

DIRECTING THE CRUCIBLE AT THE LEICESTER HAYMARKET

Arthur Miller in his autobiography *Timebends* has said that he could always tell whether a country was going into or about to come out of a period of political repression by the number of applications he received to license a production of *The Crucible*.

In the autumn of 1989 I decided to direct a production of *The Crucible* at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre, at which time I was its Theatre Director. Within a week of my announcement I learned that the Royal National Theatre Director, the Manchester Exchange Theatre as well as two others were planning their own productions of *The Crucible*. Ostensibly we were celebrating Arthur Miller's seventy-fifth birthday, but I believe we also heard echoes of McCarthyism's "are you now or have you ever been" in the intemperance of Thatcher's "are they one of us". Needless to say, Margaret Thatcher is now no longer Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and in our case, Arthur Miller's statement was uncannily borne out. But at the time of our production she was still politically robust.

Before ever reading *The Crucible*, theatre people are aware that it is about McCarthyism, that Miller courageously stood against it, and that throughout this period he fell in love with and later married Marilyn Monroe. When you then first read the play, the artifice of the language and the structure rushes you headlong, agog at characters' naivety and mistakes, which quickly lead to a polarization within the community, and allow the tender shoots of totalitarianism to take root. As such, *The Crucible* serves as a comment on and warning about not only the United States of the early 1950s, but as a template for all societies. Had that been the sum of the play I don't think that it would have become a vigorous statement of moral outrage and social accountability, for at the time Miller was not under personal attack. The story was not his story yet, and had it been left there, *The Crucible* would have been a story about looking back at Salem in anger.

What gives the story authority and immediate interest is the Elizabeth-Proctor-Abigail triangle as it pertains to A. Miller's life. In Elia Kazan's memoirs *A Life* the author talks about Miller's first marital infidelity, the cold unforgivingness Mary Slattery was showing Miller, his agreeing with her, and the continuous guilt he was feeling. The exact situation as in the play. In addition, Miller had already met Marilyn Monroe, and although not yet lovers, from *Timebends* and *A Life* it is clear that she is already preying on his mind. I cite this not through prurience but because in all good plays playwrights use the material of their own life which in turn gives authority to a play. To quote Elia Kazan, "Art [Arthur Miller] was not a writer who made up stories. His material has had to be experienced ; he reported on his inner condition. Art has to go through a crisis ; that would provide him with material for a play. He had to have that living connection with a subject before he could make a drama out of it".

When considering *The Crucible*, I had to ask myself whether the play touches the community within which it is to be performed ; and whether my stage is an appropriate theatrical space. I have already made a parallel with Thatcherism. But *The Crucible* has at least two other major concerns which are mirrored within our

society : these are children and women, and a society in transition, although the whole play is suffused with class structure.

As a society, the white English-speaking world has a problematic relationship with its children. So much of our relationship to children is based on censure, sanctions and violence. I can only give you some examples. In Cleveland, an area in north-east England, during the autumn of 1987, a doctor who specialized in sexual abuse of children ordered thirty-odd children into state care within a matter of days. The doctor not only believed that these children had been sexually abused, but also wanted to draw attention to the widespread sexual abuse of children in the British Isles. The case caused widespread consternation, and even the notorious right wing tabloid newspapers didn't know whether to lead a campaign against parents or doctor. After all, tales of British public schools are littered with buggery. A judicial inquiry found that the parents had no case to answer, the families were reunited. Interestingly, the doctor was not fired, although some months later moved to a less sensitive position.

In Scotland last year between thirty and forty children were taken into care by social workers in the Orkneys, after they became convinced by children's statements that they were being forced into Satanic practices. There was the Kincora boys'home case in Northern Ireland, which was used by Army and Police officers and politicians as a "brothel" using boys as sexual victims. As I write there is a case in front of the Courts in Leicester that involves both a Member of Parliament and a number of Social Workers accused of sexually abusing the wards in their care.

For me these examples raise interesting questions mirrored in *The Crucible*, questions concerning witchcraft, the power/authority relationship between adults and children, sexual repression, paedophilia ; and how and when do you believe children. In the terms of the play, where all the 'children' are women, they also raise questions about society's way of dealing with women by treating them as children.

A second area of common interest is the depiction of a society undergoing profound structural changes, and the political forces they unleash. In Thatcher's Britain it was the social economy being pushed into a laissez-faire economy ; an industrial-based economy pushed into one of financial services and information technology ; and one that underwent profound centralization. It was a time of managers versus unions, denigration of public services, and triumphalism in overturning consensus politics. The society as portrayed in *The Crucible* is at just such a juncture.

When the Puritans first established themselves at Salem they needed to conduct themselves by strict conventions and organization in order to survive harsh winter, to protect themselves against Indians, to eat, to prevent incest, to open up the forest and clear the land. But as the play opens we have a settlement that is prospering and secure and has successfully weathered this first stage. A second church has been built by dissidents away from the town. This results in a stratification of society and to the first-built church belong the establishment, the landowner who already employs labour, who is intent on keeping political power ; while to the latter church belong well-enough-to-do farmers, who wish the conventions to loosen up so that they can have more of a political say. It is against this political and religious background that the play unfolds itself.

P. LICHTENFELS
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My next consideration was which version to use, that is, the four-act or five-act text. The added act, which occurs between acts two and three in the popularly available version of *The Crucible*, takes place between Proctor and Abigail in a clearing in the forest. Proctor asks Abigail to stop the madness, clear Elizabeth's name, but after protracted discussions she says no. I rejected this act in my reading because it had nothing new to say that had not already been heard in act two or would not become clear in act three. Furthermore it destroys the rhythms of the play.

As I have already briefly mentioned, Miller's language in *The Crucible* is a literary English ; he says in *Timebends* that he got the sense and rhythm of it by reading texts of the trials at Salem. The dialect is not therefore recognizably American, and certainly not the Queen's English ; we therefore had to find a regional dialect which could encompass Miller's rhythms. I could identify four which would work well : Scottish, Northumbrian, Suffolk and West Country. In my opinion Scottish would work best but I rejected this for an English production because of colonialist overtones. After trying out the remaining three with a dialect coach, the cast was most comfortable with learning a West Country accent, that area of England encompassing Bristol and Somerset.

Having agreed on the accents, one of the first things that the cast and I learned in rehearsal was the adversarial nature of the language. In act one Parris cross-examines Abigail about happenings in the forest ; then the Puttnams cross-examine Parris, and later Proctor comes in to cross-examine Abigail ; then Hale comes in and soon cross-examines Abigail, Parris and Tituba. So examples go on through act two until it culminates in the courtroom scene of act three. The literary English in conjunction with the adversariality of language, quickly leads us to recognize that not only is all of *The Crucible* a courtroom drama but that consequently it is highly stylized.

From this came two decisions. The set, costumes, music and lights, while they might contain "naturalistic" elements, should provide an environment that focuses on the emotional truth of the play. The actors should embody their characters as "naturalistically" as possible so as to create a tension between the play's subject and its form. This worked well for our production until the last act. Try as we might we could never satisfyingly crack it, and we tried and we tried. The problem is that the crying out of act three feels to an audience as if it is the climax of the play. They have sustained so much build-up of pressure that the crying out comes as an enormous release. They are mentally tired. When they do finally start to listen again it feels unsatisfying.

I have no answers except to believe that it may be a short-coming in the writing, lying somewhere in the area of needing another structure other than adversariality to sustain its philosophic discussion.

Dissatisfaction in *The Crucible* may also lie in the focus which narrows from the community of Salem down to the plight of an individual, and is left there. As an antidote, a production choice I made was to keep a focus on the community throughout the play.

The main stage at the Leicester Haymarket is thirty metres wide by eighteen metres deep by eighteen metres high ; one of the largest in Britain. The designer, Kandis Cook and I felt that the production should be on an open stage ; and so we

decided on a vast gently-raked floor built from gray American oak, nailed down in a seemingly random fashion. Although the floor could sustain some symbolic interpretations such as hinting at the emotional uproar within Salem, or the pattern of the land if viewed from, an airplane, or that, as the production used different areas of the stage so the audiences eyes would be reinvigorated, the practical effect of the rake would be the sense that the production was thrown at them. It was on this stage that I placed fifteen chairs at the back of the playing area, so that the rest of the cast could watch and listen to the scene taking place.

We started using the space. Having quickly blocked and run through *The Crucible* as an exercise in mountain climbing, we spent the last three days of our first week exploring act one. We centred the action in a playing space of six metres by six metres which would represent Betty's room. There was one bed, two chairs and a small table. Good work was being done. We delineated characters, came to understand why they were on stage and what each wanted out of the scene. The six metres by six metres looked good within a context of thirty by eighteen, and we had our chairs in various positions in semi-darkness near the back of the stage. The weekend came, and while intelligent work had been done, we also knew that the first act hadn't been cracked.

On the Monday morning, and I can't remember whether it was festering dissatisfaction, or seeing Betty's room in a fresh light and feeling it was big, or whether I had somehow recalled my visit to pioneer villages in Canada, but for some reason I contracted the playing area to an area of two and one quarter metres square with still the same furniture in the room. It did wonders. For the first time we were inside a real crucible, and everybody started living on top of each other, the room began to feel airless, and one got a physical sense of pressure and urgency, especially when there were thirteen or fourteen characters in the room. The physical pressure of space and the adversariality of language became the two keys that unlocked our production.

I admire Miller because he fights for liberal values when people are being cowed. But I also recognize that he writes within a nineteenth-century tradition. Like Ibsen, Miller uses metaphor that sometimes attains the weight of symbol. Time permits me to look at a few of them that we examined in rehearsals. I would like to start with silence. The dominant silence of act one is Betty as she lies inertly on her bed ; then the nurturing silence that Rebecca Nurse demands from everybody after Betty first screams out. There is the silence of the beginning of act two when Elizabeth and John aren't talking to each other, the silence of the night when John looks out onto the land. There is the shock and menace of Reverend Hale's silent entry into Proctor's household. We have silence and order when Danforth bids any number of people to keep their counsel within the court ; or in act four we have the silence of the jail, and a depopulated Salem. The silences are used in many ways, but all help in pushing the dramatic action forward.

Another metaphor that attains weight is sight. One example of sight which can be easily missed if you only know *The Crucible* through reading it, is at the beginning of the fourth. We are told that Proctor has been in solitary confinement in a windowless dungeon for some months. As we first see him in act four he is almost totally sightless ; and as the act progresses and Proctor struggles with his conscience, there is also a physical struggle for his eyes to deal with light. Had I the space, I

P. LICHTENFELS
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could go on and talk about the metaphors of heat, food, and touch and sight, and show in what key ways they also push forward the dramatic action.

Finally, much has been said and written about Miller and the women in his plays. We too tried to explore the role of women in rehearsals, and we came up with traditional observations. For example there are the repressed sexual feelings that Parris has for his niece Abigail ; the way that when Hale cross examines Elizabeth he finds it quite acceptable that Proctor answers for her ; and the fact that while many women get hanged for being witches, the madness in Salem only stops when men start getting hanged in any number.

Of all the women characters only Elizabeth undergoes a real journey and changes, but unlike John with whom we see the process, with her we see only the results. In the event, our exploration of accepted observations on women was not that fruitful, and we settled on representing the traditional relationships they had in Salem, and presumably in Arthur Miller's America of the 1950s. Instead, what was surprising was that Miller's treatment of the children, who are all women, opened up the way that both Salem and 1950s America position women as children.

Although examining the roles of women, the metaphors of sight, silence and so on, may be thought to be of primarily literary interest, the process of focusing on and becoming consciously aware of these aspects provides the texture, the warp and woof of any production.

In the event I was proud of my production, the critics loved it, and audiences flocked to see it. But I am conscious that in writing about my production, the rehearsal and thought processes are presented partially, more coherent and sanitized, than in reality they were.

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