

Review of *The Crucible*

The joint production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* by Camberwell Grammar School and Canterbury Girls Secondary College was an accurate depiction of the allegorical tale and the conflict that evolved from the Salem witch hunts that took place from February 1692 to May 1693.

Central to this portrayal were the protagonists and their ability to involve the audience in the emotions of the play. For the play to be effective, it is vital that the audience become able to share the sense of hysteria that dominates Salem, as well the fear and hatred of the manipulation of Abigail Williams and the helplessness of John Proctor as he struggles to save his wife from hanging for witchcraft and to save the integrity of his own name within the town. At this level, the performance by Zac Puplett in the lead role of John Proctor was particularly impressive. Through his acting, Puplett was able to convey the main theme of the play—conflict—to the audience so that it was able to share the dramatic tension generated by the plot. It is the inner conflict experienced by John Proctor, as well as his conflict with the church in the theocratic Puritan society of Salem, that forms the major aspect of the play. Puplett's emotionally charged performance went a long way towards securing the play's success.

These characters were strongly supported by the performances of the other characters around them. Particularly memorable was the courtroom scene in Act Three, where the conflict between characters as a result of the continuing witch hunt was brought to life by the supporting characters of the Reverend Hale (James McCluskey) and Deputy Governor Danforth (Christopher Kapiniaris) and the Reverend Parris (Elliott Berger). At the climax of the play, where the majority of the interpersonal conflicts of the play occur, it was vital that these characters were able to capture and present a realistic courtroom scene in which the impartiality of law comes into the conflict the raw emotions of those who are left fearful and angered by the madness they now witness. Proctor's emotional pleas made a profound contrast with Danforth's strict and impassive nature as he inexorably pursues the logic of the law to prosecute and punish the evil. Hale's increasing sense of guilt, which becomes apparent particularly in this scene, helped to establish the contrast required between the various characters in an effective and compelling manner.

The danger in having such a strong supporting cast is that they will overpower the performances of the lead characters. While Puplett was able to hold his own on stage, the same cannot be said of Phoebe Darlison, who played the antagonist Abigail Williams. That is not to say her performance was poor but, rather, that the performances by McCluskey and Kapiniaris, in particular, were that outstanding. Regardless, the play as a whole tended to suffer because Abigail's emotions were not fully explored as she manipulated the other girls within the village, which meant that a vital part of the play was not effectively conveyed to the audience.

Perhaps the weakest aspect of the play was that the pre-existing tension between village members, so evident in Miller's script, seemed to be understated in the performance. Central to the allegorical nature of *The Crucible* is that while there may be a catalyst, unless there exists a realistic understanding of the existence of witches, or Communists, and a corresponding belief in the threat they present, none of the events that follow could have occurred. That is, there has to be an underlying level of conflict that is only exacerbated by an event such as mysterious illnesses suffered by the various girls in the village. The clear disputes between Putnam and Proctor, or Proctor and

Parris, were discreet in the performance and the play would have benefited if some time had been taken to establish these pre-existing conflicts within the village in the opening of the play.

As a whole, at key moments during the play, the strength of the acting allowed the audience to understand the themes and emotions experienced by each character. In terms of an accurate emotional portrayal of Miller's play, it was the final Act that proved to be the most successful. It was clear that Puplett in his character of Proctor had a clear understanding of the play, in particular of the inner conflict his character must experience and, as a result, he was convincing in conveying to the audience the guilt his character must feel. The final Act and Puplett's role within it were particularly impressive because of the strong contrast he created. The emotional and strong Proctor, who agonises over the decision to confess and be damned, or keep his silence and maintain his good name, stands out against the more reserved Proctor who is clearly made anxious by the presence of Abigail during Act One.

While the strength of the cast was the primary reason for the success of the production, the staging of the play was also significant in the contribution it made to the production's overall success. The set, along with the props and costumes, added to the production's sense of realism. The staging and set was neither intrusive nor drew the audience's attention unnecessarily from the actors. The lighting itself was central to creating the sense of dramatic tension on stage; the scene that immediately springs to mind is the play's opening, where Tituba (Melahni Dean) and the village girls run onto the stage to dance in the forest and summon spirits. The lighting created a sense of expectation, excitement and mystery that enabled the play quickly to draw in the audience.

Overall, the actors, production team and both schools are to be congratulated on a powerful and convincing adaptation of Miller's classic play.

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