

The Crucible

The Antaeus Company

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



In this version of Arthur Miller’s evergreen play, co-directors Armin Shimerman and Geoffrey Wade give us theater as the Greeks might have seen it. The two directors block the actors to face the audience, rather than one another, at almost all times. Here it’s as if the actors were in the rehearsal room, the eye “contact” shifting as if the characters were communicating with one another while facing a mirror.

Why doesn’t this work? Audiences have expectations, and many want their actors to face each other. Adding to the meta-theater feel—or in this case perhaps meta-rehearsal feel—actors involved in an upcoming scene sit upstage, subtly watching the action. Unfortunately, one might spend too long pondering the significance of the particular combination of actors there.

On the other hand, why does the direction work? We can see the full force of the play in these actors, not half-hidden in their profiles, not in three-quarter “cheating” toward the audience, not in standing unnaturally close to each other or moving downstage center to signal, “This is an important moment.” Only two pieces of lighting design do that signaling here; hopefully, either they were board-operator error or are something to be changed over the run.

The sole exceptions to the audience-facing concept are moments between John and Elizabeth Proctor. The couple’s intimacy—or lack of it—belongs to these two, privately, while the rest of Massachusetts butts in to everyone’s business and makes assumptions based on the manipulation by the town’s teen girls.

This play is, after all, Miller's condemnation of witch hunts in general, and in particular that of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Shimerman and Wade's direction makes this so clear. Names, reporting names, keeping a good name, signing one's name—all seem significant without being spotlighted by the line readings. So, too, the sandpaper that the Proctors's marriage has become is given tangible layers by Bo Foxworth as a very human John and by Kimiko Gelman as a formerly ill, currently stretched Elizabeth.

The directors couldn't have operated this way with lesser actors. The cast knows what it's saying, the language is articulated and it resounds. Shimerman's ability to paint beautiful compositions shows, but it doesn't overwhelm the subtle character work he and Wade have elicited from their casts. (The play is double-cast. "The Putnams" are reviewed here.) There's an evenness in the contrasting characters that, rather than making the whole seem bland, keeps the archetypes involingly human. The smug-yet-insecure-televangelist portrayal of Reverend Parris by John Allee counterbalances the sensible nobility of Dawn Didawick's Rebecca Nurse. The seductively bullying Abigail Williams created by Nicole Erb reflects the evil side of young America; the ice-breaking performance of Philip Proctor leavens and brings tenderness to the careworn Giles Corey. The scales fall from Reverend Hale's eyes in the work of Ann Noble—the reverend's Christian name changed to Jean here—so why, oh, why couldn't they fall from the eyes of the obdurate Gov. Danforth, in a chilling portrayal by James Sutorius?

The costuming seems relatively modern, resembling rehearsal attire. What the audience gives up by the way of buckled shoes and pilgrim collars, we gain in the ability to see in full the reactions of these townspeople living a life far too similar to ours. And although nearly every American theatergoer has seen a *Crucible*—or been in it at some grade level—it's an honor to see it done this well.