

'THE CRUCIBLE'

Arthur Miller's Dramatization of the Salem Witch Trial in 1692

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH opinions vary about details of the workmanship, Arthur Miller's new play, "The Crucible," has made a deep impression on the town. Put it down as the most notable new play by an American so far this season, for Mr. Miller has an independent mind, professional skill and personal courage. "The Crucible" is the story of the hysterical persecution of people accused of witchcraft in Salem in 1692 when fear paralyzed the judicial faculties of men in authority. Probably Mr. Miller has had to alter some of the details of the record to make a tidy play out of a big historical subject; and he has also made a few remarks in passing that apply specifically to the public intolerance of today. But fundamentally, "The Crucible" is a portrait of the terror and ferocity with which a few Americans, mostly God-fearing men, once accused each other of allegiance to the devil.

Terrible as this story may seem today, it is founded on fact. Things like this did happen in America in the seventeenth century. The time was ripe for an explosion. After about seventy years of religious and civil omnipotence, the Puritan theocracy was breaking up, for two new generations of colonial Americans had come to maturity and new settlers had come in. The mood was fanatical. The nearer the theocracy came to an end, the more desperately it insisted on conformity.

Historical Premise

Thirty years before the Salem trials the Puritans had hanged four Quakers in Boston for heresy. And at the time of the Salem trial even educated men like Cotton Mather accepted "satanic molestations," as he called them, as facts of nature. Everything was ready for the cruel frenzy that swept the town and came to a climax in the year of Mr. Miller's play.

As a matter of historical record, the community quickly recovered. The next year the Governor released from jail everyone accused of witchcraft. And five years later the jurors who had condemned their neighbors publicly confessed that they had been deluded. But that did not restore the lives of twenty innocent people who had been put to death for not confessing to something they knew to be a lie.

Since "The Crucible" is a play about bigotry, it has certain current significance. "Is the accuser always holy now?" John Proctor ironically inquires when the court looks with suspicion on all the evidence that bears on Goodie Proctor's innocence. But Mr. Miller is not delivering a polemic or offering "The Crucible" as a deadly parallel. For the difference between the Salem trial and the current hysteria is a fundamental one. There never were any witches. But there have been spies and traitors in recent days. All the Salem witches were victims of public fear. Beginning with Hiss, some of the people accused of treason and disloyalty today have been guilty.

In "The Crucible" the parallels are minor to the central horror of the witch-hunt in Salem; and they involve the irresponsibility and maliciousness of the accusers, the avidity with which most people accept the accusations as proof of guilt and the bias against anyone who defends the accused people. Obviously, Mr. Miller has these things in mind, for no one can write about bigotry today in a historical vacuum. But they are incidental to the play as a whole, which dramatizes a unique episode in American history long before the time of representative govern-

ment and the constitutional judicial system.

As a piece of dramatic writing, "The Crucible" is closer to Mr. Miller's "All My Sons" of 1947 than to his "Death of a Salesman" of 1949. "Death of a Salesman," which is Mr. Miller's own standard of theatre excellence, had epic form, which gave it latitude in its analysis of people, and it penetrated deep into the hearts of the characters.

In "The Crucible" Mr. Miller is more interested in his theme than in his people. Using the realistic form of "All My Sons," he tells the sweeping, tragic story of a momentous historical event that has left a scar on our history. Most of his characters are instruments of the action first and human beings with private lives and thoughts at second hand. John Proctor and his wife, Elizabeth, are the only people who really interest Mr. Miller. After a frenetic prologue, Mr. Miller finds a quiet interlude in which to present them at home and listen to their hopes and misgivings; and in the last act he brings them together again and searches their hearts for a word of civilized comfort in a barbaric storm.

Artistic Qualities

But he is so generally absorbed in the headlong rush of the story that he has difficulty in finding room for his chief characters. Perhaps that explains why "The Crucible" is a gripping and exciting play without much human warmth. It is swift and shrill but emotionally external. There is plenty of group madness in it, but less individual humanity. For Mr. Miller has not sufficiently mastered his material to forget the details of the story and surrender himself to the love and anguish of his people. His mind dominates this play, and it is a good mind. But he also has a good heart when he does not withhold it.

No doubt the over-wrought direction by Jed Harris is deliberate for a specific dramatic reason. He begins the performance at a high pitch of terror and suspicion; and, with the exception of the two scenes between the Proctors, he keeps it raging to the end. A master of the theatre, Mr. Harris does not set the key for a performance impulsively. But the pitch and tempo create dramatic excitement at the expense of the Puritan temperament, which, according to tradition, was cooler and more reserved. Although the performance is brilliantly organized and paced, it becomes a little tiresome before the play is over; and in the prologue it seems also to have the effect of overwhelming some of the plot motivation that a theatregoer needs in the next scene and next act.

Despite these fussy reservations, the whole production represents professional theatre on a much higher plane than most of the work done on Broadway. Boris Aronson's unsentimental settings enclose the play in the austere solidity of the Puritan tradition. The acting is passionately alive. As the deputy governor who presides over the trial, Walter Hampden plays with a towering fanaticism that is enormously effective, since it conveys the vengeful self-righteousness of the true theocrat.

In the central parts of John Proctor and his wife, Arthur Kennedy and Beatrice Straight give superb performances. These parts have true perspective in the writing because Mr. Miller admires these people. Through the understanding and skill of the acting, Mr. Kennedy and Miss Straight have created two admirable characters who set a moral standard.

Out of a dark episode in American history Mr. Miller has written a fiery play.