



Sunday, May 19, 2013

Astonishing Revelation – Antaeus Company's 'The Crucible' (Putnam Cast)



The Antaeus Company, recently voted one of LA's best 99-seat theaters, proves itself with an intense production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Adroitly though not flawlessly directed by Armin Shimerman and Geoffrey Wade, the stellar ("Putnam") cast creates a visceral, in-yo-face version of Miller's enduring classic.

As is evident through this production's expert performances, Miller's take on the 17th Century Salem Witch Trials is not about an evil, hypocritical church community persecuting and executing innocent secularists. The plot crux of Miller's *Crucible* is – and has always been – about church outsider Abigail Williams, a fearful, emotionally injured young woman deceiving and manipulating an entire village into her vengeful, murderous rampage. Her ultimate target was Elizabeth Proctor, the wife of her love and one-time adulterer, John. The dozens of others also condemned were just collateral damage. Indeed, even her co-conspirators weren't safe from her holier-than-thou bloodlust. Everyone else – the town's minister, elders, marshals, co-conspiring townsgirls – were pawns in and eventual scapegoats of her crimes.

Not to say the townsfolk were innocent. Had they been as Christlike (loving, gracious) as they fancied themselves; had they heeded Rebecca Nurse's wisdom that the "bewitched" girls were faking and that everyone needs to pray instead of relying upon unbiblical superstitions; had the Salemites been less legalistic, opportunistic, and hypocritical, perhaps they wouldn't have been duped into willful mass murder.

Fortunately, Antaeus' directors and cast aren't guilty of the eisegesis that normally muddles the plot and themes of such a religiously, politically charged play. The ensemble remains true to *Crucible's* text and thus deliver potent, exemplary work. Nicole Erb crushes the role of Abbey, the inciter. From quiet menace to teary-eyed vulnerability, Erb's performance is breathtaking. Likewise, Bo Foxworth as John Proctor brings the gravitas and well-controlled power worthy of such a role, especially in his brilliant one-on-one moments with Erb, an endearing Kimiko Gelman's Elizabeth, and an excellent James Sutorius' Dep. Gov. Danfourth. Then, there's Sandra McClain's Tituba... her forced confession scene with Ann Noble's Reverend Hale... wow. A bone-chilling spectacle I won't soon forget.

The artistic design (scenic by Stephen Gifford; costuming by E.B. Brooks; lighting by Bosco Flanagan; sound by Jeff Gardner) is equally admirable. Set in a rustic "non-time" – not quite Salem, not quite modern America – the overall effect strengthens the impact of Miller's timeless words.



The production's only notable sin was that of staging hubris. At first, it was interesting to have the actors speak their lines towards the audience instead of to the characters directly beside them; to create a quasi-cinematic effect of all close ups; yet it grew tiresome and was often distracting – especially after seeing how impressive the traditionally played scenes were. Yes, the cast could deliver truthful performances towards the

darkness (ATTN: Hack TV/Film actors. It *is* possible.), but in the end it felt like an unnecessary gimmick. Immense talent is a unique enough commodity, and Antaeus already hath it to overflowing.

The Crucible continues at The Antaeus Company until July 7, 2013. Get your tix here, or by calling (818) 506-5436.

* In a stroke of production genius, Antaeus double (or "partner") casts every play. Benefits for the troupe are two-fold: more actors get the chance to perform; as well as collaborate with a peer to elevate their performances of the same role. For the audience, this results in an even better theater-going experience, as well as chance to see their favorite play multiple times – with alternating casts on the weekends, and computer-randomized casts during the week. Every play, then, is a crucible in which these privileged actors can refine their respective abilities.