When, a year ago, Rosalba Clemente listed Arthur Miller’s The Crucible for inclusion in the 2003 State Theatre Company season, she cannot have imagined it would speak so vividly in such difficult times as these. Miller’s play, written in 1952, uses the analogy of the Salem Witch trials of 1692 to describe the accelerating paranoia of the McCarthy hearings which dragged so many Americans, including Miller himself, into a frenzy of denunciation and confession. The fear, then, was of communist conspiracy and the accusation that it was Un-American. But the play is not confined to its initial pretext. It has been widely performed over fifty years because, unfortunately, its truth just keeps marching on.

In her poised and lucid production Clemente has brought together a strong cast, along with the notable talents of designer Cath Cantlon, to create a seventeenth century hotspot fuelled by a brew of anxiety, suspicion, piety and false logic that is disturbingly familiar. The play opens with a glimpse of a group of young women - we would now call them teenagers - dancing and cavorting in a wood. Cantlon has a single tree from which they swing, soon to be a gibbet from which many will hang. The set and costumes are in strong contrasts of black and white, with a large grid of doors affording us a glimpse of the world of nature and instinct while guarding and confining a community increasingly hysterical from its own guilt and repression.

The long and intricate narrative is driven by several key performers, not least Nicholas Eadie as John Proctor, whose common sense is a rare commodity in a world turned upside down. Eadie has a staunchness and clarity which defines both the character and the production as a whole. His scenes with the excellent Margot Fenley as his wife Elizabeth, are highpoints. Also memorable is Roger Newcombe as Judge Danforth, incongruously seeking due process in what Miller himself has called a miasma. As the Reverends Hale and Parris Rob McPherson and Geoff Revell give us a doubter and a zealot, both overrun by events while Edwin Hodgeman excels as the crusty sceptic Giles Corey. Emily Hunt captures both the naivete
and opportunism of Abigail Williams and Sarah Dunn, one of several young actors recruited from Urban Myth Theatre Company, plays a convincingly bewildered Mary Warren whose tragedy, as in the play itself, is that, even when she begins to get things straight in her head, her only socially intelligible choice is to keep supporting the collective lie.