

The Crucible

The new movie version of Arthur Miller's drama *The Crucible* comes highly recommended as one kind of American tragedy redeemed through great actors consecrating a passionate text.

Mr. Miller's original 1953 play was a modest success in its day but has had tremendous "legs" over the years, appealing to both American and foreign audiences (it is one of Miller's most produced plays) because of its grand--and stark--dramatic themes. Originally written at the height of the McCarthyite hysteria, it aimed at matching that political frenzy--the rooting out of an implacable enemy, the vicious settling of scores, the "naming of names"--with a distant, yet potent, historical parallel. The overt link to anti-communism has long been enfeebled, yet the play continues to resonate because the drama is fundamentally sound and because the phenomenon of mass hysteria persists to trouble us.

A more apt current parallel to this story of devil-wracked young women shredding the cohesion of a colony might be the nationwide controversy about cases of "recovered memory," wherein troubled children, usually facilitated by therapists, recollect vile and abusive--indeed, Satanic--treatment at the hands of teachers, day care workers, even their own parents. These memory fits, tinged with forbidden sex, are another kind of mass hysteria, the kind that can shatter families and whole communities.

This tale stems from the actual 1692 witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts, when a clutch of frustrated young women chose to denounce dozens of local folk as servants of the Devil, charges the town took so seriously that nineteen persons, most of them upright women of the colony, were hanged. Arthur Miller absorbed the facts of these cases then, using real names of many of the accusers and the accused, fashioned his own dramatic version of events.

In *The Crucible*, the drama's spur is the spurned love Abigail Williams (Winona Ryder) feels for yeoman John Proctor (Daniel Day-Lewis). Abigail was part of the Proctors' household, but after briefly taking John as her lover, she has been turned out. Aiming to hex Proctor's wife, Elizabeth (Joan Allen), Abigail participates in secret rituals with other girls of Salem led by the West Indian slave woman Tituba (Charlayne Woodard). When the evening revels of Tituba and the girls are discovered by the Reverend Parris (Bruce Davison), Tituba is pressed to confess her witchcraft to town's leaders, and the girls, led by the scheming Abigail, cover up their indiscretions with feigned hysteria and possession. In a climate now hard for us to credit, the shocked townspeople--steeped in angel-devil cosmology and unable to believe their own innocents could be made so base--feverishly seek out the evil-doers among their own brethren.

The plot thickens when a Boston tribunal, headed by the stony Judge Danforth (Paul Scofield), comes to Salem to assess the girls' charges. While Abigail's vengeance is first aimed at Elizabeth, the girl, declaring "I am but God's finger," also labels John as a devil. Proctor has one final defense in the person of Mary Warren (Karron Graves), the one young woman who has initially abjures the local hysteria, but, under the pressure of the stern judge, she breaks down and also names his name. The catastrophic circle is complete.

Collective paranoia is hardly fun to watch, but in director Nicholas Hytner's

hands, it could be called--bewitching. Hytner (whose first film was another fine theatrical adaptation, *The Madness of King George*) gives *The Crucible* a fevered momentum which mirrors both the madness taking over the village and the implacability of Danforth's rulings. Hytner and the playwright, working closely together, have "burst the bounds of the stage," in Miller's phrase, and given a tactile geography to the town and its inhabitants. New scenes incorporating the forests, the farmland, the village green, the jail, all enrich the drama by giving it a context, partly pastoral, partly claustrophobic. The scene where Mary accuses Proctor takes place in picturesque shallows at the edge of town, a cruel perversion of what looks like a baptismal setting.

Thank heavens that Arthur Miller's elevated Puritan language is delivered from the mouths of such a cast. Day-Lewis is brilliant as the upright Proctor, a skeptical voice of reason in an unreasonable climate. It is not a showy role, evincing restraint rather than passion. Which makes his final scene, agonizing between life and death over the signing of his name to a confession he knows is a lie, so potent. All his guilt, humanity, and sorrow pour out in another kind of confession: that he would rather give up his soul than "give up his name."

Joan Allen is perfectly icy and censorious (Proctor laments that her "justice would freeze beer"), yet she turns meltingly human in a last, poignant moment with her husband, shyly admitting of "the cold house I kept." Winona Ryder, of beatific eyes and countenance, is most effective as the shriveled soul, Abigail, her sweet visage shifting all too abruptly from open-mouthed naivete to twisted slander. Then there is Paul Scofield as the orotund yet menacing Danforth, his great lined face a road map of suppressed desire. A string of other superb supporting performances--like Kaaron Graves' edgy Mary Warren--could also be cited.

Here is tragedy in the classic sense, a conflict between Man (or men) and a greater Destiny with the inevitable grim outcome, eliciting pity or terror. You know, you just know, that what is happening is so *wrong*, you want to change it but you cannot. During the real witch trials, less than perfect recitation of the Lord's Prayer was deemed strong evidence of witchery (the Devil would never let the guilty achieve this); only the unblemished knew the prayer without flaw. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor and two other innocents are lugged to a scaffold in a Salem sick of the killing, and, just before they die, they all recite the Lord's Prayer--letter-perfectly. Amen.

(*The Crucible* is rated "PG-13" for mature themes and fleeting nudity.)

(December 1996)