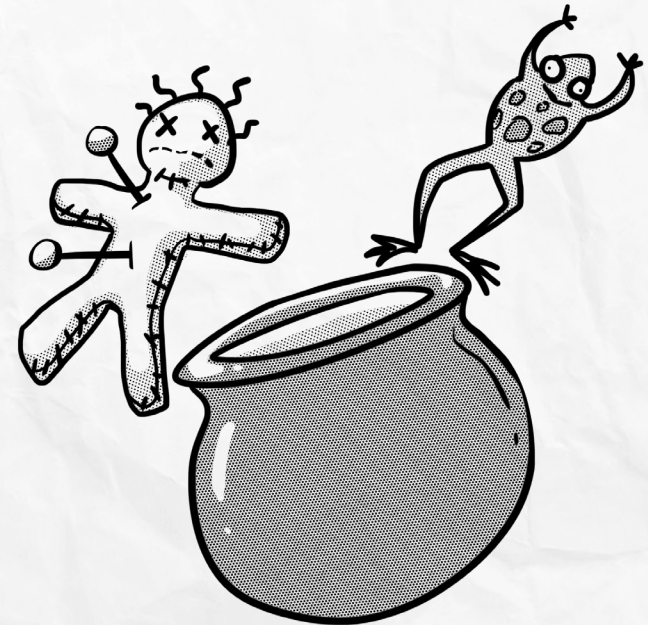
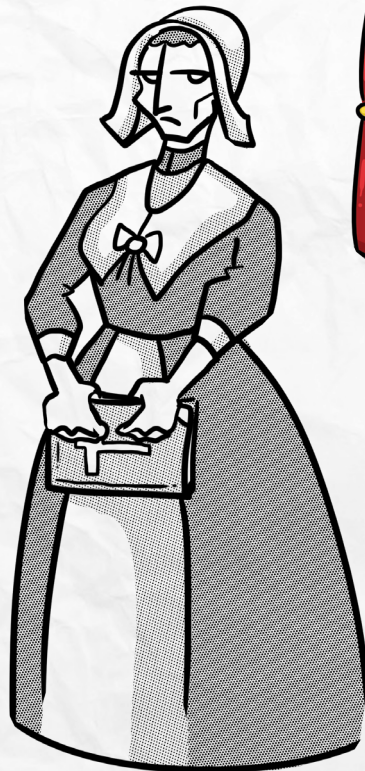
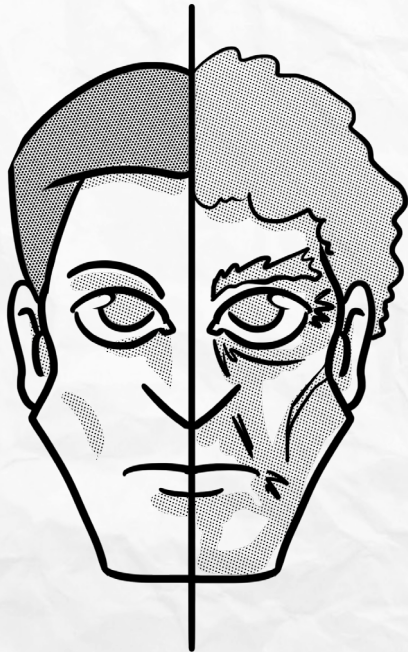
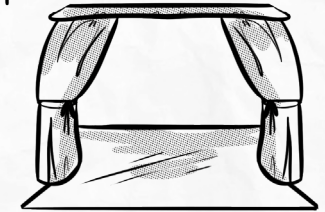
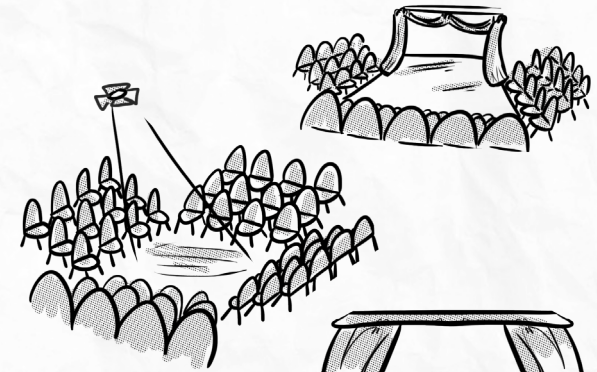


The Crucible

Arthur Miller



ThinkIT

Period / Location

The play is set in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, only 70 years after the early settlers arrived from Britain. It is a simple, religious, rural community relying largely on farming for survival. Discuss how these factors would influence your use of **costume** (fabrics, lines, use of colour etc.), **set, props** etc. How would the period and location of the play impact on the vocal accent that the actors should use?

Stage Directions

Whilst the dialogue in a play informs us what is **said**, the stage directions inform us what is **happening** on the stage. Often actors/directors are guilty of ignoring the playwright's stage directions. Arthur Miller, however, was insistent that his stage directions were accurately followed and viewed them as an intrinsic part of the play. Stage directions in "The Crucible" are extensive, detailed and full of historical information about the characters' backgrounds, motives and personalities. As an actor, consider how you would use your physical and vocal skills to carry out the following stage directions:

In Act 1, as Parris prays, **a sense of his confusion hangs about him. He mumbles, then seems about to weep, then he weeps, then prays again.** How would you interpret this?

In Act 2, Proctor moves to kiss his wife. She **receives** it. How would you interpret **receiving** as opposed to **responding to** or **recoiling from** a kiss and what is the significance of this?

In Act 4, when Proctor agrees to give his confession and he cannot bear his wife's response, the stage directions read – **He moves as an animal, and a fury is riding in him, a tantalized search.** In what way might he 'move as an animal'?

The Plot

Unusually, Miller also gives us an insight into the various characters, most of whom are based on real people, by interspersing the dialogue with detailed and intriguing descriptions (usually on their first appearance in the play) which can be invaluable to the performer.

Consider, for example, how you would incorporate the following in your interpretation of the role:

Mrs Putnam:
"A twisted soul of forty-five, a death-ridden woman, haunted by dreams."

Abigail Williams:
"A strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling."

Danforth:
"A grave man in his sixties, of some humour and sophistication that does not, however, interfere with an exact loyalty to his position and his cause."

Religion / Witchcraft

The early settlers brought with them the religion and lifestyle of Oliver Cromwell's God-fearing, Puritan society. The church was central in the life of the community and suspicion would fall upon anyone who didn't attend church regularly or was seen to work on Sundays.

"In the book of record that Mr Parris keeps, I note that you are rarely in church on Sabbath Day." "I – I have once or twice plowed on Sunday. I have three children, sir, and until last year my land gave little."

People were viewed as belonging either to God or the devil, hence the fear of witchcraft and widespread superstition. Do some background research on signs or indications of witchcraft at the time in which the play is set. How were so-called witches punished? List the 'perceived' indications of witchcraft in the play.

Staging

The four acts of the play take place in four different locations: a bedroom in the home of Reverend Parris, the home of John and Elizabeth Proctor, the vestry room of the Salem meeting house and a jail cell. Consider how, as a set designer, you might represent these four different areas for the audience. How would you adapt your plans for staging that is end-on, thrust, in-the-round or traverse/in-the-corridor?

Politics, McCarthy and the Communist Trials

Miller wrote his play in the USA during the 1950s against a background of the Communist trials instigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy in which many writers, actors and other creatives – including Miller himself – were implicated. These were fuelled by a largely irrational fear of 'reds under the bed' and the play represents a direct allegory of the situation. Research the McCarthy trials and consider how and why Miller has made the link with the Salem witch hunts. Can you think of any situations in modern society where similar parallels could be drawn? As a group, devise a drama based around one of these situations.

Make-up

Consider the different factors you would need to bear in mind when designing the make-up for characters in the play. For example, some characters, such as Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey are quite elderly and yet, in a school production, your cast are likely to be considerably younger. Research how to use stage make-up to 'age' a younger face. How might other factors such as lighting and the proximity of the audience affect your designs?

Consider how make-up might be used to show or emphasise the following:

- John Proctor is a farmer who spends the majority of his time working out of doors.
- Elizabeth, in Act 4 is wearing dirty clothes and is described as 'pale and gaunt' having spent some time in jail.
- Proctor, in the same scene is described as 'bearded, filthy, his eyes misty as though webs had overgrown them.'

Note: It is important that no-one in the play should **appear** to be wearing make-up which would have been frowned upon in Puritan society.

Status

Status and power – particularly the acquisition of power – are important themes in the play. What gives a person power or status? Physical strength? Wealth? Intelligence? Other factors? Order the following groups of people from high to low status. Compare your list with that of a partner and discuss your reasoning.

- Elizabeth Proctor; Mary Warren; Reverend Parris; Abigail Williams; Thomas Putnam
- Tituba; John Proctor; Giles Corey; Deputy Governor Danforth; Judge Hathorne
- Mercy Lewis; Ann Putnam; Marshall Herrick; Reverend Hale; Rebecca Nurse

Discuss how, as an actor, you can convey high or low status in a scene using: voice, movement, posture, gesture/mannerism, facial expression, proxemics, positioning on the stage, levels etc.

Mass Hysteria

Mass hysteria plays a huge role in the play and in so many people being accused of, and often hung for, the crime of witchcraft. People, and particularly young girls, get 'caught up in the moment' and, heavily influenced by Abigail (who has her own motives), behave in ways they wouldn't under normal circumstances. Hysteria can be an incredibly powerful force – many of the girls would not have been 'acting' in a conventional sense but probably genuinely convinced themselves that Mary Warren had 'sent her spirit on them' in the form of a cold wind or that a huge yellow bird was stretching its claws and about to attack them. Betty Parris goes into a self-induced coma and Mary Warren is able to faint at will. When, under different circumstances, it is demanded that she 'Faint!' without the influence of the group, and particularly Abigail, she cannot.

"I heard the other girls screaming, and you, Your Honour, you seemed to believe them, and I

... it were only sport in the beginning, sir, but then the whole world cried spirits, spirits and I

... I promise you, Mr Danforth, I only thought I saw them but I did not."

"Folks are brought before them, and if they scream and howl and fall to the floor - the person's clapped in jail for bewitchin' them."

Consider and discuss other situations where aspects of 'mass hysteria' play a part, and where people may act in a way which is 'out of character':

Young girls screaming, crying and fainting at a pop concert.

Mob rule erupting into violence at a football match.

In biblical times, crowds incited to call for the crucifixion of Jesus at his trial before Pilate.