

THE CRUCIBLE

by Arthur Miller

IES – Friday 16th March 2018

THE PLAY

This is a very, very ‘big’ play! It is unusually long (a problem which is often mitigated by cutting Act 2, Sc 1, unfortunately), it requires a large cast and gives little or no opportunity for doubling, and it makes tremendous demands on those involved and also on those watching. It can be exceptionally powerful, not only because it is beautifully written, but because the subject matter is particularly harrowing and is still extraordinarily relevant.

Everyone now understands that the story, while dramatising the true events surrounding the witch trials in Salem at the end of the 17th century, was originally seen as an allegory for the anti-communist hearings led by Senator McCarthy in Washington in the early 50s. However, I believe that the play still chimes with us today since it explores a fundamental failing in society, where the unjust scapegoating of minority groups, who are seen as ‘other’ and therefore threatening to the established order, continues unabated. When I saw it last (September 2017) the dreadful plight of the Rohingya muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar was very much in the news. And, coming even more up to date, there is something about the current ‘me too’ campaign, and the way in which potentially destructive claims of sexual harassment are all too easy to make, which reminds me of those who cried ‘witch’ back then in Salem and were believed without question.

Less well-known perhaps is that, when Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1952, he was also exploring his own moral dilemmas. In a really interesting and illuminating interview which he gave the New Yorker in 1996, he reveals that he used the character of John Proctor, and his protagonist’s imagined infidelity with Abigail Williams, as a way of dealing with his personal guilt over his responsibility for the failure of his marriage at the time. Both were real people, but Proctor was actually a man in his 60’s, and Abigail was only 13; there is no evidence at all that they had any sort of relationship, but the ‘scorned woman’ is a tremendously effective plot device, and we cannot blame Miller for having used a bit of poetic licence in his retelling of this dreadful story.

I have seen several amateur productions of *The Crucible* over the years, and I got to know it very well when we did it at the Merlin over ten years ago. It presents some interesting challenges for any Society. Firstly, there is a risk that an audience today won’t be prepared to come and watch because it is such hard work (we played to half-filled houses) and therefore effective publicity will be crucial to its success, from a financial point of view anyway. Secondly, though the settings can be very simply indicated, the costumes aren’t easy, and can be very expensive to hire, and finding (or possibly making) a reasonably convincing 17th century blunderbuss for Proctor will give your Props team quite a task! Thirdly there is the decision to be made about accents; the older characters like Giles Corey might well speak with early-English accents since it had only been 60 years since the first pilgrims had sailed over on the Mayflower, and many of them came from the Midlands, we are told. And lastly the play depends on skilful direction and very committed acting, to draw us in and make us all feel the depth of passion which a sense of injustice rightly engenders.

Though the play often leaves me feeling wrecked emotionally, I am greatly looking forward to it!

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

It is quite some time since I last saw front tabs being used at The Warehouse. They give rather a comforting 'feel' to a production and, though the changes in the four settings you used didn't need a great deal of stage management to achieve them, closing the tabs did mean that you could manage with quite a small "black gang". In fact I note from the programme that only Xavier Driver is credited with this job – I hope he got a bit of help from other members of the cast!

There was a jolly piece of simple country music before the tabs went back, but thereafter there was no music at all to cover the sounds of set furniture being moved around. We sat there in the darkness between Acts and, though you didn't keep us waiting all that long, I think some sort of 'signature' music to carry the mood from one scene to the next would have been helpful.

The basic set, when we saw it, was surprisingly plain – just a rectangular room, painted in a uniform sepia brown with no attempt to delineate the door stage L or the unused window in the upstage wall, and there was a barest minimum of functional set furniture – essentially one of two tables, the bed in Act 1, a lectern in the vestry and a writing desk in the gaol, and a total of three chairs at any one time. As a consequence the whole thing looked disappointingly dull, at first, but as you populated the stage with more and more characters I realised that it provided just the right simple, unfussy, backdrop for this play – and I think 'unfussy' was the watchword for this production; bravo!

Brian Perkins' lighting too was in the same vein – good general cover, and the levels very nicely judged, so that faces, collars, cuffs and aprons 'popped'. At times I was reminded of a Rembrandt painting. Later on you took a considerable risk by under-lighting the gaol – just a couple of blue floods as far as I could see, but you had added just enough front light for us to be able to see expressions and I thought it worked really well – particularly since you could then add the sunlight coming through the barred window – lovely. I did wonder whether you might have used this idea right at the start of the play, if Betty's bed had been placed stage R, rather than stage L. The opening moments when Rev Parris is kneeling in prayer at her bedside could have been lit from the lattice window behind him and I think this would have greatly improved the look of the room, and given us confidence, when we first saw it. There was only one occasion where I felt the lighting style strayed away from being naturalistic and that was the pin-spot at the end for Elizabeth – a bit clumsy because it took her a moment to find it on the night I came, but also it seemed to me to be out of kilter with the rest of the presentation.

Recorded sound, as far as I remember, was limited to the effect of Cheever and Herrick arriving on horseback, with a cart, outside the Proctors' window, which worked rather well I thought, and to the roll of drums leading up to Proctor's hanging which didn't, I'm afraid – it seemed rather quiet, almost perfunctory, and as a result was anti-climactic. I think the voices off stage L at the beginning of Act 2 were probably performed live in the wings (and a bit confusing because Martha's voice – not credited in the programme – seemed to be coming from stage R!). I reckon there might have been a case for recording this exchange, and possibly adding a very slight echo, to give the impression of a large unseen courtroom.

Costumes by Sonya Young were quite a challenge but well done on the whole – quite a few of them made specially for this production, I would guess. Several of the men wore britches made of what looked like very nice brown raw silk, for instance, presumably from the same roll of cloth. There were a couple of lovely blouson shirts, and a credible heavily-distressed copy of one made for Proctor when he was incarcerated. Lots of coifs of course, and white collars and aprons, but the colours chosen for the surcoats, waistcoats and dresses/skirts were quite rightly from a muted natural colour palette – mainly burgundies, browns and greens, with black for the clergy and the judiciary. Only Tituba wore blue, with a colourful green/blue head-wrapping, and this set her apart from the rest – very effectively I thought. Footwear was OK – faux boots for Proctor and real ones for Elizabeth; not the right period maybe, but at least they were lace-ups. Buckles on shoes, except for the clerics – good. I was impressed to see that Rebecca wore a dirtied-up apron for her Act 4 appearance, and was a little surprised that Elizabeth’s had remained pristine. And I think someone should have told your director to wear tights, or at least socks that went above the knee – there was a gap when Hathorne sat down, which I’m sure Phil wouldn’t have been aware of! And while I am being picky – that same person should have spotted that Herrick was wearing ankle socks under his grey woolly tights... I know, I know; it’s irritating, but this is the sort of thing adjudicators notice.

Lots of props, but no one credited for them in the programme... Proctor’s whip looked splendidly original but the coddled gun seemed rather small in his hands. A nice range of stuff on the chest of drawers and it was good to see him using a semi-glazed earthenware bowl. He had to mime washing his face and hands though, and I think it would have been better to have had a rough towel for him to use, even if you didn’t want to bother with water. The paper used for depositions etc seemed to have been handwritten, appropriately, but looked too lightweight for the period. It is quite easy to get heavier stuff which looks like parchment – in fact the SFD certificates are printed on it! And why a red quill in the nice little pottery inkwell, I wondered? It shouted: “Look at me – I’m totally wrong!”

Hair and make-up wasn’t used as much as I’d expected to make the Proctors and Rebecca Nurse look as though they had been kept in prison in awful conditions. It was good to see Elizabeth’s hair taken down, and both John’s and Rebecca’s looked a bit unruly, but all three of them had exceptionally clean feet I noticed, and I would have liked to have seen some attempt to make John’s wrists look raw from his shackles – especially since Elizabeth comments on them immediately she sees him.

Direction

I wrote in the previous section that ‘unfussy’ was the watchword for this production, and this was particularly the case with your direction, Phil. I have seen this play virtually ruined by a director who thought he needed to be clever and fiddle about, augmenting it with too much directorial detail, and I was so pleased to see that it seemed, very largely, that you had let the words speak for themselves.

I use the word ‘seemed’ advisedly, because I know very well that in fact everything an audience sees on stage has been carefully thought through and planned meticulously. And though it may look simple, it is actually quite difficult, in my opinion, to manage a cast of this size in a relatively small acting area, to make sure that whoever is speaking is able to draw our focus, and to avoid the sense that they are just milling about. You did this very well, because I got the impression that you didn’t feel you needed to move them just to create new

pictures. An example? Well, Danforth spent almost the entire court scene sitting in that magnificent chair. He stood up once or twice and he did move to confront Proctor and later Abigail, and to conduct Elizabeth's cross-examination, but mainly he sat – flanked by Hathorne on his right and Parris on his left. It was simple and uncluttered, and it worked beautifully. And while I am thinking about this scene, I really liked the way you had directed the girls (who were superb, incidentally) – a group spearheaded by Abigail, tremendously disciplined and harrowingly credible, coming forward into the limelight and then retreating to the back of the stage in a gaggle. And was it by chance that they occupied the L side of the stage while the forces of good were on the R side? No, I don't think so. Just as I think it was deliberate that Mary Warren started out stage R and crossed over to the L, the sinister side – literally and figuratively – when the peer pressure became too great for her to resist. It was a chilling scene, and so well handled by all involved.

A word here about the decision to cut Act 2 Sc 1, the scene between Proctor and Abigail, set in the woods... I can understand why you might do so, on the basis that the play is quite long enough already. My own opinion however (having decided to include the scene in FDC's version) is that, if you have an able actress to play Abigail, as you most certainly did, it is well worth giving her this opportunity, even though it adds maybe 8 minutes to the running time. The scene provides a bridge which carries Abigail across her personal arc from scheming teenager “with an endless capacity for dissembling” to spurned and vindictive lover, rather scarily losing her grip on reality as she recklessly abuses the power the court gives her in the second half of the play.

The production was very well-paced, on the whole. It certainly never dragged and I sensed that you had fully engaged your audience, to the extent that there were murmurings of what sounded like outrage on several occasions! If anything, I felt it was a little over-paced at the start – a good fault, I suppose, but I do think you needed to keep this in check – at least until our eyes and ears had become attuned to the style of playing. I was sorry actually that you weren't able to put the brakes on a bit more with Iona in the role of Abigail – she spoke so fast that we lost quite a lot of what she said, and I'm afraid you, Phil, must bear the responsibility for this – the director has to be a mirror for the members of the cast, reflecting back to them what the audience are seeing and hearing. On the other hand, you can take full credit for ensuring that cueing was so tight, even to the point of over-cueing sometimes, but I always think this adds a degree of realism. And in the same vein I thought entrances were very well timed – not once did I detect a ‘clunk’ on the night I came, and of course this helps enormously to keep the play flowing.

I've said nothing as yet about your playing Judge Hathorne, Phil... Generally, I think productions suffer when the director takes to the stage, and I reckon their own performance tends to be below their usual level, simply because they haven't been able to give it their undivided attention, but I appreciate that sometimes it is necessary because there just aren't enough actors available. I did wonder however whether you might have considered taking on the much smaller role of Francis Nurse, for which I think you were more age-appropriate, and given Hathorne to John Ralph? This would have enabled you to sit out front a lot more in the 2nd half for those crucial final rehearsals. And did you have an assistant director to give you some feedback for your own performance? There is no mention of this in the programme.

Acting

A cast of 18 puts a bit of a strain on any adjudicator! I am keen to mention you all because this production was clearly a great team effort, but I hope you will understand if my remarks to each of you are relatively brief.

Betty Parris – Emily Dugdale

I saw you in *Goodnight Mr Tom* in December, and previously in *Far From The Madding Crowd*; it is great to see you getting so involved with IES and I was impressed that you gave such an assured performance as Betty. Good clear voice and stage presence. I thought you were entirely credible as a young girl in Act 1, though I suspect you had to act down in age, and also that you were a very effective member of the scary group of girls in the courtroom in Act 3 – well done.

Rev Parris – Patrick Knox

A fine performance, just as I might have expected from such an experienced actor! At least one generation older than Miller had anticipated, but hey ho – with such a large cast of males to find, I think IES were very fortunate that you were available. No attempt at an accent, but I seem to remember reading somewhere that Parris was born in London, though we are told that he was educated at Harvard before spending some years in Barbados. Your cueing was excellent and you injected lots of energy into that opening scene, just as required. You established Parris very effectively as a mean, self-serving character and it was a pleasure to see him reap the consequences of his calumny towards the end of the play. Good work.

Tituba – Lucy Driver

Though of course your skin colour didn't exactly accord with Miller's concept of Tituba as a Negro slave brought over by Parris from Barbados, I thought your colourful clothing, voice and acting style went quite a way towards convincing us of this. Lots of gesturing, which you may have felt was appropriate for this excitable character, but also a fair bit of restless movement to and fro on the stage which was a bit distracting and needed directorial quelling in my opinion.

Abigail Williams – Iona Davis

This was a role in which I expected you to excel, Iona, because I think you have a lot to offer as an actor and I greatly admired what you did with Annie Hartridge in *GMT*. So I am immensely frustrated that we lost so much of what you were saying because you were gabbling your lines and swallowing your words. I wondered whether maybe your director had asked you to speed up in order to get the play moving at the start, and then failed to get you to pull it back? Additionally, though you looked terrifyingly intense with those piercing blue eyes and wonderfully chiselled features, I would have wanted you to put a damper on all that facial expression. Abigail has to do a lot of listening in both Act 1 and in Act 3, and I felt that you did so much too actively, to the extent that you pulled focus. You probably weren't aware of this, but I do think Phil should have picked it up, and possibly would have, if he'd been sitting out front more, rather than having to play Judge Hathorne.

Susanna Walcott – Bethan Moran

A very brief appearance in Act 1, where you didn't seem all that comfortable with the form of speech Miller gives you – it came over a bit flat and possibly needed to be injected with a modern-day style in order to sound more genuine. Much more at home with the others in the courtroom where you spoke beautifully in unison, and with chilling effect. -

Ann Putnam – Rachell Buttell

It was quite a while (in fact not until I checked in the programme at the interval) before I realised it was you playing Mrs Putnam, Rachell. I'd been rather impressed with this understated performance, in which I thought I could detect just a trace of a New England accent. Undoubtedly bitter and twisted by the loss of all those children, but you kept it real, and you brought good energy to this small role. Nicely done.

Thomas Putnam – Malcolm Young

Here at last was a character who sounded very much like the New England farmer Putnam had been in reality, though quite a lot older than the original, who died in his late 40s I believe, a few years after the trials. Lovely soft accent, but this belied his essential meanness which I thought you portrayed very effectively, allowing the lines to do the work. I enjoyed this a lot.

Mercy Lewis – Zuleika Driver

Described in the script as a 'sly merciless girl of 18'... I don't think you fit this description at all, but I thought your performance in this small role was very convincing, particularly in your attitude towards poor Mary Warren in Act 1, and you seemed to be a lynch-pin in the unholy trio of acolytes in Abigail's thrall. Very nicely done.

Mary Warren – Olivia Pangraz

I enjoyed this performance very much. Poor weak, down-trodden Mary, who now invests herself with borrowed importance, was extremely well conveyed. She is caught though between two very strong personalities – Proctor and Abigail – and though she struggles to do what she knows is right, Danforth wears her down with the threat of punishment whichever way she turns, which seems terribly unfair! Finally peer pressure, and Abigail's unbridled demonstration of her power, wins her over, babbling with relief at being accepted back into her fold. Chilling really, and done beautifully. I could sense the outrage in the mutterings from people sitting around me... Congratulations on portraying this so well.

John Proctor – George Montague

This is one of the really great roles, and I thought you played it well as a level-headed farmer, with an appropriately taciturn start and then that growing frustration at the madness developing around him, fuelled by the manipulative Abigail and Danforth's dangerous obduracy in not recognising it. I was also impressed to see some frustration in his manner towards Elizabeth in that very good Act 2 scene, born of his personal guilt. I liked the beard and the 'look' you gave this character, and I thought you showed good stagecraft, though sometimes you needed to check a tendency to move your feet aimlessly. You did resist overusing gesture, which was good, but at the expense of quite often getting stuck with your forearms folded across your belly. I noticed others doing this too, and wondered whether perhaps it had been suggested by your director as a way of solving the 'hands problem'? You have a very measured way of moving around the stage, which is attractive, but you need to avoid making your delivery too measured as well – being able to vary the pace in a naturalistic way is really helpful in nailing credibility.

Rebecca Nurse – Louise Adams

At last! – the quiet voice of reason. Rebecca Nurse brings good common sense as an antidote to the mounting hysteria surrounding Betty's fugue-state, and your clear voice and calm demeanour provided welcome relief from the heightened volubility surrounding her. That dignity carried through marvellously well into the jail scene and I thought you played this frail elderly lady very movingly – bravo.

Giles Corey – Scott Waldie

Dear gentle Giles – ironically the agent of his own undoing. His reported death, by pressing, is one of the moments in the play which still brings a lump to my throat, and all the more poignant because I believe it is historically accurate. I think we warmed to this elderly man as you portrayed him, but the all-too common problem of excessive use of hand gestures to emphasise every phrase did reduce credibility a bit. You weren't the only one, mind you! I think rehearsing your lines on your own in front of a full-length mirror can be helpful.

Rev John Hale – Jonathan Peckover

This is such an interesting role; of all Miller's characters in *The Crucible*, Hale has the greatest journey. We see his initial confidence in himself, as a respected expert in witch-finding, begin to crumble as he realises, with horror, the devastating effect that unquestioning acceptance of the children's claims is having on Salem. I liked this performance a lot – it was well-structured and shaped, and in the main delivered with clarity and authority, but I sensed some insecurity with lines which suggested that you hadn't been off script all that long, and though you didn't dry at any stage, stumbling over words did tend to undermine some of the good work you'd done in terms of characterisation.

Elizabeth Proctor – Kate Little

You created a pale, sad character here and you did it with great dignity and self-control. You really made us feel for her. There is only one moment in the play when her reserve breaks – when she realises that she has inadvertently failed John by lying to Danforth, and the wail you gave as she was carried away back to prison was gut-wrenching. I remember seeing you as Liddy Smallbury in *FFTMC* and being impressed with your natural talent as an actor – I'm so pleased to see you coming into your own with such a well-thought-out and moving performance. My only sadness is that after that wonderful demonstration of Elizabeth's strength in facing up to the hopelessness of life without her husband, the end came as a bit of an anti-climax, but I don't think this was your fault at all.

Francis Nurse – John Ralph

This is a tiny role of course, full of pathos. What you did with it was fine, but I found it a little difficult to credit that your character was married to the matriarch of this small community, since you seemed so much younger than Rebecca. I would like to have seen you teaming up with Ken and getting your teeth into the role of Judge Hathorne instead,

Ezekial Cheever – Michael Wills

I saw you playing no less than three roles in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Michael, but getting the part of Cheever was a considerable step up for you. You certainly seemed to be enjoying it, and you definitely made an impression with the role – well done.

Marshall Herrick – Xavier Driver

Herrick didn't have a great deal to do, but I see that you were given some of Willard's lines as well, in the scene in the gaol, when he was supposed to be slightly drunk according to the script. I don't think there was any evidence of this in your performance, but you might have had a bit of fun with this, maybe?

Judge Hathorne – Phil Hunt

You are a very able actor, Phil – I thought you made a really good job of Boldwood in *FFTMC*, but I didn't feel that Judge Hathorne stretched you much. I think he can be more than just a 'Yes-man' to Danforth, but I don't think we saw enough conviction in this performance, perhaps because you couldn't give it full attention.

Dep-Gov Danforth – Ken Steed

This is a crucial and quite a complex role. We have his forceful personality relentlessly driving the play all the way through Act 3 and 4 – initially supremely confident in his upholding of the law, despite Rev Hale’s increasing opposition, and then just beginning to falter in the face of Proctor’s recalcitrance, but unable to go back because the hangings have begun, and he is so afraid of appearing weak. I thought you did this very effectively, and subtly, and Danforth’s desperation towards the end was well conveyed.

SUMMARY

I don’t think there can be any doubt that this production was a great success; the presentation was simple but worked very well, the direction was ‘unfussy’ and allowed the play to speak for itself, and in the main I thought the acting was of a good standard. Most importantly your audience was completely absorbed and I’m sure they went away well satisfied by what they had seen – so, congratulations to everyone involved!

Thank you very much for inviting me to come and adjudicate. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

Philip de Glanville

18.3.18