

THE CRUCIBLE

US, 1996, d. Nicholas Hytner



Salem 1692. Reverend Paris discovers some girls dancing in the woods at night, including his daughter and his niece, Abigail Williams, indulging in strange rituals. There are rumors in the town of witchcraft.

The Reverend John Hale comes to examine the girls who blame the servant Tituba for casting spells over them. Paris beats Tituba and she 'confesses'. Then she and the girls begin to name other people in the village as involved with the Devil.

Abigail is a leader and pressurises the girls to name names as well as to go into trances. But she is also motivated by her anger at being rejected by farmer, John Proctor, a married man with a family, with whom she had an affair when she worked for him. Hearing the accusations, John, with his wife, Elizabeth's support, goes to the authorities to denounce Abigail.

Abigail then plots against Elizabeth towards whom she is resentful. A doll with a needle is found in the Proctor house and Abigail claims that Elizabeth has wounded her by witchcraft. Elizabeth is silent before Judge Danforth hoping to protect John's reputation, but this confirms the accusations and he is arrested.

Hysteria continues in the village with many accused and hanged (and their property acquired by upright citizens). Abigail, failing to persuade John to leave with her goes to Boston. Hale tries to persuade Elizabeth to save John by having him 'confess'. He does. But then, in self-respect, he recants this confession and is hanged.

Arthur Miller's 1953 classic touched a nerve with its symbolising the witchhunt atmosphere of the McCarthy era. Here it is given 1990s treatment with a screenplay by Miller himself - 81 at the time of the movie's release - and directed by, Nicholas Hytner from the London theatre, whose film directing debut was *The Madness of King George*. The film is visually striking, wild Massachusetts locations for the 1692 setting of Salem village.

The witchcraft trials of Salem have made an indelible mark on the American psyche. A religiously puritan community, faced with some of the young girls of the remote village dancing in the woods and playing at spells, unleashed a movement of fanaticism and superstition, of persecution and manipulative court cases and executions that have become a symbol for a righteous community revealed has having a destructive and dark side. Winona Ryder is believable as Abigail Williams, the sexually aware servant whose malevolence grows as she controls the justice in Salem.

Miller has emphasised the 'sexual politics' as well as the communal fanaticism in this version. But his portrait of the 'Everyman', John Proctor, is a fine exploration of an ordinary man, a sinning man, a repenting man, a man who finds his integrity. The final sequence, with its religious imagery and prayer, is jolting.

Daniel Day Lewis gives yet another different, strong performance as Proctor, matched by Joan Allen as his wife, who is not the merely shrewish woman of some interpretations. Paul Scofield is Judge Danforth who embodies the contradictions in Puritan religion and justice. Both Lewis and Scofield have some powerful speeches in what Hytner calls Arthur Miller's 'sculpted prose'. The Crucible is as relevant as it was in the 1950s and is a warning that true religious discernment is needed rather than egocentric and fundamentalist righteousness.