

# Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*The Crucible*

by Arthur Miller

State Theatre Company  
with Urban Myth Theatre Company  
Dunstan Playhouse

In his memoirs Arthur Miller describes driving back from Salem, Massachusetts and hearing on the radio that Elia Kazan, his close friend and the director of his famous play *Death of a Salesman*, had agreed to testify to the House Un-American Activities Committee. It is 1952 and Miller is in Salem researching the witch trials which had enveloped the town in 1692. Here he believed he had found a parallel to what was occurring with the hearings, presided over by the notorious Senator Joe McCarthy, which turned citizen against citizen, where suspicion and hearsay constituted proof, where guilt was a presumption, denunciation and confession the only remedy.

*The Crucible* was first performed fifty years ago and repeatedly since, because it not only describes the exponential insanity of the McCarthy period but those numerous occasions before and since when a community is goaded into such insecurity that it turns on outsiders or minorities within its number. It happened in Nazi Germany, in Rwanda, in the former Yugoslavia. It is happening internationally, the very day I am writing this, with the invasion of Iraq and preposterous assertions that all threats are one threat and that the Enemies of Freedom are dancing together in an Axis of Evil.

State Theatre Company and director Rosalba Clemente can not have imagined how closely the themes and concerns of Miller's play could be so congruent to current circumstances. *The Crucible* is a study of a religious fundamentalism that can recognise only the most extreme binaries, reducing even manifestly obvious commonsense to a distorted and distorting logic that creates hysteria in the grammar of language itself.

This production of *The Crucible* is not successful merely because of its timing but in the clarity of its presentation. Miller has written a long and wordy play about a society whose manners and language are not familiar. But the location of the drama in the tensions and conflict between parent

and child, husband and wife, preacher and congregation, the court and the citizen creates a galvanising narrative.

Establishing the emotional tenor of the production there is an opening tableau of young women dancing in abandonment. The implication is sexual, the mood is frantic as these adolescents swing wildly out from a single tree, the tree of knowledge perhaps, a hanging tree for sure. Cath Cantlon's set, searchingly lit by Mark Shelton, has a pristine quality in its stark blacks and whites, the minimal interiors with pale scrubbed furniture, the costumes prim and modest and self denying. The interiors carry the implication of prosperity and careful order and, as we glimpse through the mesh of doors to the natural world signified beyond, we know there is a total lack of readiness or understanding of the emotional riot which is to occur.

The casting of performers from Urban Myth Theatre Company highlights the youthfulness of the women at the centre of the turmoil in the play. Emily Hunt, as Abigail Williams, is disturbing in her mischief but we see also the desperation of her infatuation with John Proctor, the bluff townsman who finds himself the only sane man in a world gone mad. Nicholas Eadie is excellent as Proctor and much of the success of the production is due to his presence and our belief in his conviction. Sarah Dunn does well as Mary Warren, Proctor's one hope to turn the tide of opinion, who collapses yet again into delusion under community and peer pressure. Margot Fenley, as Elizabeth Proctor, adroitly captures both the vindictive rage of a spurned wife and a recognition that she and her husband have a tragic but heroic task to fulfil.

As part of the barrage of pious authorities, Geoff Revell and Rob McPherson discover differing calamity as the Reverends Parris and Hale. Roger Newcombe is measured and systematic - and frighteningly absurd - as Governor Danforth investigating a miasma, as Miller called it, as though it were subject to empirical principles. The result is that matters go further awry with only the curmudgeonly Giles Corey, a lively portrait by Edwin Hodgeman, and the saintly Goody Nurse (Barbara West) standing their ground. Corey, at his end, we are told, goes right up to the battle and when he pressed with stones to make him repent calls only for more weight.

Rosalba Clemente and State Theatre have brought an admired play to our attention and with strong casting and good ensemble discipline, assisted by Cath Cantlon's well-wrought decor, has recalled some of the courage and clear sightedness that Arthur Miller himself showed in writing it. The

tragedy of *The Crucible* is in the contamination of language and the lethal nature of accusation without proof. The panic which resulted from the intensive rhetoric of the McCarthy era is not something we have easily understood before. Now, the Bush Presidency, and some of its allies, seem to be getting closer to the outskirts of Salem every day.