

## Review

# Witch Hunt

## Classic allegory begs the perennial question, 'Is the accuser always holy?'

by Martin Brady

Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* 55 years ago as a none-too-veiled response to McCarthyism and the so-called Red Scare. If you're old enough, or you've learned your history, you might very well identify the play's specific lines of dialogue with those paranoid times. ("Is the accuser always holy?" cries one character in distress.) There are a few creaks in this classic play, though Tennessee Repertory Theatre manages a generally sound new production that flies through the ominous proceedings primarily on the strength of an all-star Nashville cast.

Director René Copeland has assembled a who's who of local talent, including David Alford, Chip Arnold, Matthew Carlton, Jessejames Locorriere, Michael Montgomery, Eric Pasto-Crosby, Brian Webb Russell and Sam Whited. There are strong familiar women as well, such as Jenny Littleton, Evelyn Blythe and Tia Shearer, along with relative newcomers Delali Potakey and Kahle Reardon. (The cast also features several young women drawn from Nashville public schools.)

Gary Hoff's magnificent set is so striking that you wish lighting designer Karen Palin had turned up the dimmers. Yet the dark atmosphere certainly lends itself to Miller's brooding tale based on an outbreak of supposed witchcraft in Salem, Mass., in 1692. Narrow, suspicious and hypocritical Puritan minds look for reasons to explain or correct their misfortunes, and when a tight-knit group of young girls are spotted in the woods behaving unnaturally, the witch hunt is on.

The allegorical ideas—the intrusive power of officialdom, the poisonous nature of hearsay, the cowardly protection of one's reputation, the dangers of jealousy—are writ large in Miller's script, which is involving almost all the way through. Yet there are some textual holes—or at least weak depictions—that strain our willing suspension of disbelief. Chief among them are the "witches," whose histrionic devilment reads as overplayed and not wholly credible.

*The Crucible* is complex and wordy, and besides witchcraft, it tackles other big ideas such as the separation of church and state, sexual morality, corruption in the justice system, even love and honor. When the Rep's cast is at full throttle, which is often (due to Copeland's good pacing of the lengthy script), it's very rewarding stuff.

Alas, both climax and denouement (complete with stark gallows imagery) seem to get lost in all the point-counterpoint of the many characters' motivations. Plus an important later scene between Alford and Littleton is played so cozily and so sotto voce that we hardly understand a word they say.

This *Crucible* is sometimes just that—a severe trial. But there are fine performances from almost all the players—Russell in particular turns in some notable work as an aging landowner—and the big-canvas presentation is highly professional in every way.