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"THE CRUCIBLE"—p.22.



COSTUMES AND WIGS ON HIRE

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The article below appeared in Amateur Stage following BCP's production of *The Crucible* in April 1964.

The Play Produced

The Crucible


Drama by Arthur Miller.
10m., 10f. Composite set.
Massachusetts, 17th century.
U.K. amateur rights—English
Theatre Guild.

TO CAST, stage crew and producers *The Crucible* is a most rewarding and absorbing undertaking. To the audience it may be, if successful; if unsuccessful, it may become dull and embarrassing.

There are two outstanding difficulties. Firstly to make the story convincing and the characters real, even though the story is true and the characters clearly based on real people; secondly to decide what aspects of the play to emphasise, as it is far too rich a meal for an audience to absorb completely in one sitting without suffering mental indigestion.

To carry conviction to the audience implies conviction on the part of the cast. The producer's first task, then, is to convince the cast. To do this he must appreciate and convey to the cast something of the background to the early American settlers. They were bigoted, but they were very, very sincere—this is important. They had a history of persecution dating back to the Maryan martyrdoms and continuing through the reigns of James I and Charles I, and had been in exile in Holland before, as the Pilgrim Fathers, they emigrated to North America. These early settlers suffered great hardship—after the first year only four of the original women survived; the remainder had succumbed to the rigours of the Massachusetts winter, and starvation. The Salem episode took place only two generations later, and death was still not far away—death from starvation or from Indian revolt. The history of these times is dealt with in numerous publications, but there is a convenient summary in Chitwood and Owsley's *A Short History of the American People*, Vol. I (Van Nostrand—New York, 1945).

When people are in great danger or near to death, they become superstitious or devoutly religious according to one's viewpoint. With their background of persecution:



This article is based on Dr. Turner's production for the Banbury Cross Players featured on the Cover (photo: Blinkhorns). The silhouette on the left is from the programme of the Four Ways Drama Group, High Wycombe, a photograph from whose production (by Robert Powton) is on p.24. On p.23 is a scene from the Penrith Theatre Club's production (photo: Robert Armstrong).

the people of Salem became fanatic in their religion. It was a Calvinist faith in which predestination loomed large. To them the devil walked not only in the worship of evil spirits but even in following other Protestant creeds — Quakerism was also 'a hangin' error' at one time. Life was hard and there was little relaxation. There was particularly little for the children. They were not sympathetically treated. Original sin in them had to be dealt with promptly by all means possible—threat of damnation and eternal fire and whipping. Not for them the normal outlets of childhood, but only training for their parents' ideal — work and prayer. Leisure let in the devil; therefore there should be no leisure. Small wonder that in adolescent bodies minds became hysterical. Not for them sublimation by means of hockey or the adulation of a rhythm group—all thought and desires that did not fit in to the general creed of work and prayer must be stifled. Stories of the Barbados from the negro slaves, of sunshine and warmth, of other, happier customs, of more exciting and colourful religions were listened to clandestinely. From there to fortune telling, conjuring, spell-making, and 'the other things' were natural steps. Adolescence, repression and in some cases a history of mental instability did the rest.

What morals, then, does the play draw? What human weaknesses does it expose? In the first place, there is the central dilemma. Confess and go lightly punished—so long as you implicate others; or hang. This technique has been used through the ages as a means of persecution and suppression. Examples can be drawn from the time of Titus Oates to the present day. Allied to this is the deep-rooted desire to confess in public, and the pleasure taken in cruelty which has the backing of social approval. The alliance of church to state and their mutual decadence is relevant, and the employment of religious dogma to support purely secular quarrels. The play illustrates the error of putting the law above mercy, and the danger of resentment caused by ostentatious goodness. Eventually ordinary people will stand firm against terror and oppression whether this be of mind or body; but innocent people will have to suffer first.

Many of the characters may be interpreted in more than one way, and the producer must decide at the outset if he is going to follow the lead given by the author, or go back to the originals. Abigail, for instance — is she essentially innocent but swept away by her own emotions, as she probably was in fact; or mentally unbalanced, as seems to be suggested by the earlier edition of the play; or thoroughly bad, as portrayed in



the later edition? There is much to be said for the last interpretation, the character being based more on Margaret Rule than on the real Abigail Williams. Again, should the character of Deputy Governor Danforth be based on the real Danforth? Or on Judge Stoughton, who seems much nearer in spirit to the author's character — the only man who maintained to the end that his conduct was right and correct, that the hangings were necessary

must be set the overwhelming intellectual power of the church and state; the self-interested virtue of Parris; the reasonableness and slowly awakening horror of Hale; the humane but cruel lucidity of Danforth; and the petty self-importance of Hathorne. A further contrast must be provided by the down-to-earth matter-of-factness of Proctor, Elizabeth, Corey, Nurse and Rebecca, each of whom had their own human weaknesses. It is well worth while reading



and just and that the subsequent revulsion against them was evil? Probably, the latter is preferable. Most of the characters can be examined in this way. This is one factor which makes the play so fascinating.

Whatever interpretation is given to each character, great care must be taken in balance and contrast. For instance, the five girls must be obviously a product of the same age, the same culture and background; yet they must be clearly defined individuals. Abigail clearly the leader, the 'bad seed', perverted but only just freed from innocence; Mary, weak-willed, easily led, but basically good; Mercy, vicious in a petty, unimportant way; Susanna, ordinary, everyone's daughter, in danger but not really touched by evil; Betty, emotionally unstable to the point of hysteria. Against these

Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* (Trust Books) to get an appreciation of the real people on whom Miller based his characters. The illustrated edition (published by Robert Hale) is particularly valuable.

In casting it is obvious that Proctor, Danforth, Elizabeth and Abigail should be strong. Of considerable importance, however, and perhaps of prior importance, is the casting of the very old and the very young. Without convincing performances from Nurse, Corey, Rebecca and the five girls, the principals are powerless to convince the audience that we are dealing with real people and real facts.

There are two printed versions of the text. The first was published by Dramatists Play Service Inc. in 1954 and was that used for the

original Broadway production. The second, published by The Cresset Press, London, in 1962, is a later version and may be thought to be the better. The texts are considerably different.

The play is a long one. Running time, excluding intervals, is in the region of 140 minutes. There should be no difficulty in holding the attention of the audience, however, so long as the pace is varied. The first act is perhaps the most difficult, as not only has the predominant mood to be conveyed, the characters introduced and the background to the 'story' sketched in, but the way has to be paved for the hysterical outbursts of the children. The foreboding atmosphere and the mood of impending tragedy was suggested by the use of a menacing drum beat theme as the introduction and ending to each act (tympani would have been better but were not available); and the use of highly atmospheric lighting, which was varied to suit the changing action and tempo. The first act was played at as fast a pace as was compatible with audience comprehension. The first half of the second act was played as a complete contrast — consciously at a much slower pace—in an attempt to convince the audience of the naturalness of Proctor and Elizabeth and to bring out the very subtle and very human relationship between the two. The audience must understand and sympathise with both characters in order to make the later drama more poignant. The third act was played at high tension throughout, rising to a crescendo from the entrance of Elizabeth. Doubtless this act could be done in a more restrained manner, with considerably more variation in pace and tension than was achieved. This would involve a considerable risk, however, of letting the audience "off the hook". All scenes involving hysteria on the part of the children were pushed to the maximum and carried through at great speed in order to build up an emotional rather than an intellectual climax.

There is difficulty in sustaining the fourth act after the overwhelming effect of the third. Some interlude to the drama must be provided. This was attempted by making the first part uncomfortable and uncertain by concentrating on the physical discomfort, the cold and dirt of the prison cell, and stressing the doubts of Hale and Parris. From the time of Elizabeth's entry, however, the tragedy worked up until the final curtain.

The use of a drum theme as incidental music has already been mentioned; this was most effective. A hymn was substituted for the 'psalm' mentioned in Act 1, that chosen being "God is a Stronghold and a Tower" (Ancient & Modern No. 678). This hymn was written by Luther in 1529 and is sung in Massachusetts now, so is quite appropriate. The second verse contains the words 'Jesus Christ'; these can be brought out at exactly the right moment, if the second verse is started at the beginning of Abigail's speech. The lullaby at the start of Act II is not very important, but a simple pentatonic melody which is quite suitable is Rumanian Lullaby in Horton's European Folk-Song Book (Arnold, Leeds).

The scenery, if the play is performed on an orthodox stage, demands a splendid simplicity. Both box sets and curtains were rejected, and after several ideas had been tried out on a scale model stage, an idea was selected which made maximum use of the four entirely different scenes. The basis of each set was a vast cyclorama of black curtains which stretched well into the wings on each side and almost up to the proscenium-arch wall. Placed on the stage and free standing were a series of canvas flats, each painted a dark greenish-grey. These merely suggested walls and corners, but were in no way intended to resemble real walls. From their very position they suggested the relative size of the bedroom as opposed to the cell and (on castors for quick changes)

they gave opportunity for acting on several levels.

In Act III, Danforth's desk was placed very high on a platform, itself on a dais, with steps leading up either side. This could be criticised on the ground that the scene is set in the ante-room and not in the courtroom itself. The great advantages secured were, however, sufficient justification. It enabled unusual and dramatic groupings to be used with no danger of masking the central character, Danforth, and gave extreme emphasis to the tense inquisition scene. Three or four flats placed side by side behind the judges' desk gave a solidarity to their position which was balanced by the solitary flats placed on either side of the stage rather like pillars. In Acts I and II furniture was carefully chosen for period and kept to a minimum. The bed in Act I was placed on a 2ft. x 9ft. high square platform on which several actors could stand. Act II had a staircase running in from the side and a fireplace complete with ovens painted somewhat symbolically and placed free-standing in front of a gap between two side flats. This method enabled the scene to be lit almost entirely from the side or just above, giving a powerful three-dimensional appearance to figures standing in front of the dark flats or even darker cyclorama. In Act I the doorway was suggested merely by an empty door frame, confirming that the scene was a private room and not a courtroom, for example. Act IV, the cell, had only one entrance to it, upstage centre, but by careful placing of the flats a wide gap was left at the side of stage right, adjacent to a low platform, and it was through this gap that most of the lighting changes came, throwing a reflection on the back wall. At the end of the play just before Proctor's execution... a shadow of the gallows was projected in the same way. The cell floor was liberally spread with straw, and with low intensity lighting largely from a single source, an atmosphere of cold and

squalor was preserved. In this scene, particularly, the lighting was changed to suit the grouping of the actors and to heighten the dramatic intensity. The graduation from cold, bleak moonlight to a wintry sunlight at daybreak was an effective reflection of the re-awakening hope of the final stage of the play.

It might be argued that the theme of *The Crucible* is timeless and that if a symbolic set is used there is no need to look for authenticity in furniture and costume; but irritating anachronisms may well take away the attention of the audience. To discover the correct furniture of the period is not difficult; it is a great deal more difficult to borrow what is wanted, however. Most desirable pieces are in museums and likely to remain there! However, the domestic furniture was mainly Jacobean—slat-back and sawback chairs, gate-leg tables, are not out of place—although the possessions of the farmers were plain and utilitarian. Although wooden plates were generally used by the poorer folk, pewter was not unknown.

The women's costumes are not difficult. A good idea of the styles can be obtained from Starkey (*op. cit.*). Grey was the dominant colour for the girls, contrasting with black for the older women. The farmers were also easily clothed—breeches, boots, leather waistcoats, etc. The guards' costumes were mostly made from designs taken from Cromwellian models. The Deputy-Governor and Judge Hathorne had much more elaborate and brightly coloured garments. Men's hair was long; this makes wigs for the representatives of law and religion essential. Here lies a considerable problem, as without care the total effect can be ludicrous and can draw comparison with certain well-known beat groups! In a play of such emotional tension an untoward titter can ruin the whole effect. It is essential to let the cast rehearse in costume for long enough to get any tendency to hilarity out of their systems. The

play demands a great deal from the actors, and the release from tension caused by the first appearance of Hale or Parris with shoulder-length wigs will probably interrupt rehearsal not a little! But the cast must have forgotten this by the first performance.

From the publicity point of view, *The Crucible* presents several possible approaches. It is difficult to "place" as a type, and whilst the general public remembers Arthur Miller only when his name is linked with a former wife, most of them know something of the witches of Salem. One can therefore tackle this as a drama of

witchcraft or as a more up-to-date attack on McCarthyism and its like. For my part a phrase from a critic's review summed up the feeling of the play. "*A cry for sanity in a world where the nightmares are closing in*"—was used extensively on posters, programmes, handbills and advertisements. The use of the off-set litho method of printing allowed the design of a style of lettering for the particular play title and the use of that exact style on all publications. A producer's note on the play, its setting, historical accuracy and interpretation is advisable in the programme.

A. N. TURNER.
