

Review: 'The Crucible' reinvigorated at Antaeus



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Alexandra Goodman and Bo Foxworth in 'The Crucible' at the Antaeus Company.

BY F. KATHLEEN FOLEY

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Shakespearean in dimension and craft, "The Crucible," Arthur Miller's 1953 play about the Salem witch trials, is inarguably a masterwork.

More arguably, it's over-produced. How, then, does a director bring new immediacy to this beloved yet familiar work — Miller's sly denunciation of the McCarthy hearings, cloaked in period garb?

Leave it to the creative team at Antaeus. The company's subtly revisionist production of the play, co-directed by Armin Shimerman and Geoffrey Wade, reinvigorates the language and brings a novel dimension to Miller's well-worn text.

The production is double-cast and multiethnic, but for Antaeus that's nothing new. And casting a woman — in this instance, effectively magisterial Ann Noble — as the Rev. John Hale, is a bold twist that works nicely, to be sure.

But the boldest innovation is having the performers face dead front for the bulk of the action rather than directly addressing one another. It's a risky, even outlandish tack that could have blunted the drama's emotional connections. Yet considering the play's polemical nature, it's brilliant.

After all, what is "The Crucible" but a sermon, a clarion warning against demagoguery in all its forms? By having the characters address the audience, preacher-like, the proceedings take on the immediacy of a Chautauqua tent revival.

The actors, clad in E.B. Brooks' suggestive costumes, are all able and deeply committed to the text. But there are standouts, most notably Bo Foxworth, whose moving and muscular portrayal of John Proctor, the pragmatic farmer caught up in the madness, is the linchpin performance. Also exceptional is James Sutorius as Gov. Danforth, the head of the court proceedings, a brutal ideologue whose relish in his deadly work is all the more chilling for its offhand matter-of-factness.

If you feel you know "The Crucible" too well, pay it another visit. You may be surprised to find that in the right hands the play still commands our fascination — and our unease.