a triple whammy dose of "history".

It is a play with a historical setting, which intended to hold a mirror up to an episode now fixed firmly within the frame of history, and the cherry sitting atop it all is that the play itself is a classic.

The average theatre company would find producing Miller's play a rather intimidating prospect. Fortunately, there is nothing average about **The Antaeus Company**. Directors Armin Shimerman and Geoffrey Wade have refashioned a "*Crucible*" for our time, giving it a presentational staging and slightly modern shading.

Some purist will, I am certain, take umbrage at this re-fitting, and, to be honest, it does come at a price. Initially having the actors speaking their lines directly at the audience denies the needed connection between the characters to establish that ferocious dramatic urgency which Miller uses so deftly that one is sucked into the action with the very first lines. But as the piece progresses, the style takes grip on the audience and continues to tighten relentlessly.

Antaeus double casts their productions, and I was lucky enough to see the two ensembles perform, which I must say was a fascinating exercise. (By way of differentiating the two casts Antaeus refers to them as "The Proctors" and "The Putnams", a convention I will respect.) Bo Foxworth ("The Putnams") and Christopher Guilmet ("The Proctors") are each standouts in that most problematic of roles John Proctor, and both casts are solid and possessed of an intoxicating level of talent across the boards.

Drawing from the two casts I found Shannon Lee Clair is spot on as the malleable Mary Warren and the dexterous Marcia Battise (both “Proctors”) gripping as the scapegoated slave Tituba and unctuous Judge Hathorne.

Dawn Didawick shined as Rebecca Nurse the only truly Christian character in the drama, while James Sutorius portrayed with finesse her polar opposite the officious Danforth (both “Putnams”).

The superb Steve Hofvendahl serves both casts and brings the human price of the unfolding tragedy into sharper focus as Giles Corey. But where the experience of viewing the two ensembles proved the most intriguing was where the casting of a single role featured two very distinctly different actors.

In my first viewing of the show, “The Proctors” cast, John Prosky was mesmerizing as the Reverend John Hale who came upon stage like some Ivy League Freudian in a white hat whose wisdom would save the day, only to learn how helpless knowledge and good intentions truly are when confronted by the all devouring monster of fear.

On my second night watching the show, ‘The Putnams”, finding the role of Hale filled by the capable Ann Noble I felt a tinge of disappointment, but this was soon dispelled. Gone was the smug academic whose fall I took a secret relish in watching and in his place was now the sincere believer whose anguish at being faced with the failure of her faith was palpable.

Both casts distinguish themselves, though allow me to close with a nod towards Daniel Dorr, who as Marshal Herrick demonstrated what an actor of talent can achieve in even the slightest of roles.

Directors Shimerman and Wade, along with the artistic crew of Antaeus are to be commended for taking up the challenge of this most challenging of plays, as well as presenting a production ideally suited to the dedicated theatregoer who perhaps would wonder at first what he or she might find fresh in the oft-staged “*Crucible*”.

Shimerman and Wade’s bold staging brings new perspective that emerges strongest as we come nearer to the point where the trial takes possession of the narrative, then suddenly lines find their resonance amplified, striking with deeper

thrusts until the audience's engagement is overwhelmed by a sense of recognition:

“There are wheels within wheels –“

“Think on your village.”

“Is the accuser always holy?”

We know these talking heads, we know the glib televangelist, we are no longer allowed the security of the spectator, now the hysteria has engulfed us. We are too familiar with this insatiable madness; it can't be dismissed to the receptacle labeled “historical”. It is not witch trial or McCarthyism, it's Kenneth Star, it's Benghazi, it's Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, it's 9-11 “Trutherism”, Glenn Beck, Nancy Grace and all our collective hobgoblins clustered behind the fence on the grassy knoll. We are no longer allowed the option of sitting as audience, we can be only accuser or accused.

Now Choose.