

Theater review of “The Crucible” at Ozark Actors’ Theatre for Ladue News by Mark Bretz

The Crucible

Ozark Actors Theatre

Cedar Street Playhouse, 701 North Cedar, Rolla, MO

Through August 7

Tickets: From \$10 to \$20; contact 573-364-9523 or ozarkactorstheatre.org

Story: Once upon a time, in late 17th century America, the Massachusetts Bay colony was gripped with paranoia and fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the different. Fear of the unsettling and disquieting ways of its youth. And the surest explanation for anything that made the residents of the town of Salem uneasy was Lucifer himself. So, when a cluster of young girls, including his daughter Betty, are discovered by Reverend Parris dancing in the dark in a nearby forest, suspicions are aroused as to who is responsible for such brazen behavior.

Teenage Abigail Williams, one of the dancers, sets accusations ablaze after she is spurned by John Proctor, a pillar of the community who now regrets his adulterous relationship with Abigail. The teen lashes out with a fanciful tale of demonic possession, and soon irrational intolerance spreads among the citizenry, sweeping Proctor, the genial Rebecca Nurse, Proctor’s dutiful wife Elizabeth and others under the insidious pronouncement of witchcraft. Despite the protestations of the learned Reverend Hale, who is sent to investigate the charges, numerous residents are threatened with death by hanging unless they admit to consorting with Satan.

Highlights: Arthur Miller’s searing drama about the Salem witchcraft trials served as a fitting allegory for the “red scare” driven by Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the early 1950s. *The Crucible* won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1953 and continues to resonate powerfully today, when the level of political discourse has degenerated among extremists intent on bullying anyone opposed to their strict beliefs and edicts.

Miller’s genius was in creating a moving story with gripping dialogue and memorable characters to underscore the perils of demagoguery. Jason Cannon, producing director for Ozark Actors Theatre in Rolla, closes out the 24th season of OAT, one of two professional theaters in outstate Missouri, with a compelling, deeply satisfying interpretation of this classic American tragedy.

Other Info: Cannon’s direction is taut as he deftly balances the contributions of a number of professional performers alongside the earnest efforts of local players. Technically, a smart scenic design by Lex van Blommestein sets an eerie, wooded backdrop for the action played out center stage, surrounded by a series of wooden shards that give the story a feeling of imprisonment. Bess Moynihan’s harsh lighting and Patrick Burks’ unsettling sound design accentuate the foreboding atmosphere, while Mary Woll’s costumes emphasize the imposing modesty of the era as well as the region’s harsh climate.

The spacious stage at the Cedar Street Playhouse comfortably accommodates large scenes such as the courtroom trial in Act II, when Abigail's legion of hysterical followers wail at one end while the imperious Judge Danforth and his minions stare on in disbelief.

There's superior work by Jason Grubbe, who dominates the action in Act II as the intimidating and intractable Danforth. His portly physique complements his commanding voice and underscores the inflexibility of the legal hierarchy. As Proctor, Josh Bywater overcomes a tentative start to deliver a powerfully persuasive performance as the community's strongest voice of reason, making amends with his wife even as he rallies to the defense of his friends against the deafening roar of ignorance.

Sarah Cannon brings a steely resolve to the role of Elizabeth Proctor, counterbalancing her love for her husband with the hurt and betrayal she feels in the revelation of his infidelity. The underlying tension and ultimate love in the Proctors' relationship both are brought to the fore with both power and vulnerability by Cannon and Atwater.

There's excellent work, too, by Maggie McVey as the cunningly malicious Abigail, who shrewdly turns the courtroom into a performance space for the histrionics she choreographs with her impressionable charges. Blane Pressler brings compassion and understanding to the role of the frustrated and merciful Reverend Hale, while Susan Holmes fills Rebecca Nurse with a quiet serenity and strength.

Erin Roberts offers a fabulous turn as Tituba, Reverend Parris' mysterious slave from Barbados and the initial instigator of the witchcraft accusations, providing a lilting West Indies accent that belies Tituba's cunning nature. Lynn McFarland is OK as the legally savvy land-owner, Giles Corey, while Lanin Thomasma, Kevin Edwards and Steve Skelton contribute as the fretful Reverend Parris, the nervous Thomas Putnam, Danforth's rigid assistant Judge Hathorne and the feckless jailer Ezekiel Cheever, respectively (Edwards plays both Putnam and Hathorne). Jenna Light does well as the timid Proctor servant, Mary Warren, and Heather Beger, Wendy King, Kat McCaulla, Rebecca Light, Olivia Edwards and Esther George capably fill smaller parts.

As long as fear mongers grasp for power, *The Crucible* will continue to resonate in any era. Miller's enduring words and wisdom are well served in director Cannon's astute Ozark Actors Theatre presentation.

Rating: A 4 on a scale of 1-to-5.

Photos courtesy of Jason Cannon