

REVIEW

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The Crucible, an Almost-Menacing Journey, Oct. 4 - 13

By Susan Swindell Day, editorial director

David Alford's beautiful baritone voice (interestingly reminiscent of Mel Gibson's) is one of the more striking sounds to be heard in Tennessee Rep's 2007-08 season opener of Arthur Miller's masterwork, *The Crucible*, and that's a good thing. The jarring and richly layered text of Miller's play requires the full command of a theater company's powers. The Rep has been itching to do this particular play — and why not? The work is a major star of the dramaturgical realm.

But even the most attentive theater-goer finds herself seeking relief from the binding weight of the play's matter, and thankfully, in this particular production, the light touch comes in the character of Giles Corey (played by Brian Webb Russell). Yet many other important nuances in Miller's wrenching play go wildly undetected in this production. The audience must accept themes of suspicion, guilt and dread but the grander, less obvious themes of love and honor are practically lost. That's a pity for so great an undertaking as Miller's classic play. Miller himself painstakingly researched historical letters, court records and diaries involved with the witch trials of 1692 to bring this play to life, and his script's handsome text crackles and pops with slanderous slings and arrows . . . but the supporting production does not. In fact, it stalls at the gate of Act I.

We open at the home of Reverend Parris (Samuel Whited) where his young daughter, Betty (the very capable 12-year-old Rachel Wood), is ailing in bed due to a mysterious adventure with girls in the woods. The opening should be frantic (conjuring with spirits in the woods is strictly forbidden, after all), the pacing urgent, the mood borderline psychotic. Instead, we begin peacefully, with a concerned Reverend Parris who is given to pointing his fingers to make himself clear. It is as if someone told the actors, "Let's not lose our heads or blow our gasket too soon, because we'll have no where else to go."

But that's precisely where *The Crucible* begins. The gasket IS blown. People HAVE lost their heads. Getting the launch of this play wrong is an enormous calamity that throws off the pacing for the actors and the rest of the play. Instead of having something to sink their teeth into, actors are forced to watch and wait. So, when John Proctor (played by the smooth and sanguine Alford) makes his entrance into the scene — as a watching and waiting innocent — he practically goes undetected; you're not sure why he's there. The error in the play's launching is so significant that not even Alford can repair it.

Alford, always in command of his talent's prowess, is like an artist with a limited palette. He's so good you long to give him the colors he needs to render his painting fully, but your hands are tied. He should

have cobalt blues, emerald greens and scarlet reds, but he's bound by a misguided idea (whose?) that is achieved by browns, grays and black.

Not all is lost in Salem, however. An outstanding and appropriately Puritanical set designed by Gary C. Hoff adds just the right minimalist flavor to the play without barricading it. Classic costumes designed by Trish Clark are smart, even if Alford's borders on the rogueish romantic making him stand out more than necessary from the rest. Somber lighting takes care of the woe, although a starker touch now and then would have added a needed contrast.

The main idea that goes regrettably awry and is the backbone of the play is the true love between John (a man who succumbs to a bewitching seductress — Abigail, a girl in service at his home — during a long, cold winter while his wife is ill) and his forthright wife, Elizabeth. As the aforementioned spouse, the outstanding actress Jenny Littleton is a bridled mare. If she'd been directed to actually play a cold, hard-hearted and unforgiving wife, rather than simply a tense one in Act I, her imprisoned love scene on the cell floor of the jail with her husband, John, in Act II, would have left nary a dry eye in the theater. It was emotional, yes, and private, but the depth of the story didn't carry the weight it should have here: Her icy heart melts for him (but Littleton's Elizabeth was never that icy) and his for hers, but it is too late.

And then there's Abigail (Kahle Reardon). The source of the town's wretchedness is a bad seed, but only kinda-sorta. We should be privy to her deranged tactics; then rear back together in shock by her masterful cunning and false butterings of the easily deceived turkeys around her. Abigail is a study of split personality, but here the edges are all-too-fuzzy. And the same can be said for numerous other characters: they all rather blend together. Character development is everything here, but we are left with good actors unrealized in their roles. With the exception of Tia Shearer as a perfectly sniveling Mary Warren and an all-too-shortly lived performance by the spiritually profound Tituba (Delali Potakey), the actors work hard yet their pay-offs are lost.

Prior to this production, the last time I saw *The Crucible* was at The Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Ct. It was scary and riveting. The danger in producing this play is that many have much to compare it to and come with expectations. That makes it a tall order. It should be approached with caution and reverence. Much like one might approach the woods on a dark night in 1692.