

The Crucible Tells a Terrifying Tale



BY ANNEMARIE DONKIN

A spectacular new Theatricum production sends a harsh message to those who have not learned the lessons of history.

A blustery wind blew cold during opening night of Arthur Miller's timeless play, *The Crucible*, at the Theatricum Botanicum on Saturday, June 16. During Act IV, the skies finally opened up just as the trial scene played out during which protagonist John Proctor is condemned to the gallows due to false accusations.

It was fitting weather for the gloomy play, a cautionary tale and a fitting parable recounting the mass hysteria that draws a chilling parallel between the Salem witch hunts of 1692 and McCarthyism during the "Red Scare," that gripped America in the 1950s.

In fact, Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum's own history is firmly rooted in McCarthy-era Hollywood. Blacklisted actor Will Geer and his wife, Herta Ware, created the theater as a haven for other blacklisted actors.

The play remains eerily prescient to politics today, with charges of "fake news" and the current Administration's handling of life and death issues based on few or no facts.

According to sources, Miller originally called the play *Those Familiar Spirits* before renaming it as *The Crucible*.

The word "crucible" is defined as a severe test or trial; alternately, a container in which metals or other substances are subjected to high temperatures.

The characters, John Proctor and Rebecca Nurse, whose moral standards prevail in the face of death, symbolically refuse to sacrifice their principles or to falsely confess.

While one may have seen the 1996 film starring Daniel Day Lewis and Natalie Portman, *The Crucible* at the Theatricum is brilliantly directed by Theatricum artistic director Ellen Geer and provides a fabulous opportunity to experience an outstanding professional production of the Tony-award winning play.

The timeless story of how the small community of the Salem Bay Colony is stirred into madness by superstition, paranoia, and malice offers a frightening depiction of what can happen when fear clouds fact and reason is replaced by blame.

Christopher W. Jones as New England farmer John Proctor and Willow Geer as his wife, Elizabeth, gave compelling performances from beginning to end when they dismiss their young domestic, Abigail Williams, played with terrifying and realism by Bethany Koulias, and she seeks revenge by accusing Elizabeth of witchcraft—an accusation that carried a death sentence in the highly-charged political and social atmosphere of 17th century Salem, Massachusetts.

The drama that ultimately plays out during the production is compelling and reminds us of why we love live theater.

Among the luminaries of the cast are Thad Geer, who turns in another outstanding performance as John Proctor's resolute neighbor, Giles Corey. Melora Marshall (as always) is spectacular as the aged Rebecca Nurse, another who is falsely accused and later hanged.

Other cast standouts include Franc Ross as the Deputy Governor, John Danforth, Frank Weidner as Reverend John Hale, and Jacquelin Schofield as the hysterical Barbadian Tituba.

The rest of the cast is a mix of actual and fictional characters, well played by Kate Adams and Maya Brattkus (alternating in the role of Mary Warren); Gabbi Beauvais as Betty Parris; Cindy Guastaferrero as Ann Putnam; Tim Halligan as Thomas Putnam; Mark Lewis as the Reverend Samuel Parris; David Stifel as Francis Nurse; and Laura Zenoni as Mercy Lewis.

Ensemble members include Jessamyn Arnstein, Tavis L. Baker, Elizabeth George, Ethan Haslam, Holly Hawk, Caitlin Kilgore, Gabriel Anthony Palma, Brandi Lynn Reinhard, and Lawrence Sonderling.

Original music and sound design for Theatricum's production of *The Crucible* are by Marshall McDaniel, the authentic costume design is by Amy Mazzaferro, lighting design is by Zach Moore, and the prop master is Sydney Russell. Kim Cameron is the production stage manager.

The Crucible continues Saturdays through Sept. 30 at 8 p.m. Tickets range from \$10 – \$38.50; children 4 and under are free. ■

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley.

The amphitheater is terraced into the hillside, so audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance. Best advice: Bring a jacket, scarf and blanket to keep warm!

For a complete schedule of performances and to purchase tickets, call 310-455-3723 or visit www.theatricum.com. Visit Theatricum on Facebook: www.facebook.com/theatricum.

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