

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Crucible

Arthur Miller

Birmingham Rep and the Touring Consortium

Lyric Theatre, The Lowry, Salford

(2004)

Arthur Miller's 1953 play was performed to a packed house at the Lowry including a large number of school parties, but then with a cast of nineteen actors plus four understudies Birmingham Rep has a large wage bill to cover. The play was written as a thinly-veiled allegory of Senator McCarthy's 'witch hunts', in which the sinisterly-titled House Un-American Activities Committee used the mythical threat of the spread of communism to discredit people with opposing political views and to empower themselves by promising to provide protection from the non-existent threat. As similar groups are using similar methods today - this time using the myth of an international network of organised terrorists - for identical ends (the parallel is completed with the line, "you either support this court or you are opposed to it"), the message of the play is still frighteningly relevant.

The play is set in a Puritan community in seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. Abigail Williams and her friends, including the daughter of the rather materialist village clergyman, have been caught dancing naked in the woods, and in order to avoid getting into trouble they say they were bewitched by the servant Tituba. They are believed, and they use their newfound power to accuse anyone they do not like or who speaks out against them, a number of whom are hanged for witchcraft.

The first half seems very static; the first scene in particular introduces a lot of characters who just stand around talking, and a number of performances do not project very well into this large auditorium. For instance, Leah Muller as Abigail acts the part well, but her performance is directed mostly onto the stage and not into the audience, so her words are not always clearly audible and we are left feeling as though we are spying on something happening in the distance. However the scene comes more alive when Malcolm Storry enters as John Proctor; after this first scene, it is Storry's excellent performance that holds the whole production together. There are some good supporting performances from a number of other actors, including Patricia Kerrigan as Proctor's wife, Sara Beharrell as Mary Warren and Oliver Cotton as Deputy Governor Danforth.

After the interval, the production livens up quite a lot and is full of moments when the audience cries out or laughs in despair at the tortured logic used to discredit witnesses' testimony or evidence and to convict people of crimes that do not exist. Even so, there were times when the rise in volume of whispering and paper rustling from the less-well supervised school groups indicated that at least some spectators found their attention wandering.

This is a very long production (three hours including the interval) that is very static at times but gets much more interesting after the interval, largely due to a compelling central performance from Malcolm Storry.

"The Crucible" runs until 13 November 2004 and continues to tour until 4 December 2004

Steve Orme [reviewed](#) this production at Birmingham Rep

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)