

"Why I Wrote *The Crucible*"

Essay

By: Arthur Miller

Date: 1996

Source: Miller, Arthur. "Why I Wrote *The Crucible*." *The New Yorker*, October 21 and 28, 1996, 158–164.

About the Author: Playwright Arthur Miller (1915–) was born in New York. He worked numerous odd jobs from truck driving to singing for a radio show before he studied journalism and playwriting. During the 1940s he produced a series of popular radio plays. His Pulitzer Prize-winning *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is one of America's best known dramatic works. He was married to Marilyn Monroe from 1956 to 1961. In 1957, Miller was convicted for contempt of Congress because he refused to divulge names of associates who were suspected Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and he was blacklisted from Hollywood. The conviction was eventually reversed. Miller has also written screenplays, essays, and short stories. His only novel, *Focus*, was published in 1945. ■

Introduction

The Crucible is both a tragedy and an allegory based on actual events and persons. The play opens with a scene of teenaged girls dancing naked around a bonfire in the woods. The girls are discovered by an adult, Reverend Parris, who suspects them of wrongdoing. Urged to confess their sins, the girls place blame on the witches living among them. Abigail Williams, the group's ringleader, points to Elizabeth, wife of John Proctor and her rival for his affections. Proctor has long regretted his adulterous affair with Abigail, but she continues to pursue him. Tension and anxiety overwhelm the citizens of the town, as false confessions and finger pointing lead to deaths of the innocent. The play is written in authentic seventeenth-century English for which Miller enlisted the assistance of his former classmate, poet and scholar Kimon Friar.

In developing his script, when Miller visited Salem in 1952 he immediately realized the parallels between Salem in 1692 and the then-current United States. Salem citizens were replaced by actors; witches were replaced by Communists; McCarthy and the HUAC were the so-called pillars of the community condemning those suspected of leftist activity.

The play debuted on Broadway in 1953. Some derided the play as a flawed parable of the Communist witch hunts. Famously, Elia Kazan's wife said to Arthur Miller that there were never any witches but there certainly were Communists. Elia Kazan had directed award-winning productions of Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, but their differences regarding the legitimacy of

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AUDIO AND VISUAL MEDIA

Biography: Dorothy Dandridge: Little Girl Lost. A&E Home Video. Videocassette, 1999.

Introducing Dorothy Dandridge. Directed by Martha Coolidge. HBO Home Video. Videocassette, 1999.

the HUAC ruptured their friendship. Kazan appeared before HUAC in the spring of 1952, after which Miller refused to speak to Kazan, considering him an informer. Kazan was conspicuously not invited to direct *The Crucible* for its Broadway debut in 1953.

Significance

The Crucible remains widely read in the early twenty-first century, and is considered one of Miller’s most powerful works. The play is especially riveting because of the intense personal relationships among its central characters. It was an 1867 study by Charles W. Upham (Salem’s then-mayor) that moved Miller to create a drama exploring such emotions as hysteria, anguish, remorse and courage. Other historical accounts of what had happened during the Salem witch hunts might be rich in facts and analysis, but Miller’s fictional account of the lives at stake brought home to a contemporary public what it must have been like then—as well as the terror felt by the targets of the Communist witch hunts.

Miller’s writing has often been celebrated for his unflinching examinations of human character in moments of both moral weakness and moral strength. Miller’s essay of reflections on his work is a valuable contribution to the study of the political in art. Miller reiterates his affinity for the John Proctor character, who would rather die than give false testimony. Miller was willing to testify before the HUAC about his own leftist activities, but would not name others involved. The playwriting of *The Crucible* was also an artistic processing of the personal as well as political. Miller hints at his own marital infidelities and subsequent regret that are again paralleled in John Proctor.

More than five decades after its composition, *The Crucible* remains as powerful as when the specter of McCarthyism colored its every analysis. The play’s artistic impact lies in its complex development of characters and the sheer drama of Miller’s brilliant storytelling. Miller’s fascination with legal language—he followed Senate hearings very closely—also inspired the style of the dialogue in *The Crucible*. Although contemporary audiences may experience Miller’s play as period drama, he is ever astute in bringing to the audience’s awareness that at any time, somewhere in the world, there are ongoing witch hunts of some kind. In the instance of *The Crucible*, the artistic is inherently political, but at its root is an unshakeable social concern.

Primary Source

“Why I Wrote *The Crucible*.” [excerpt]

SYNOPSIS: Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* in 1952 largely in response to McCarthyism. *The Crucible* is

set in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Rumors of witchcraft throughout the town lead to accusations, roundups, and forced confessions. Eventually the innocent were sent to the gallows. Miller compared the hysteria of the Salem witch hunts centuries earlier to the outing of alleged Communists during his own lifetime. Miller’s essay “Why I Wrote *The Crucible*” was written on the occasion of the play’s first Hollywood adaptation, a little more than forty years after *The Crucible* and ironically, Miller’s blacklisting by Hollywood.

As I watched “The Crucible” taking shape as a movie over much of the past year, the sheer depth of time that it represents for me kept returning to my mind. As those powerful actors blossomed on the screen, and the children and the horses, the crowds and the wagons, I thought again about how I came to cook all this up nearly fifty years ago, in an America nobody I know seems to remember clearly. In a way, there is a biting irony in this film’s having been made by a Hollywood studio, something unimaginable in the fifties. . . .

“The Crucible” was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma—the blow struck on the mind by the rise of European Fascism and the brutal anti-Semitism it had brought to power. But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors’ violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly.

Nobody but a fanatic, it seemed, could really say all that he believed.

. . . The Red hunt, led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by McCarthy, was becoming the dominating fixation of the American psyche. It reached Hollywood when the studios, after first resisting, agreed to submit artists’ names to the House Committee for “clearing” before employing them. This unleashed a veritable holy terror among actors, directors, and others, from Party members to those who had had the merest brush with a front organization.

. . . Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures, did something that would once have been considered unthinkable: he showed my script to the F.B.I. Cohn then asked me to take the gangsters in my script, who were threatening and murdering their

opponents, and simply change them to Communists. When I declined to commit this idiocy (Joe Ryan, the head of the longshoremen's union, was soon to go to Sing Sing for racketeering), I got a wire from Cohn saying "The minute we try to make the script pro-American you pull out." By then—it was 1951—I had come to accept this terribly serious insanity as routine, but there was an element of the marvellous in it which I longed to put on the stage.

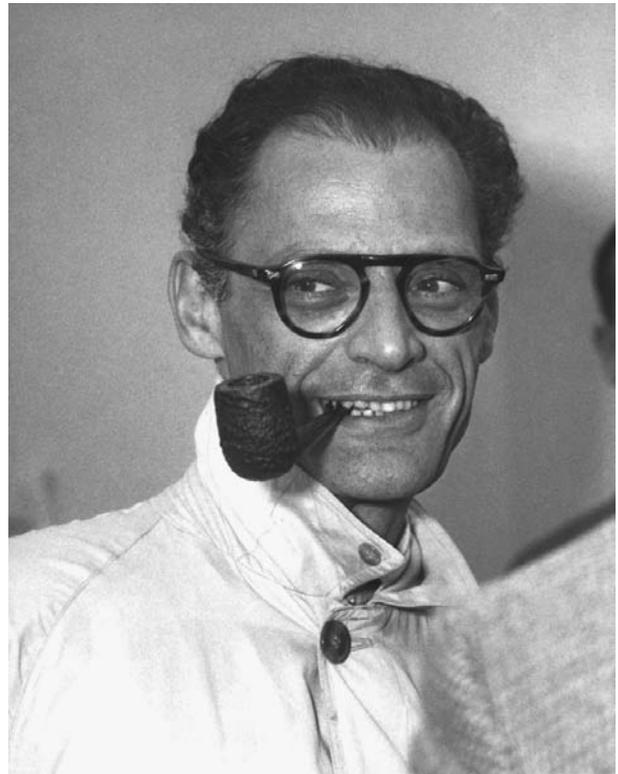
In those years, our thought processes were becoming so magical, so paranoid, that to imagine writing a play about this environment was like trying to pick one's teeth with a ball of wool: I lacked the tools to illuminate miasma. Yet I kept being drawn back to it.

I had read about the witchcraft trials in college, but it was not until I read a book published in 1867—a two-volume, thousand-page study by Charles W. Upham, who was then the mayor of Salem—that I knew I had to write about the period. Upham had not only written a broad and thorough investigation of what was even then an almost lost chapter of Salem's past but opened up to me the details of personal relationships among many participants in the tragedy. . . .

All this I understood. I had not approached the witchcraft out of nowhere, or from purely social and political considerations. My own marriage of twelve years was teetering and I knew more than I wished to know about where the blame lay. That John Proctor the sinner might overturn his paralyzing personal guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him was a reassurance to me, and, I suppose, an inspiration: it demonstrated that a clear moral outcry could still spring even from an ambiguously unblemished soul. Moving crabwise across the profusion of evidence, I sensed that I had at last found something of myself in it, and a play began to accumulate around this man.

But as the dramatic form became visible, one problem remained unyielding: so many practices of the Salem trials were similar to those employed by the congressional committees that I could easily be accused of skewing history for a mere partisan purpose. Inevitably, it was no sooner known that my new play was about Salem than I had to confront the charge that such an analogy was specious—that there never were any witches but there certainly were Communists. . . .

The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding images of common ex-



Playwright Arthur Miller wrote successful plays such as *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. © BETTMANN/CORBIS. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

periences in the fifties: the old friend of a black-listed person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. Apparently, certain processes are universal. When Gentiles in Hitler's Germany, for example, saw their Jewish neighbors being trucked off, or farmers in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks vanishing before their eyes, the common reaction, even among those unsympathetic to Nazism or Communism, was quite naturally to turn away in fear of being identified and condemned. As I learned from non-Jewish refugees, however, there was often a despairing pity mixed with "Well, they must have done *something*." Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied.

I was also drawn into writing "The Crucible" by the chance it gave me to use a new language—that of the seventeenth-century New England. That plain, craggy English was liberating in a strangely sensuous way, with its swings from an almost legalistic

precision to a wonder metaphoric richness. "The Lord doth terrible things amongst us, by lengthening the chain of the roaring lion in an extraordinary manner, so that the Devil is come down in great wrath," Deodat Lawson, one of the great witch-hunting preachers, said in a sermon. Lawson rallied his congregation for what was to be nothing less than a religious war against the Evil One—"Arm, arm, arm!"—and his concealed anti-Christian accomplices. . . .

I am not sure what "The Crucible" is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties. For some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I'd not dreamed of forty years ago. For others, it may simply be a fascination with the outbreak of paranoia that suffuses the play—the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness. Certainly its political implications are the central issue for many people; the Salem interrogations turn out to be eerily exact models of those yet to come in Stalin's Russia, Pinochet's Chile, Mao's China, and other regimes. (Nien Cheng, the author of "Life and Death in Shanghai," has told me that she could hardly believe that a non-Chinese—someone who had not experienced the Cultural Revolution—had written the play.) But below its concerns with justice the play evokes a lethal brew of illicit sexuality, fear of the supernatural, and political manipulation, a combination not unfamiliar these days. The film, by reaching the broad American audiences as no play ever can, may well unearth still other connections to those buried public terrors that Salem first announced on this continent.

One thing more—something wonderful in the old sense of the word. I recall the weeks I spent reading testimony by the tome, commentaries, broadsides, confessions, and accusations. And always the crucial damning event was the signing of one's name in "the Devil's book." This Faustian agreement to hand over one's soul to the dreaded Lord of Darkness was the ultimate insult to God. But what were these new inductees supposed to have *done* once they'd signed on? Nobody seems even to have thought to ask. But, of course, actions are as irrelevant during cultural and religious wars as they are in nightmares. The thing at issue is buried intentions—the secret allegiances of the alienated heart, always the main threat to the theocratic mind, as well as its immemorial quarry.

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AUDIO AND VISUAL MEDIA

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Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina

Autobiography

By: Maria Tallchief

Date: 1997

Source: Tallchief, Maria, and Larry Kaplan. *Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997, 185–190.

About the Artist: Maria Tallchief (1925–), ballerina and dance teacher, was a major force in bringing international fame and prestige to American ballet. Tallchief was born in Fairfax, Oklahoma, the daughter of an Osage chief. Her grandfather is credited with negotiating the Osage Treaty, which created the Osage Reservation in Oklahoma and resulted in oil revenues for some Osage people. Tallchief began dancing at age four. She studied with and was briefly married to legendary choreographer George Balanchine (1904–1983) of the New York City Ballet. She was its prima ballerina for eighteen years. Tallchief retired from dancing in 1965. ■

Introduction

Based on a story by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Nutcracker* begins at a bourgeois Christmas