

Rep's timely 'Crucible' is worth your time

By CATHERINE COKE

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The Tennessee Repertory Theatre opened its season this week with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and it is a timely and solid production.

In 1952, Miller wrote the play about the 1692 Salem witch trials that resulted in the execution of 21 presumably innocent people as a result of religious hysteria. In its own right, it is a compelling story of the struggle between authority and freedom, faith and fear, the ever-present threat of hubris to the human condition and, finally, the redemptive power of courage and love.

It was also, more specifically, an allegorical response to the rise of Joseph McCarthy and the abuses of power by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, through its inquisitions during the "Red Scare" era of the late 1940s and early '50s. Many lives were ruined and careers were ended by the committee's unquenchable search for communists and its unceasing demand for the naming of names.

The play was first performed in 1953. While its importance was not recognized initially, its dramatic impact and continuing relevance have made it an American theater classic. It is thus well chosen by Tennessee Rep for production at a time when the country is dealing with so many of the timeless issues that Miller confronts.

Stays true to vision

Director René Copeland has stayed true to the playwright's vision and has mounted a well-paced, straight-ahead production, with thoroughly researched costuming (kudos to Trish Clark) and social norms and, thankfully, with no attempt to "update" it.

That being said, Gary Hoff's set design does not fully serve the play. Although technically well executed, it appears to be a "high-concept" design placed upon the play. The central staging area appears to be suspended and is accessible only by relatively narrow walkways, making the stage resemble a metaphorical noose around the neck. However, the audience concern that an actor might tumble into the breach detracts more from the production than the effect adds to it. Lighting is generally effective, but overall the production is too dimly lit, sacrificing too much visibility for too little mood.

A large cast of 19 people, composed of both Rep veterans and newcomers, acquit themselves well overall, with the exception of the first scene of the play. On opening night it was difficult to make out some of the expository dialogue that is critical to understanding the plot and the context of the characters to the play.

There are standout performances by Brian Russell, who takes the stage completely in the role of Giles Cory; Tia Shearer, who is wonderfully vulnerable as Mary Warren; Chip Arnold as the terrifyingly self-assured Danforth; and Eric D. Pasto-Crosby as the ultimately broken Reverend Hale. Also notably watchable are Kahle Reardon, Evelyn Blythe, Jenny Littleton and Michael Montgomery.

Overall, Act II, scene 1 is where all the actors shine. In this climactic scene, every actor is completely involved with the action of the play, and that ensemble combustion makes the show worth seeing.

Unfortunately, on opening night, at the absolute climactic moment in the final scene, in which John Proctor, played by David Alford, signs his name to a false confession for the judicial committee, a cell phone went off in the audience, taking us out of the moment.

In order for all to appreciate and enjoy live theater in the 21st century, *please* turn off your phones.