

The return of an oldy but a goody

Theatre Review: The Crucible

AFTER decades doing the rounds, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is back and bursting with freshness and life in director Tanya Goldberg's hands.

Although the play - about the witch trials in Salem in 1692 - was written as an attack on McCarthyism, it still seems relevant today and Miller's script is still as riveting, clever and unflinchingly sharp as it was when it premiered in 1958.

When young Betty Parris (Celeste Dodwell) collapses after a night dancing in the forest with her cousin Abigail (Arianwen Parkes-Lockwood) and various friends, including Mary-Warren (Zindzi Okenyo), the town of Salern starts to bubble with talk of witchcraft.

Betty's father, the materialistic Reverend Parris (Angus King), calls in the respected Reverend Hale (Nathan Lovejoy) to help quell the hysteria. But when the young girls start accusing local women of witchcraft, a court is established to cast judgment on the people of the town including farmer John Proctor (Joe Manning), who struggles to repair his marriage in the aftermath of an illicit affair with Abigail.

Performed within a limited set on the Wharf 2 stage, this moving production doesn't try to overreach.

Simone Romaniuk's pared-back set and costume designs centre around an imposing wall of metal cages stuffed with scrunched paper, working beautifully with Verity Hampson's lighting design, which veers from the blinding intensity of interrogation to clinging to the set like mould. Max Lyandvert's sound design creates an unsettling atmosphere that echoes with the haunting sound of children laughing.

The cast is an interesting mix and while some of the younger actors put in a good effort, they are no match for their experienced co-stars.

King and Lovejoy are excellent foils for each other, Curran jumps superbly between roles and Peter Carroll extracts both humour and stunning humanity from his role as the gutsy farmer Giles Corey.

At the centre of the piece, Manning and Marta Dusseldorp inject honesty and compassion in the characters of Proctor and his long-suffering wife Elizabeth, and their final scene together is spine-tinglingly and gutwrenchingly wonderful.

Alex Lalak, Daily Telegraph, 6 May 2009

Dignified characters sear through the Bible belt

THE CRUCIBLE

CONCEIVED in the anticommunist hysteria of the early 1950s, Arthur Miller's analogous study of the Salem witch-hunts of the 1690s sternly resists reinvention. It takes a measure of artistic courage to do something other than strap on bonnets and big-buckled shoes and rely on the play's lofty reputation to engage its audience for 2 1/2 hours.

This production from the Sydney Theatre Company's education aria ditches the Quaker-meets-Shaker conventions in the hope that transplanting the action from late 17th-century Massachusetts to Bible-belt Australia in something like the present will strike a chord with its HSC student audience.

Sometimes it works - it's no great stretch to imagine Miller's plot igniting in a self-policing community like the Exclusive Brethren, for example – but conflicts with the fundamentals of the undoctored text used here clang loudly. This reading just about allows for Miller's antique turn of phrase and teenaged girls drinking chicken blood, but it's hard to budget for the existence of a Barbadian slave.

Wide tonal variations in the director Tanya Goldberg's treatment don't help to bring the drama any closer. After an overwrought opening, Act I turns to farce with the entrance of the witch-hunter the Reverend Hale (Nathan Lovejoy) and, while his attempted exorcism of the spellbound Betty (Celeste Dodwell, in a "What Would Jesus Do?" T-shirt) is good for a chuckle, it undermines his authority to the point of collapse.

The production drops into gear when the focus swings towards the personal drama of John and Elizabeth Proctor (Joe Manning and Marta Dusseldorp), although Goldberg's overstretched blocking renders what should be riveting dialogue into longdistance serve and volley.

Overstated design elements lead the audience by the nose too often (from Salem to the House Un-American Activities Committee to Guantanamo Bay) but nuanced performances – led by Manning's laconically Aussie Proctor and Dusseldorp's dignified Elizabeth - are this production's saving grace.

There is deft work from Peter Carroll as the serial litigator Giles Corey, Zindzi Okenyo (as Mary Warren) and Sean O'Shea (Judge Danforth). Arianwen Parkes-Lockwood makes a true teen vixen out of Abigail

Williams, and once Lovejoy sheds the Elmer Gantry affectations, his portrayal of Hale generates some convincing anguish in the closing stretch.

Reviewed by Jason Blake, Sydney Morning Herald, 6 May 2009

The Crucible

We break charity with one another at our peril.

True confession time: in the closing minutes of this production of *The Crucible* tears filled my eyes and I was undone. The pain and sorrow I felt were close to overwhelming and the only other time I can recall a similar reaction was in the closing minutes of the movie *Billy Budd*. After mopping up the streaked mascara and downing a restorative **glass of red** I felt able to examine my response and try to figure it out.

Director **Tanya Goldberg's** production of **Arthur Miller's** great play is in the STC's Education Program and is aimed at the HSC generation. This should not be taken to mean it is in any way second-rate, either in production values or casting, as has been suggested by some who've said they're "not bothering with it". It would be a **huge mistake** to overlook one of the best interpretations and best casts in any play - let alone a **seminal** one - that's likely to be staged this year.

Anyway, having considered - at length - why this *Crucible* and that *Billy Budd* have the power to reduce me to snivelling wreckage, this is what I think and why.

As you probably know, Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* as an (allegorical) response to the **witch hunting** activities of the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) and its witchfinder general Senator Joe McCarthy. **McCarthy** was convinced that the **Reds** were not only under post-WW2 beds but also scheming to overthrow the Free World via their infiltrated strongholds in the Arts and Hollywood. **Hysteria** and suspicion, **accusation** and betrayal quickly became daily currency in Washington DC and across the country as people succumbed to threats and **dobbed** in friends and colleagues rather than risk their careers. At the same time, careers and lives were **ruined** by those who did not give in or who were given up by peers to McCarthy's mob.

History being the endlessly repeating record that it is, Miller was able to go straight to the New England village of **Salem**, Massachusetts and 1692 for a story to illustrate his thesis "If the current **degeneration** of discourse continued, as I had every reason to believe it would, we could no longer be a democracy, a system that required a certain basic trust in order to exist." (From his **autobiography** *Timebends* quoted in the play program.) Put another way, Miller wanted to demonstrate the ease with which the **vener** of civilisation can be cracked and then broken to reveal the **fearful savages** just below the surface.

It's arguable that in Salem at that time religion and superstition were even more closely linked than they are today, although having said that I think it might be **nonsense**. The "crime" that sets in motion the awful events of *The Crucible* is dancing: some of the village girls are spotted **dancing** in the woods. This is taken as evidence of their involvement in witchcraft and anyway, it's ungodly.

Come forward **414 years** to 2007 and to Liberty University (the largest evangelical university in the world, in Lynchburg, Virginia, again according to the program). In its code of student conduct it lists various **offences** ranging from "entering the space above ceiling tiles - \$50 fine", to "possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages - \$500 fine" and includes "attendance at a **dance \$25 fine**". It would be funny if it were funny, but it isn't.

As **young girls** are wont to do, once one realises she's in trouble she sets up a **shrieking** and pointing of her finger at one and all. As blame, **hysteria** and revenge are contagious, it's not long before the community descends into **terror** and chaos. Rumour and tittle-tattle turn **toxic** as reverends and judges are summoned to rout out the **alleged evil**.

Abigail Williams (**Arianwen Parkes-Lockwood**) is the kind of pert girl Michael Gow's *Away* refers to as "a snide miss". She's pretty, sneaky, conniving and terribly dangerous. The others - Mercy Lewis (**Lynette Curran**), Betty Parris (**Celeste Dodwell**) and Mary Warren (**Zindzi Okenyo**) - are in her thrall and like rabbits trapped in a spotlight. Each inhabits a character discrete from the others and as clear as **crystal**. They are, in their different ways, as pathetic and frightening as cornered wild animals.

Salem's resident **man of God** is the Rev. Parris (**Angus King**), a sanctimonious, prideful, money-grabbing piece of work if ever there was one. His first reaction, when he thinks young Betty is **possessed** by the Devil, is not her welfare but his. It's the one-note tune he plays throughout. His is a performance that gives even the most **hypocritical** tele-evangelist a bad name.

Caught up in the rolling wave of havoc caused by the girls are the simple Barbados slave Tituba (the second of three terrific characters from **Lynette Curran**, the other is local midwife Rebecca Nurse), the lemon-lipped village worthy Ann Putnam (**Marta Dusseldorp**) and her priggish husband Thomas (**Sean O'Shea**); and the out-of-town farmers Giles Corey (**Peter Carroll**) and John Proctor (**Joe Manning**).

The **split** that quickly opens up between the "sophistication" of Salem and the salt-of-the-earth style of Proctor and Corey is a chasm into which **innocence** and trust will fall before the evening is out. Corey is a simple man and Proctor is an honest one. They're **fatal traits** in this situation.

In previous productions of *The Crucible* that I've seen (including the **famous** STC version with (the real) **John Howard** as Proctor) the setting has been Salem 1692 or thereabouts: buckled shoes, starched white **mob caps** and sober Puritan-style clothing. It's visually effective and at the time of the play's **New York** premiere in 1953, may have been an homage or perhaps an echo of the **Shakespearean** mode of distancing unpalatable truths: place them safely in the past.

Goldberg and her set and costume designer **Simone Romaniuk** have taken the bold step of placing the play in the here and now. The set is abstract and minimal (lighting by **Verity Hampson**). The girls wear **hoodies**, frocks and skimpy tops; Ann Putnam looks as if she's about to play bridge in a nice **twinn set** and scarf; the Rev Parris has obviously been watching far too much 3am church TV and is unctuously resplendent in **white shoes**, white suit and sky blue vicar's shirt with a peep of white dog collar.

The very superior Judge Danforth (**O'Shea** again) stalks around with his nose in the air and an elegant dark suit and legal gown, while his accomplice in the trials, the Rev Hale (**Nathan Lovejoy**), is somewhere between a Vatican diplomat and Anthony Robbins in his sharp dark suit and over-rehearsed piety.

The McCarthy era in the USA ended in **calamity** for many and cast a pall over the country that lasted years. It reared its ugly face again with George W Bush's "if you're not with us you're against us". And it continues to **morph** into something closer to the original Salem witch hunts as a similarly warped, Old Testament-based **fundamentalist** "Christianity" gains traction among the poor and **ignorant**.

Which brings us back to *Billy Budd* and tears. Most often in productions of *The Crucible* John Proctor's wife Elizabeth is a chilly thing. Her ramrod morality in the knowledge of Proctor's dalliance with young Abigail is at the heart of his eventual downfall. As played by **Marta Dusseldorp**, however, Elizabeth is as flawed as he and he is as human as she.

Elizabeth alone, of all members of her community, is unable to stand in **judgement**, to condemn him; and she cannot lie. Neither will she tell him to confess a lie to save himself, or to remain **steadfast** and truthful and condemn himself to death. In the final moments, they face each other, each dressed in orange overalls, he in chains, the **Gitmo garb** that signals the worst kind of incarceration to a young audience. Her face glows with **trust** that he will do the right thing by his own lights; that forgiveness and love are all and will **triumph** in the end.

In *Billy Budd* the young **Terence Stamp**, as the innocent condemned sailor boy of the title, has a similar moment. He is going to hang at the behest of the lying, cruel Claggart, a man who is his superior courtesy only of a uniform. Like Elizabeth, Billy **glows** in the knowledge that his love of life is not greater than his love of what matters most to him: **honesty** and truth; love and forgiveness.

These are extraordinary, **life-affirming** moments of revelation that make life worthwhile. I scribbled on the program on the way home last night: "The power of the powerless is their dignity and courage, and their inevitable death." And that, I figured, is the great tragedy and **inspiration** of these two characters and their fate.

Arthur Miller said (in *Timebends*, also in the program) "I went naked to Salem, still unable to accept the most common **experience** of humanity, the shifts of interests that turned loving husbands and wives into stony enemies, loving parents into **indifferent** supervisors or even exploiters of their children - - that was the real story of ancient Salem Village, what they called then the **breaking** of charity with one another."

We break charity with one another at **our peril**. Please see this production and take your teenagers.

Diana Simmonds, Stage Noise online, 5 May 2009