The Crucible (Theater, 1953)

Arthur Miller’s The Crucible premiered on Broadway in 1953 to rather tepid reviews from critics, yet the play holds an enduring place as one of the two or three most revered—and most performed—dramas ever written by an American playwright. The plot centers on the famous witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 17th century. However, the play also serves as an allegory condemning Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) for their ruthless and often reckless attempts to root out communist activity in the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s. For Miller, the job of the playwright was always to speak to issues of morality in the context of identifiable social forces. The Crucible was Miller’s attempt to warn Broadway and the nation of the insidiousness of McCarthyism and the consequences of acquiescing to it.

The Crucible originally ran on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theatre from January 22, 1953, to July 11, 1953, for a total of 197 performances. Jed Harris served as director and Kermit Bloomgarden served as producer. The lead performers were Arthur Kennedy (John Proctor), Beatrice Straight (Elizabeth Proctor), Madeline Sherwood (Abigail Williams), and E. G. Marshall (the Rev. John Hale).

Over 50 years after its Broadway premiere, the play is a staple of college and high school English reading lists. Moreover, with an uncommonly large number of young characters for a nonmusical—particularly Abigail and the Salem girls whom she controls—The Crucible is a perennial favorite for school drama and community theaters as well as regional professional and semiprofessional theater companies.

Despite the lukewarm initial response, in the years immediately following its premiere, Miller received a great deal of correspondence from friends, admirers, and detractors expressing their opinions of the play’s meaning and engaging the play’s themes of personal integrity, community, citizenship, and loyalty. One such letter came from a representative of the American Bar Association, protesting The Crucible’s decidedly unflattering portrayal of lawyers and requesting that the harsher aspects of those criticisms be removed from the play. In response to the offended attorney, Miller pointedly declined.

Miller wrote The Crucible largely as an allegorical representation of HUAC, which was investigating the film, theater, and communications industries for purported infiltration by communists and their “fellow travelers.” Miller had considered other titles for the play, including The Men’s Conversation, Conversation of Men, Inside and Outside, If We Could Speak, and The Reserved Crime. Yet none captured the insular, incendiary nature of the trials as effectively as his ultimate choice, The Crucible.

The play also became famously associated with a rift between Miller and his closest friend in the theater world, Elia Kazan. Kazan had directed Miller’s first two Broadway successes, All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949), and by 1950 the two friends were anticipating working together on future projects in both New York and Hollywood. But the relationship soured after Kazan testified before HUAC in 1952 and chose to give the committee the names of those he knew or thought to be communists—including some theater and film colleagues. Many believe that Kazan’s decision to “name names,” which deeply offended Miller, influenced the playwright’s decision to write The Crucible.

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The Crucible tells the story of Salem, a small Puritan community caught up in the furor of witch trials. Following an affair, farmer John Proctor and his wife, Elizabeth, are accused of witchcraft by Abigail Williams, Proctor's young mistress who is jealous of Elizabeth and enraged at Proctor for ending their affair. The Proctors are just two of many community members accused by the town's young girls of consorting with the devil. Esteemed religious and judicial authorities are summoned from afar. They immediately identify the source of the town's travails as being rooted in its citizens' supposed witchcraft and act swiftly to purge the community of its evildoers. Caught up in the frenzy of accusation, the town tries and condemns “the guilty” to death by hanging. Proctor maintains his innocence until the end and, despite threat of execution, refuses to confess to witchcraft or, significantly, bear any witness against neighbors already under suspicion.

The immediate impact of the play helped establish Miller as a major American artist and, along with his own Death of a Salesman and early major works by Tennessee Williams (The Glass Menagerie [1945] and A Streetcar Named Desire [1947]) and those of other dramatists, staked a claim for serious, literate drama on Broadway in the years immediately following World War II. In the decades following The Crucible's premiere, Miller’s masterful treatment of the play’s universal themes has resonated with successive generations of Americans and international audiences, to whom the 1950s McCarthyism and the HUAC controversies are an increasingly remote or even unknown phenomenon. The Crucible has seen four Broadway revivals. The most successful of these was staged in 2002—nearly 50 years after the Broadway premiere. Miller also adapted the play for a highly regarded 1996 film, starring his son-in-law Daniel Day-Lewis, for which Miller received an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay based on material from another medium. The play is also a popular revival piece for companies in Europe and Canada. In the minds of many observers of American theater, The Crucible is the finest American play written in the last half of the 20th century and, by virtually all accounts, one of the most important works in all of modern American literature.

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