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Arthur Miller's "The Crucible"

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Trial by Fire

“We burn a hot fire here;” states Deputy-Governor Danforth in Arthur Miller’s play The Crucible, “it melts down all concealment” (55). Miller’s title, which objectively means a container where metals are purified by being subjected to an intense heat, becomes an apt metaphor for the ordeal which his characters must undergo. Under such searing illumination Miller’s characters either attempt self-preservation by adding heat to the fire, succumb and melt from such heat, or are refined in the process and discover their own true mettle.

Although many of the characters are culpable of pointing fingers, it is Abigail Williams, who Miller describes in his stage note as having “*an endless capacity for dissembling*” (6), who wastes no time in pointing the first finger at Tituba, Rev. Parris’s Negro slave from Barbados. When she first feels the heat of the Reverend Hale’s questions Abigail vehemently denies any communion with the devil and recants her denial almost within the same breath:

HALE. You cannot evade me, Abigail.—Did your cousin drink any of the brew in
that kettle?

ABIGAIL. She never drank it!

HALE. Did you drink it?

ABIGAIL. No, sir!

HALE. Did Tituba ask you to drink it?

ABIGAIL. She tried but I refused.

HALE. *Why* are you concealing? Have you sold yourself to Lucifer?

ABIGAIL. I never sold myself! I’m a good girl—I—(*Ann enters with Tituba.*) I
did drink of the kettle!—She made me do it! She made Betty do it! (23)

Prompted by a precocious teenager's desire to protect her own guilt of a sexual relationship with John Proctor, Abigail stokes the coals that begin the witch hunts.

Within minutes Tituba, threatened with being whipped to death or being hanged if she does not confess, joins Abigail's deception by naming names. It is interesting to note that the naming begins with the lowest caste of society, a Negro slave, who then names a poor, white beggar woman, Sarah Good. Those who find themselves marginalized are the first to be relegated as dispensable.

As the accusations mount and the consequences intensify, some begin to wither under such heat. John Proctor, in an effort to save his wife, Elizabeth, from the cries of witchery, brings the servant-girl Mary Warren before Governor Danforth to expose Abigail as a liar. Mary recants her story and tells the Judge that she and the other girls lied to the court when they claimed to have seen Satan and named others as witches. But Mary Warren's confession only serves to heighten Danforth's religiosity:

DANFORTH. . . . the law and Bible damn all liars, and bearers of false witness.

Now then . . . it does not escape me that this deposition may be devised to blind us; (*to Hathorne.*) it may well be that Mary Warren has been conquered by Satan who sends her here to distract our sacred purpose. If so, her neck will break for it. (63)

And when Abigail begins "seeing" apparitions in front of Danforth, claiming they are Mary's evil spirit, and the other girls begin joining in the self-induced hysteria, Danforth's "sacred purpose" becomes all too clear as he jumps at Mary's vulnerability: "(*Pounding it into her.*) You have seen the Devil, you have made compact with Lucifer, have you not? . . . You will confess or you will hang! (*He turns her roughly to face him.*) Do you know who I am? I say you will hang,

if you do not open with me!” (73). Mary finds herself damned if she does, and damned if she doesn’t. Her resolve melts under such a blaze and she embraces her deception as truth once again, turning on Proctor: “(*Screaming at him.*) No, I love God; I go your way no more! (*Looking at Abigail.*) I love God, I bless God. . . . (*Sobbing, she rushes to Abigail.*) Abby, Abby, I’ll never hurt you more!” (74).

Reverend John Hale, who first appears absorbed “*with a tasty love of intellectual pursuit*” (20) soon realizes that ideology derived from books is not the same as an ideology derived from the ordeal of circumstance. As he tries to be a voice of reason against Danforth’s blind inquisition, he, too, comes to compromise his principles by pleading with Elizabeth Proctor to convince her husband to sign a false confession in order to save his life:

HALE. (*To Elizabeth.*) Let you not mistake your duty as I mistook my own. I came into this village like a bridegroom to his beloved . . . and what I touched with my bright confidence, it died; and where I turned the eye of my great faith, blood flowed up. Beware, Goody Proctor—cleave to no faith when faith brings blood . . . Life, woman, life is God’s most precious gift; no principle however glorious may justify the taking of it. I beg you, woman—prevail upon your husband to confess. Let him give his lie. (82-83)

But it is Elizabeth and John Proctor whose impurities are burnt away as their honest confessions, not to a theocracy but to one another, serve to purify their souls. For Elizabeth, such heat has caused her to recognize that a pious faith without mercy is no faith at all:

ELIZABETH. . . . I have read my heart this three month, John. I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery. . . . I counted myself so plain, so poorly-made, no honest love could come to me! Suspicion kissed

you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house
I kept . . . !” (85-86)

And whether John Proctor confesses and gives them their lie or not, Elizabeth makes certain that he knows “whatever you will do, it is a good man does it” (85). And John, whose adulterous act has riddled him with such agonizing guilt, finds forgiveness and grace in the eyes of this woman.

Proctor, even though he is willing to confess to the lie—even sign his name to it in front of Danforth, cannot bring himself to hand it over:

DANFORTH. Why? Do you mean to deny this confession when you are free?

PROCTOR. (*Rising.*) I mean to deny nothing!

DANFORTH. Then explain to me, Mr. Proctor, why you will not let . . .

PROCTOR. Because it is my *name!* Because I cannot have another in my life!

Because I *lie* and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul, leave me my name!

DANFORTH. (*Pointing at confession in Proctor’s hand.*) Is that document a lie?

If it is a lie I will not accept it! What say you? I will not deal in lies, Mister!

(*During the speech Proctor looks at Danforth, then Rebecca, then Elizabeth.*)

You will give me your honest confession in my hand, or I cannot keep you from the rope. What way do you go, Mister? (*Proctor deliberately tears paper once.*) (90)

He cannot give away his identity to live a life compromised by a lie. And in Proctor’s blistering words, one cannot help but recall the words of another martyr, “What does a man gain by

winning the whole world at the cost of his true self? What can he give to buy that self back?”
(The New English Bible, Mark 8.36-37). He has found his true mettle.

The initial impact of reading The Crucible is not a cerebral one, but one that comes from the gut. When asked how he chooses a play, noted director Jack O'Brien in Robert Benedetti's book, The Director at Work, goes right to the heart of it:

For me, it is a kind of visceral commitment. I must have a response to the text, not only in terms of my comprehension, but in the necessity to move that material through me and, with the help of the company, out to others. If my reaction (to the play) is intellectual and objective, that will be the nature of the experience for others. But if I have some real connection to the material, some deep conviction about it, I think the sense of danger and consequence are more readily communicated. Odd, in a way, to reduce it to purely personal reactions, but that's what it comes down to—belief! (12)

Perhaps from one's first encounter with Miller's play in high school and 30 years of life experience before the second encounter accounts for such a reaction. The crucible of life teaches one that things initially seen as only black and white become colored by experience. Blind justice—even in the name of God—is still blind, while belief gleaned through the white-hot light of experience can serve to purify one's principles.

Production and Place in History

The Crucible's place in history is well-established. From its first Broadway production in 1953 through its latest revival in 2002, its reputation continues to grow and spark debate.

Whether one sees it as a timeless message of the individual conscience crying out to be heard in the midst of manic paranoia or as a timely message of political allegory, given whatever current political corruption or abuse is in the news, The Crucible remains Arthur Miller's most produced work throughout the world (Miller, Crucible in History 52). By looking at several noteworthy productions in the past 50 years, one begins to appreciate how its stature has grown with the passing of time and also with the passing of the Red Scare.

Miller was the first to admit that the idea for writing The Crucible came about due to "what was in the air . . . not only the rise of 'McCarthyism' . . . but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality . . . assuming even a holy resonance" (Theatre Essays 153). In January of 1953 when the first production was mounted on Broadway the Communist witch hunts were at their height and the obvious parallels between the Puritan Church in 1692 and the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) could not be missed. This was both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it made the production newsworthy, a curse because "it didn't help that The Crucible was described as a political play, and with the pressures that were beginning to seep down from HUAC, it was even something to avoid" (Gottfried 219).

The first production was staged with full sets and was considered, if not a flop, at least a commercial failure which ran for five months. According to Miller, most of the responsibility fell squarely on the director:

Jed Harris . . . had decided that the play, which he believed a classic, should be staged like what he called a Dutch painting. In the Dutch paintings of groups everyone is always looking front. We knew this from the picture on the wooden boxes of Dutch Masters cigars. Unfortunately, on a stage such rigidity can only lead an audience to the exits. (Crucible in History 50)

In June of 1953 Miller took over the production and attempted to restage it closer to his original vision by eliminating all the heavy realistic scenery—which also eliminated the need for nine stagehands, playing all the scenes in front of black drapes, reinstating a scene between Abigail and Proctor which had been cut during rehearsals previously, and re-casting five male roles, including the lead role of Proctor (Zolotow 18). The end result was a “more stylized look, as he had first wanted—‘a physicalization of infinite space so that the play wouldn’t be going on now or in 1692, but was instead going on forever’” (Gottfried 219). Even the re-staging and garnering of the Tony Award couldn’t save the initial production. It closed one month later after 197 performances and began a national tour of most major U.S. cities.

While The Crucible may not have initially received the accolades afforded Death of a Salesman in 1949, Miller found a lifelong home for his works across the Atlantic where The Crucible became a mainstay of repertory. Within the year, the play was given its British premiere and “was promptly staged in Munich, Berlin and Copenhagen, and productions were scheduled for Buenos Aires, Vienna, Cologne, Rome and Brussels . . . and the play would have a year’s run in Paris too” (Gottfried 220). At the same time that Proctor’s tale was being told onstage throughout the world, Arthur Miller’s own trial by fire was being lived out. In 1954 he was refused a passport to see The Crucible’s premiere in Brussels because the State Department believed Miller to be supporting the Communist movement. And shortly after his marriage to

Marilyn Monroe in 1956, Miller was subpoenaed to appear before HUAC. On the day before his scheduled hearing, one member of HUAC approached Miller suggesting that his hearing would be cancelled if the chairman of the Committee might be allowed to have his photograph taken with Marilyn. Miller “. . . burst out laughing. Why I was not even tempted I don’t know . . . We could only sit there shaking our heads at how fundamentally simple politics was—just as in show business, you kept your name in the paper no matter what” (Timebends 406). In a surreal moment of art reflecting life, Miller found himself in contempt of Congress when he refused to name others who were suspected of being Communist sympathizers. In 1958, one year after Senator McCarthy’s death, the United States Court of Appeals overturned Miller’s conviction while The Crucible was enjoying its first of many New York revivals.

For this production Miller added new material once again. Although this time it was not added dialogue but essays to be recited by an actor cast as “The Reader.” These essays served much like character descriptions and gave rich historical information about the characters and setting, but did nothing to heighten the dramatic structure of the play. In fact, the added material has been included in most published editions but is not included in the acting editions of the script. In the five years since the initial performance of The Crucible the era of McCarthyism had peaked and was very much on the wane. Partly due to its cool reception five years earlier and partly due to what Mr. Miller had been through himself, Miller attempted to explain and defend his play in an article written in The New York Times prior to the opening:

I was drawn to write The Crucible not merely as a response to McCarthyism. . . .

It is examining the questions I was absorbed with before—the conflict between a man’s raw deeds and his conception of himself; the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being, . . . I believe the wider

the awareness, the felt knowledge, evoked by a play, the higher it must stand as art. (“Brewed in The Crucible” X3)

Whether due to Miller pleading his case to view his work outside of the witch hunts of the 1950’s or the cooling of the political climate in America, this Off-Broadway production—whose running time was over three and a half hours long—found a much warmer reception and ran for 653 performances (Bigsby 155). Miller was gratified with the reception and realized he “couldn’t help noting that by then McCarthy was dead. The public fever on whose heatwaves he had spread his wings, had subsided, and more and more people were finding it possible to look into the dying embers and read the terrible message in them” (Crucible in History 50).

Those “dying embers” have continued to find flame in the past forty years. In 1965 Sir Laurence Olivier directed the Royal National Theater of London’s revival to great acclaim (Young 35). Olivier eliminated the scene between Abigail and Proctor which Miller had reinstated in the original and also cut all the expository prose Miller had added in 1958. The Crucible was the second most produced play in the country on college and university campuses across America in 1966, second only to The Glass Menagerie (Calta 18). In 1967 Miller adapted his play for television which aired on CBS. And in the next three decades there would be innumerable incarnations of The Crucible: touring productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company, a movie version written by Jean Paul Sartre in France, several New York revivals, a mainstay of noted repertory companies such as the Royal National Theatre in England and the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, and a myriad of productions throughout America and the world. Throughout this time reviewers began to make note that the power of the play no longer lay in its previous political situation but that, in fact, the disappearance of the obvious political

parable served to strengthen The Crucible as art. Many critics began heralding it as “the best play Arthur Miller wrote, possibly the best American play of this century” (Dukore 91).

In 1996 Arthur Miller’s play finally found its way to the big screen. He wrote the screenplay and entrusted it into the hands of his son who produced it. Directed by Nicholas Hytner, noted British director of stage and screen, the material seemed to only grow in relevance:

Yet something curious happens in the film version of The Crucible.

McCarthyism seems as irrelevant as Stalinism. Mr. Miller’s initial allegory has been stripped away, both by the intervening decades and by the determination of its director, Mr. Hytner. . . . “The Crucible has outlived Joe McCarthy,” suggests Mr. Hytner. . . . That approach works. In fact, it works better than if we had to keep the 40-year-old “witch hunts” in mind. (Rothstein C13)

And the same can be said upon its return to Broadway in 2002. Directed by Richard Eyre, then artistic director of the Royal National Theatre in London, Miller’s play once again found a receptive audience, received five Tony Award nominations, and ran for 101 performances, no small feat for a revival of a straight play in the spectacle-driven environment of Broadway.

Whether one sees parallels to the witch hunts of the 1950’s, China’s cultural revolution in the 1970’s, the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1984, the Tiananmen Square uprising, religious zealots who fly planes into buildings, the USA Patriot Act, the oppressive society of the Taliban, a President who delineates clear lines between “us” and “the axis of evil,” or the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, The Crucible will remain as timely as the nearest headline. But beyond the headline, the message of The Crucible will remain timeless as it continues to ask its audience to explore how an individual’s conscience and choices affect, not only his or her sense of self,

but society as a whole and how tyranny continues to mask itself in the guise of “the greater good.” Forty nine years after penning this play, Miller put it very succinctly:

And for people wherever the play is performed on any of the five continents, there is always a certain amazement that the same terror that had happened to them or that was threatening them, had happened before to others. It is all very strange. On the other hand, the Devil is known to lure people into forgetting precisely what it is vital for them to remember—how else could his endless reappearances always come with such marvelous surprise? (The Crucible in History 55)

Human history has borne out the realization that evil lurks in the recesses of the human psyche. The Crucible continues to be a mirror for people in any time and any place to view those devils which plague us. Miller’s play continues to challenge us to recognize the treacherous face looking back.

The Crucible's Reception by the Critical Press

As Arthur Miller succinctly put it, “. . . I exist without a major reviewer in my corner. It has been primarily actors and directors who have kept my work before the public . . . I have often rescued a sense of reality by recalling Chekhov's remark: ‘If I had listened to the critics I'd have died drunk in the gutter’” (534). On the whole, Miller's reviews for his plays in America, aside from Death of a Salesman, have been negative while in England, where The Crucible is considered the sixth most important play of the Royal National Theatre's millennial survey of 100 important plays—Death of a Salesman was ranked first (Winer F29)—and elsewhere outside of the United States his notices have been more consistently positive (Barker 238-39). Critics have been sharply divided in their criticism of The Crucible from its premiere in 1953 through its revival on Broadway in 2002. Although critics may not agree on whether The Crucible is tragedy or melodrama, art or craftsmanship, poetic or prosaic, a human drama or a heavy-handed thesis play, The Crucible has never failed to provoke thought.

Critic Walter Kerr took exception to exactly that—thought over human drama—as one of its major failures in its Broadway premiere. According to Kerr in his New York Herald Tribune review, Miller seemed “to be taking a step backward into mechanical parable, into the sort of play which lives not in the warmth of humbly observed human souls but in the ideological heat of polemic. . . . One's intellectual sympathies go out to Mr. Miller . . . but it is the intellect which goes out, not the heart” (“The Crucible” 190). Brooks Atkinson, drama critic for The New York Times, wrote on the very same day that “Mr. Miller is not pleading a cause in dramatic form” yet went on to suggest that Miller was “concerned more with the technique of the witch hunt than with its humanity. For all its power generated on the surface, The Crucible is most moving in the simple, quiet scenes between John Proctor and his wife. . . . There is too much excitement and

not enough emotion in The Crucible” (“At the Theatre” 15). A week later, Atkinson went on to write that “Mr. Miller is more interested in his theme than in his people” (“The Crucible” X1). Although neither Kerr nor Atkinson found any fault in the performances and direction, their initial response suggests—as Aristotle argued over 2000 years earlier—that plot and character must take precedent over the theme. And in their estimation Miller did not achieve that with The Crucible. Joseph Shipley, drama critic for The New Leader, summed up the general criticism of the first production as “the calculating craftsman, not the deeply moved creator, is at work . . . the play is not so much a creation of dramatic art as a concoction of the author’s contriving mind . . .”(203). Whether this was due to Miller’s lack of ability or the simple fact that red-baiting was much on the mind of America due to the current events of 1953, only time would tell.

Five months into the initial run, Miller redirected a good deal of the production, recast the leads, reinstated a scene between Proctor and Abigail, and eliminated all the heavy realistic scenery. Atkinson, in reviewing the revamped production for The New York Times was much kinder to Mr. Miller’s work:

. . . the changes have improved Mr. Miller’s drama. The Crucible has acquired a certain human warmth that it lacked amid the shrill excitements of the original version. The hearts of the characters are now closer to the surface than their nerves . . . as a drama about a man and woman whose devotion to each other is haunted by the memory of an infidelity, The Crucible . . . is more moving now than it was originally. . . . The excitement is less metallic. The emotion is more profound. (“Arthur Miller’s The Crucible” 20)

Miller’s play would have to cross the Atlantic before it could be viewed outside of the red lens of McCarthy’s anti-Communist investigations. Upon its premiere in England in 1954

Harold Hobson, drama critic for The Sunday Times, found the play to not only be an exciting drama but a fair one in its portrayal of all the characters. In his estimation “Mr. Miller does not allow his personal convictions to interfere with the dramatist’s responsibility for presenting every one of his characters with understanding and sympathy” (228). In Paris The Crucible found a home for over a year and was widely praised for its ability to sustain dramatic tension in a three-hour production without an intermission and critics were “astonished at the power with which a theatrical fiction in performance can involve the soul of the audience” (Selz 242). The very qualities the American critics believed The Crucible was lacking—emotion and human drama—were the qualities the foreign press praised.

It would take several decades before the American press became friendlier toward The Crucible, despite a myriad of productions throughout the United States. Critic Clive Barnes in reviewing the 1972 production by the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater made a strong case that the “. . . play should have a life of its own. . . . Now its story of a man, his conscience . . . takes on a wider pattern unclouded by topical connotations. This is to the play’s ultimate advantage” (36). While Barnes went on to praise the “superbly taut” play as Miller’s best, Kerr found the production “loosely focused” and not much more than “melodramatic overstress” (“Staged Without Care” D3). Although never a fan of Miller’s play, this time around—almost twenty years after his initial take on the play—Kerr found the fault not in Miller’s writing so much as in the play’s heavy-handed direction.

Although the critics may not have always been kind to The Crucible, time has been a loyal friend. On the heels of a much-praised film in 1996, its 2002 revival on Broadway found a new audience, once again, discovering its universality. Although the critical press’s response continued to be mixed, wherever critical review to the play could be made without imposing any

obvious parallels on top of it the reviews were positive. Elysa Gardner states, “In the wrong hands, Miller’s richly symbolic, extravagantly dramatic text can be made to appear contrived and preachy. It is best done in a straightforward manner that stresses the universality of the playwright’s concerns and the humanity of his characters” (D14). And in the 2002 revival most reviewers praised the portrayal of the personal tragedy of John and Elizabeth Proctor, but found fault in the “threadbare social fabric” of The Crucible (Hurwitt D18).

If broad generalizations were to be made regarding the critical reception of The Crucible over the past fifty years, it would be this: where critics viewed a production highlighting Mr. Miller’s social “message” over the human drama, they found The Crucible tepid at best. But where critics saw the intimate story of two people caught up in a tragedy with epic implications, The Crucible sizzled. Whether or not time continues to strengthen The Crucible’s stature as art, rather than a political “message” play, actors and directors will continue to keep Miller’s work before the public and grapple—along with the critics—with both the personal human drama of John and Elizabeth Proctor and the broader social responsibility implied.

Where Have All the Heroes Gone?

More than 2000 years prior to Miller penning The Crucible—and the fifty years hence—scholarly opinion on what makes a hero tragic continues to be explored. For Miller, in his seminal essay “Tragedy and the Common Man,” the possibility “of man to achieve his humanity” is the essence of tragedy. “The plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them and in them alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man” (7). That possibility for Arthur Miller always comes down to individual choice: the protagonist always has the power to choose how he or she will live—or die. In The Crucible, the struggle for power is central to the story. But more importantly, it is how the characters choose to use that power that defines the best and worst in mankind. For some, it becomes a seductive god worthy of their own worship, while for others it becomes the refining moment of self-realization of one’s own dignity and “perfectibility.”

The seductive nature of power is very evident in The Crucible in both Judge Danforth and Rev. Hale. Their ultimate response to that seduction, however, is quite different. Danforth can certainly be argued as being possessed with theocratic madness which blinds him to any higher purpose, such as justice. The idea of mercy or grace seems rather foreign to a man who introduces his authority by stating “. . . that near to four hundred are in the jails from Marblehead to Lynn, and upon my signature. . . . And seventy-two condemned to hang by that signature” (54). To him, the letter of the law is, indeed, carved in stone and it is enough that “God damns all liars” (63). A recurring criticism of Miller’s portrayal of Danforth is that he is written as “—implacable, ruthless, and unforgiving—[it] would have been more interesting if Mr. Miller had less of a clear-cut villain in mind” (Rothstein C13). Danforth never wavers from his belief in his position of power and ultimate authority over these people. His parting words certainly ring

truer to an eleventh commandment spouted from on high than it does a new beatitude from a benevolent savior: “Hang them high over the town. Whoever weeps for these, weeps for corruption” (90-91).

However, Danforth’s portrayal in the hands of capable acting and direction can be more fully realized as a man grappling with a community being blown apart. However tyrannical and pedantic his actions are, he is attempting to sincerely restore an order or sense of unity among Salem. Of course, his attempt to do so means declaring anything—real or imagined—that stands in opposition to his interpretation of the law as evil. Richard Eyre, the much-praised British director of the 2002 Broadway revival of The Crucible, noted that Danforth’s statement that “a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it” (58) sounds hauntingly similar to the then attorney general’s, John Ashcroft, statement after introducing the USA Patriot Act after 9/11 that “civil-rights activists who question or oppose the legislation are giving aid and comfort to the terrorists” (Eyre 12). This type of either-or, black or white thinking—whether voiced in politics, law, or religion—is very comforting for many who wish not to think about the shades in between. Does Danforth really believe these people guilty of witchcraft? Thomas Porter suggests that “it becomes perfectly clear to the Judge that the girls’ testimony was fraudulent, if he had not known this all along. But the hanging verdicts are now on record . . . and pardon for the rest would necessarily be a confession of error on the part of the court” (88-89). What Danforth does believe in is his absolute power and he is bewitched by it.

While Rev. Hale’s initial appearance is one that is literally weighted down with all the confidence and power that he can carry in a half dozen heavy books, his first words, “Pray you, someone take these!” (19) become a foreshadowing of where his choices will lead him by the end of the play. According to Robert Martin, “his heavy books of authority also symbolically

anticipate the heavy authority of the judges who, as he will realize too late, are as susceptible to misinterpreting testimony . . . as he is” (86). And although his zealous pursuit of outing the witches is evident in his initial grilling of Tituba, Hale does not let his authority blind him when he sees that power in the name of God is being abused—not only by Judge Danforth but by the young girls who are calling out “witch”—and that innocent people are being condemned. His choice is to initially denounce and escape the proceedings. This knee-jerk reaction is one easily made and costs little in a hero. One choice before heroes is always to escape and abandon evil rather than attempt to rectify it.

But Hale does not stay disengaged but chooses to return. This time—unencumbered by the weighty authority represented by his books—Hale does not mete out justice in the church vestry, but chooses to take the church to those who are falsely accused awaiting their fate in jail. As he ministers to the accused he also breaks faith with Danforth’s lockstep theology by pleading with them to lie and confess to the crimes to avoid hanging: “—cleave to no faith when faith brings blood. It is mistaken law that leads you to sacrifice. . . . Life, woman, life is God’s most precious gift; no principle however glorious may justify the taking of it” (83). Hale’s attempt to find a middle ground is well-reasoned and many scholars make an effective argument that Hale is a much more attractive protagonist than John Proctor. This conciliatory faith is very attractive in a post-modern world but it is not where Miller believes honor is to be found, for it eliminates what Miller calls the hope or possibility for “the perfectibility of man.” And when none recant to save their lives, the picture of Hale that Miller leaves us with is very much the type of hero George Lukács illuminates in “The Sociology of Modern Drama” where he states that such heroes “are more passive than active; they are acted upon more than they act for themselves . . . their heroism is mostly a heroism of anguish, of despair, not one of bold

aggressiveness” (837). Ultimately the last image of Hale is one of a broken man—figuratively and literally—on his knees pleading and weeping in despair.

The person left standing and getting the last word is Elizabeth. Although Miller has been criticized, and legitimately so, for his patriarchal attitude in his portrayal of women, Elizabeth Proctor is one of his more fully-realized characters. She is given as much power, if not more, than John Proctor. In fact, it is Elizabeth’s power over John—power that, at first, serves only to condemn or hold him in judgment for his adultery—that is the driving force in Proctor’s need to find forgiveness. Initially, he defines his own sense of conscience or worth in her. Elizabeth’s power begins in a place almost as lofty and removed as Danforth’s. Although she says “I do not judge you” (30) her heart—if not her bed—is certainly cold enough “to freeze beer” (31). But Elizabeth is more than just a scorned woman turned frigid. She is also the one person who “understands, from the very beginning, that . . . she cannot read another’s heart . . . she knows that judgment, like forgiveness, must come from the self. That the only goodness which counts is interior to the individual” (Adler 97). For Proctor, Elizabeth’s morality rests in her inability to tell a lie. And in one of the most compelling moments of the play, Proctor sees her judgment put aside and mercy extended in its stead. When Elizabeth is asked to tell the court if Proctor is, indeed, the fornicator he has confessed to being—unbeknownst to Elizabeth—she “lies out of love, not just to protect his honor but to validate her belief that only the individual can . . . name his or her own good or evil. Is to lie in this instance, then, not an act of love? . . . Her lie . . . arises . . . from moral conviction” (Adler 97-98).

And in her most tender and defining moment, she practices what she preaches. She confesses to John her own evil: “I have sins of my own to count. It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery. . . . I counted myself so plain, so poorly-made, no honest love could come to me!

Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept . . .” (86). In her moment of confession, or what Aristotle called recognition—moving from a place of ignorance to knowledge, Elizabeth relinquishes any power she has over John. She reads no one’s heart but her own. It is a moment of proffered grace. She offers up to John the power not to be judged by another, but the power to judge himself and to forgive himself and to see the goodness in himself: “. . . let none be your judge, there be no higher judge under heaven than Proctor is! Forgive me, forgive me, John—I never knew such goodness in the world!” (86). This statement embodies her ultimate gift to John. Whether he chooses to live by giving a false confession or chooses to die, she gives him the power to choose for himself—not to be defined by her expectation of what a good man is but by knowing in his heart, not hers, that whichever way he chooses, “it is a good man does it” (85). In this redemptive act Elizabeth achieves the heroic stature necessary for tragedy as much as Proctor does.

Proctor’s journey to his defining moment is quite different. Proctor is certainly not the Aristotelian model of a tragic figure. He does not fall from the heights—he begins a fallen man, racked by guilt at his infidelity—who, through the crucible of experience, comes to find his stature. Although it is a much more romantic vision of heroism, Proctor nonetheless represents Miller’s definition of the tragic hero: “I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity” (“Tragedy” 4). As Terry Otten points out “Predictably some postmodern theorists have assaulted Miller’s conception of ‘heroism’ that simply does not mesh with the cynicism attached to much current theory” (68). But Proctor’s major battle is not just with the evil around him—which would be truer to a sense of melodrama, but Proctor’s battle is within himself where he knows the capacity for both evil and good reside. Through much of The

Crucible he sees more evil than good in himself and he defines himself by his guilt: “We will slide together into our pit. . . . Now Hell and Heaven grapple on our backs, and all our old pretense is ripped away. . . . We are what we always were, but naked now. Aye, naked. And the wind, God’s icy wind, will blow” (47). He seems to almost welcome some kind of judgment on his soul—anything to alleviate the shame he carries: “I hear the boot of Lucifer, I see his filthy face. And it is my face . . . God damns our kind especially, and we will burn!” (74-75). It is this very sense of “his complicity that generates his authenticity as a tragic figure, for it provides the necessary ‘Other’ that defines the measure of his heroism” (Otten 69-70). This guilt is the driving force in Proctor that brings him to his defining moment.

For it is in the heart-rending moment between him and Elizabeth that he catches a glimpse of what he once was, and might be again as he cries out, “What is John Proctor! (*A fury is riding in him, a tantalized search.*) I think it is honest, I think so: I am no saint” (86). For the first time, Proctor defines himself not by his shame but by the possibility of his honesty. He is not “a virtuous man exercising his virtue, he is a troubled soul who discovers, to his surprise, that he has virtue” (Dukore 50). The power to choose is his. He realizes that he cannot embrace a lie to save his life. His sense of self—of “goodness”—is held higher than breath. Though he goes to the gallows, he goes with his soul restored. He goes with a sense of who he is—a man with the power to choose and judge his own actions . . . and to answer for them.

For Miller, tragic heroes are not just victims that are defined by what happens around them. They are defined by what they choose to do with the power of responsibility. Every human being must answer for the choices one makes. It is in the exploration of those choices that Miller finds the grit of tragedy most compelling. What makes a hero tragic for Miller is not

their stature, but their struggle . . . a struggle for personal dignity, a struggle toward that “perfectibility of man” that Miller so effectively explores.

The Crucible: Dross Removed

After researching and reflecting on its production history, its critical reception, and the reams of scholarly analysis that continues to be written about The Crucible, one sees certain patterns begin to emerge that are worthy of note for anyone who is considering directing this play. The major concern for a director lies in the initial approach one takes toward this play. While one can read and direct The Crucible as a “historical” play in Puritan New England in the late 1600’s, or a “political” play due to its relevance to whatever abuse is currently newsworthy, or a social tract about oppressive governments—and all these labels are certainly applicable to The Crucible—none of them are at the heart of the play. At its core this is the story of individual people caught up in a universal tragedy. The emphasis lies on the humanity, not the situation. If the audience, or critic, or scholar wishes to lay the template of “historicity” or “social relevance” or “political abuse” or “liberal propaganda” over The Crucible, that is certainly fine and worthy of contemplation. However, if that is the director’s principal vision it serves only to weaken the production. The Crucible’s power lies in the simple fact that, at its core, it is a compelling human drama. To achieve this desired end, there are several areas worthy of exploration: character in relation to plot, suggestion or realism in set design, and the language of the play.

Noted director William Ball suggests that “narrowing one’s focus and being specific and creative within limitation leads to the most vivid success. That is why I choose one predominant element and stick to it with the exactitude of a monk” (30). In The Crucible the predominant element is character. This is not to suggest that there is not plot. In fact, The Crucible has incredible narrative drive and tension within the dramatic action. In its production history critics have even noted that where character was lacking—whether due to Mr. Miller’s writing or the direction given—the plot was a “gut-bucket suspense story” with the “theatrical equivalent of a

gripping page-turner” (Winer F29). The Crucible has long been recognized by directors and critics alike as having an undeniably gripping plot. And the director’s job is certainly to keep the plot building in dramatic tension. But Miller has done such an effective job in constructing the building blocks of suspense that a director need only make sure it stays on track and get out of its way. This is most evident in the simple fact that even a cold reading of the text has incredible narrative muscle. But dramatic action alone without roundness of character leads more to melodrama than tragedy—and while melodrama may be enough, The Crucible has the potential for more. Through study of its reception by the critical press, a consistent criticism emerges wherein productions that seemed to stress energy or driving momentum without the balance of well-developed characters resulted in plenty of manic energy or hysteria onstage but little genuine emotion which served as an opportunity for the audience to become disengaged.

The challenge lies in effectively balancing such dramatic action with the flesh and bone of real people. Otherwise, the people of The Crucible become no more than a mouthpiece for a thesis play. The playwright’s voice is certainly evident in The Crucible. But a good director must make sure that an audience hears that voice coming from the soul of these characters, not the playwright’s mouth. Otherwise, one ends up with what Gerald Weales says can be seen as “a simple propaganda play” (134) with a moralizing voice, rather than a play with moral beings struggling to find their voice. Leonard Moss suggests that “it would be an oversimplification . . . to conceive the conflict as one between innocent and wicked figures” (41). To do so is to, once again, pursue melodrama rather than tragedy.

Each of these characters struggles with the potential to do good or evil. They are not just one or the other. In an interview given in USA Today, Winona Ryder, who portrayed Abigail Williams in the 1996 film, states that “you have to find something human in there, and

something sympathetic, without trying to get sympathy from the audience” (Seiler D4). Abigail is not just a loose teenager, or as Proctor labels her several times, a whore. This is a seventeen year-old orphaned girl who has discovered the “heat” of love in a man twice her age. She is not just a sultry vixen who seduces a moral man. She is a child who has discovered her sexuality in a society that does not permit it. She is a teenager who, for the first time in her life, has discovered that she can hold power over others. Danforth is not just a corrupt judge, but a man who is grappling to hold on to a sense of stability that he has always found in the law and morality. For him, to question that law or morality is to lose a foothold on all that makes sense in the world. Proctor is a man who has lost that moral foothold, ravaged by guilt and a sense of shame, struggling to define himself. Elizabeth is more than an incorruptible woman defined by her title, “Goody” Proctor—which means “good wife.” Her rigid, moral posture and repressed warmth melt under the heat of the circumstances as she refines who she is, and how she sees John. Although some characters obviously take on greater moral dimension by play’s end, and some characters remain secondary and static, it is the struggle of people defining themselves by their choices that makes The Crucible rich with possibility. To emphasize the plot without giving full exploration to character is to diminish the size of The Crucible.

Scholarly criticism suggests that The Crucible works best when it is not about witchcraft in the seventeenth century, McCarthyism in the 1950’s, or terrorism in the new millennium. Leonard Moss suggests, “The Crucible may well be called a ‘social play,’ since it analyzes a public phenomenon with historical precedent and current actuality. But it focuses on the ‘subjective reality’ of that phenomenon; it cannot be judged merely on the literal accuracy or political aptness of its topical allusions” (38). A step toward supporting a more “subjective reality” lies in the approach to set design. On the whole, whenever a more realistic approach was

used in designing the set the result seemed to lock the play into a period piece rather than to amplify its more universal relevance.

Miller has always understood the importance of the visual element in his plays. As The Crucible was taking shape in his mind, Miller described the “sensation of being trapped inside a perverse work of art, one of those Escher constructs in which it is impossible to make out whether a stairway is going up or down” (Crucible in History 8). Miller’s original vision for the set design was symbolic of “two funnel-like openings that led the audience into a tunnel” (Gottfried 219). This description of the visual element is much closer to what Bonnie Marranca would define twenty five years later as a shifting emphasis in theatre toward one “dominated by images—visual and aural. . . . How one sees is as important as what one sees” (1551). Miller understood the importance of symbolic images in his plays. When he took over the original production of The Crucible five months into its run, he completely eliminated all walls and relied only on black drapes, stark lighting, and the actors. It is this simplistic design that one finds in the acting edition of the script, using nothing more than black drapes and furniture that Miller described as “*stark, utilitarian, and beautiful in that direct way*” (Crucible 6). The simplicity served to draw attention back to the characters and the play received warmer reviews. Its first off-Broadway production was done less than two years later in the Martinique Hotel with a few stools, benches, and a young cast. Miller notes that “it was performed this time as it was written, desperate and hot, and it ran for nearly two years. Some of the critics inevitably concluded that I had revised the script, but of course not a word had changed” (Timebends 349). Gerald Freedman, director of the Roundabout Theatre production in New York in 1990, states:

It’s not really about witch hunts, it’s about something much greater, and it will always be truthful and pertinent. . . . I’m trying to treat the environment more

abstractly . . . I'm trying to strip away the sentimentality that I think accompanies old New England artifacts—real mantelpieces, and spinning wheels—all the things which identify the period, but clutter the mind even as they clutter the eye. . . . The thing to remember is that his plays are elevated; the questions, the passion, and especially the language are elevated. (104-05)

A minimalist approach that points toward suggestion rather than pure realism goes a long way toward putting the emphasis back on character rather than on period. A heavy-handed realistic set might also seem only to surround and confine the language that Miller has created rather than letting it soar.

Critics and scholars alike have noted that the language of The Crucible has incredible power and teeth to it. The language in The Crucible is certainly elevated, but not just in a lyrical or poetic sense. Miller's language does not just ring with lyrical cadence as much as roar with a visceral passion wrapped in what Richard Eyre, the English director of the 2002 Broadway revival, called in a program note "a collage of language that is a marvelous blend of . . . biblical cadences, pastoral poetry . . . and muscular theatrical rhetoric" (qtd. in Gottfried 224). Miller invented a vernacular that would not only reflect the Puritan idiom to some degree but would "evoke Salem in a twentieth-century sense" (Gottfried 224). More importantly, the vernacular serves to support and define individual character. Proctor has several "old testament prophet" moments where his words are like commandments hurled from a great height balanced with more quiet moments of introspection with Elizabeth. Penelope Curtis suggests that the juxtaposition of phrases do more than ring with lyricism but reveal the struggle and essence of character, such as Parris's having "fought here three long years to bend these stiff-necked people to me" (Crucible 8) observing that "what is obstinacy in others is 'upright' in himself . . . the

staple of the dialogue . . . helps immensely to suggest the implications of what this or that character says so tersely” (261). The language is in service to the character.

The emphasis, again, is placed on real people not only physically, but vocally engaged with one another. With such language one must avoid the potential “weight” of the idiom. One must not allow the poetry and power to be declaimed much like a neoclassical performance, or as Miller fretted that Jed Harris, the original director, envisioned it: “a classic play that had to be nobly performed—an invitation to slumber” (Timebends 344), with the result that the weight with which the dialogue was delivered served to sink the production rather than heighten it. These are people of flesh and blood grappling and, at times, devouring one another in a language that is both voracious and eloquent.

By briefly exploring character and plot, an initial approach to set design, and the language of The Crucible, one cannot help but see the great possibilities in realizing this monumental play onstage. A week doesn’t go by without The Crucible being produced onstage somewhere throughout the world. On average The Crucible is licensed to over 300 non-professional producing organizations a year in the United States and Canada alone (Pospisil). This does not even touch upon professional performances given throughout the world. Miller states that “great drama is great questions or it is nothing but technique” (Timebends 180). And whether one sees Miller’s work as a moral, liberal, historical, social, or political play—or a combination thereof—it is wrapped in the humanity of real people struggling to define who they are. The greatness of Miller’s play lies not only in the questions raised, but in the moral stature of his people. In 1996, Miller said, “For me to get interested enough to write a play, it has to have immense moral significance. But nobody buys tickets to see morals. They buy them to see human beings. I hope that’s what they see attending one of my plays: the face of humanity” (qtd.

in Moore A29). The Crucible has certainly raised great questions in the fifty-three years since its initial production and its stature will continue to grow as those questions are explored in productions for generations to come.

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