

The Crucible

Rolling Stone Review

Confess it! you're really dreading seeing *The Crucible*, fearing a high-minded thesis of numbing good intentions. Arthur Miller's 1953 play about the witch trials in Salem, Mass, circa 1692, is freighted with enough background history to require a catch-up quiz.

True or false:

(1) Miller's play parallels the Red-baiting hysteria of the 1950s, when the House Un-American Activities Committee, run by a rabid Senator Joe McCarthy, equated communism with satanism. (True.)

(2) Miller was cited for contempt when he refused to betray friends in the Communist Party by naming names or to urge his wife, Marilyn Monroe, to submit to a photo op with the HUAC chief. (True.)

(3) Current parallels to witch hunts include religious fundamentalism, political correctness, accusations of child abuse at day-care centers and the demonizing of race, abortion, AIDS and rock. (True.)

(4) You need to know all these things to understand and appreciate *The Crucible*. (False.)

Miller is the first to admit that the tale must stand on its own. The playwright, now 81, sat near me at a screening of *The Crucible*, unwittingly intimidating all around him. For the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Death of a Salesman*, attention must be paid. Miller asked for none of it. He talked with boyish zest of working with director Nicholas Hytner on re-crafting *The Crucible* as a \$25 million film that would allow startling imagery to resonate with his language and burst the bounds of the stage.

Does it ever. *The Crucible*, despite some damaging cuts to the text, is a seductively exciting film that crackles with visual energy, passionate provocation and incendiary acting. The mood is electric from the first scene, when 15 teenage girls gather in the Salem forest at night to work out their Puritan repression. Tituba (Charlayne Woodard), a slave from Barbados, has organized a conjuring around a boiling kettle. The girls shout the names of boys they desire. Some tear off their clothes and dance naked. Not Betty (Rachael Bella), the daughter of Rev. Parris (Bruce Davison), who recoils as her 17-year-old cousin Abigail (Winona Ryder) bashes a rooster against the kettle and drinks its blood as a charm to kill Elizabeth (Joan Allen), the scolding, sickly wife of farmer John Proctor (Daniel Day-Lewis). Abigail had worked for the couple and their two sons until Elizabeth discovered John's adultery with Abigail and fired her for being a whore.

This "witching" -- a child's fatal attraction misread as devil worship -- is talked about but never dramatized in Miller's play. Onscreen, Miller's words are made flesh. Guilt over being caught drives the girls into a frenzy of false accusations. The devil made them do it. Abigail conveniently cites Elizabeth Proctor for witchcraft. The others pick up on the trick, naming

anyone they ever resented until 19 are sentenced to hang by Judge Danforth (Paul Scofield), a deputy governor as avid to make his reputation as McCarthy was.

Miller's screenplay is a model of adventurous film adaptation, showing a master eager to mine his most-performed play for fresh insights instead of embalming it. Hytner, the British theater wiz who made an auspicious 1994 film debut with *The Madness of King George*, directs with a keen eye. Shooting on Hog Island, Mass., a wildlife sanctuary off the coast, allows Hytner to catch raw nature -- the hysterical girls rush into the sea, claiming an evil yellow bird is chasing them from court -- and spur the actors to interpretive risks.

Ryder finds the lost child in Abigail, who is usually played as a calculating Lolita. Before unleashing her rage, Abigail presses her face to John's and grabs his crotch. Though he rejects her now, John was once the carnal aggressor. "And now you bid me go dead to all you taught me?" says Abigail. John, for all his late-blooming principles, has corrupted her youth. Ryder offers a transfixing portrait of warped innocence.

The great Scofield is triumphant, avoiding the easy caricature of Danforth as a fanatic. He brings the role something new: wit. We laugh with this judge, which heightens the horror later when he blinds himself to truth in the name of God and his own ambition. The scene in which he ignores Rev. Hale (Rob Campbell), who knows the girls are faking, and bullies the servant Mary Warren (Karron Graves) into delusion and madness chills the blood.

As the unforgiving wife whose "justice would freeze beer," in the words of her husband, Allen is an absolute stunner in an award-caliber performance that is also a surprising source of warmth. By the seashore, where the pregnant Elizabeth has come to say goodbye to her condemned husband, she tells John, "I once counted myself so plain, so poorly made, that no honest love could come to me." Elizabeth's scene of tender reconciliation is the film's moral core. John need only sign a false confession of witchcraft to save himself from the gallows. Of course, he won't. "Because it is my name," he tells Danforth simply. "Because I cannot have another in my life."

In the film's most complex role, Day-Lewis performs with quiet power. Playing nobility can make actors insufferable, but Day-Lewis keeps John Proctor human even when saddled with smudgy makeup and fake brown teeth for his final scene. *The Crucible*, for all its timely denunciation of persecution masked as piety comes down to individual resistance and how you search your heart to find it. The years haven't softened the rage against self-betrayal in *The Crucible*. This stirring film lets you feel the heat of Miller's argument and the urgent power of his kick.