

AFTERWORD

(To be printed in the program.)

In 2022, the last accused witch from Salem was finally pardoned, three hundred and twenty-nine years after her conviction; Massachusetts lawmakers were spurred on by an eighth grade Civics class. In Scotland, a bill is now before Parliament to formally pardon the four thousand accused witches (mostly women) who were tortured and killed there. It seems that *Becky Nurse of Salem* is coming at the right time.

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I started writing this play in 2016 after Trump was elected, and after seeing a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, when I started to wonder if the depiction of a lustful, deceitful young woman named Abigail stank of fabrication.

Often, a playwright has both a public way into a play and a private way into a play. Ostensibly, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* was about McCarthyism and the blacklist. But privately it was about Miller's guilt at wanting to sleep with Marilyn Monroe. This bit of truth was passed on to me by the brilliant playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. We were talking about *The Crucible* over a glass of wine at a retreat in Princeton. I was explaining to Branden that I'd recently experienced some rage after seeing a production of *The Crucible*. My rage had nothing to do with its being a masterpiece or not a masterpiece - I think it *is* a masterpiece - but, instead, with my sense that the whole concept of witchery had been redirected toward girls' desires for older married men, which felt like an enormous historical imposition.

"Oh," Branden said. "Didn't you know that Arthur Miller wanted to get with Marilyn Monroe when he wrote that play and he felt guilty about it because

he was married and she was young?" I did not. But watching the brilliant documentary Rebecca Miller made about her father, and reading *Timebends*, I saw that, indeed, Miller struggled with his feelings for the younger Marilyn Monroe during the writing of *The Crucible*. Of course, the play was also very much a parable about McCarthyism, about his friend Elia Kazan's betrayal – but the heat of the play is the lust of John Proctor for Abigail Williams. Miller said that he saw a painting of the trials in Salem – of Abigail Williams reaching her hand toward John Proctor – and found a passage about her hand having a burning sensation when it touched Proctor. That was Miller's way in. The real Abigail Williams was eleven years old. In the play, Miller made her seventeen. The real John Proctor was a sixty-year-old tavern keeper. Miller made him an upright farmer, age thirty-five. The real Abigail Williams never turned to prostitution; Miller writes, in *Echoes Down the Corridor*, that legend has it that Abigail grew up to be a whore in Boston. There is no evidence for that line of thinking, nor is there any evidence that she and John Proctor knew each other before the witch trials.

Playwrights deserve the creative liberty to enter their plays with all their emotional heat and history. I do not begrudge anyone a love story, real or fictional. After all, as my friend Ezra (the self-proclaimed maker of the best falafel in the Western world) once told me, every good story must contain a love story. I suppose what strikes me as fundamentally dishonest about *The Crucible* is the mixture of fact and fiction; the copious historical notes, unusually embedded in the stage directions, lead us to believe that we are watching actual history unfold. But we are watching what we always watch onstage – a psychic drama from the mind of a complicated individual relating his psyche to humankind's larger, collective unconscious. That *The Crucible* is performed at almost every high school, and

is in fact the way American girls and boys understand the history of Salem, added to my frustration. I thought, All those bonnets, all those Goody Sarahs, and, really, Arthur Miller just wanted to have sex with Marilyn Monroe! I thought, All those women died, but John Proctor was the hero of the story. I thought, to this day, no one knows why the girls engaged in mass hysteria, but it probably was not the lust of one duplicitous eleven-year-old for a middle-aged barkeep. For all of these logical reasons, I thought that I would end up writing my own historical drama about the Salem witch trials, but every time I tried to dip my toe into the seventeenth century my pen came back and told me to stay in my own era. Perhaps because I felt dwarfed by the long shadow cast by Arthur Miller's mastery. Or perhaps I wanted to stay in the present moment because I have been undone and fascinated by the language of the witch hunt used by Donald Trump from his campaign, in which he whipped crowds into a frenzy, yelling "Lock her up!", with those crowds often replying, "Hang the bitch!", to his term in office, during which he has used the expression "witch hunt" hundreds of times, describing himself as the victim. Not since the burning of witches in Europe has the iconography of witchery been used with such base hypocrisy and to such effect.

Although most contemporary historians have dismissed the rye-bread explanation for the symptoms of hysteria in Salem as sheer folly, we do know that rye was rare in the New World, and that it was shipped from Europe, often molding on the long journey. And we also know that Tituba fed rye bread mixed with urine to the girls, trying to get to the bottom of their maladies. It would be ironic if the "cure" for witchcraft was actually a biological deepening and intensifying of the girls' symptoms, which would have subsided on their own after St. Anthony's fire left their bodies. Most contemporary historians eschew a biological

explanation, preferring post-traumatic stress from the American Indian Wars, property disputes, and the like as more feasible. I don't know that we'll ever understand why those girls accused their elders of witchcraft. But what we do know is that the accusations were *not* a function of the lust Abigail Williams had for John Proctor.

Speaking of Tituba and the American Indian Wars, I think the historical characters of Tituba and John Indian deserve new plays of their very own. (Two contemporary novels have already been written about Tituba.) Apparently, Tituba may not have come from Barbados, as *The Crucible* suggests, but was, instead, from South America, a member of the Arawak tribe. The magic she was asked to do was not native to Barbados but was European witchcraft already known to the white women who asked her to perform it. The "othering" of Tituba throughout the ages, and the great mystery surrounding her own desires and intentions, deserve investigation. I did not think that story was mine to write.

A note on the opioid crisis. Massachusetts is one of ten states that have the highest casualties for opioid overdoses in the country. In 2017, there were twenty-eight deaths per one hundred thousand people in Massachusetts. Sixty-four thousand Americans died of opioid overdoses in 2016, more than died in automobile accidents. It is the largest preventable cause of death for people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. This cluster has created what some call a lost generation, flooding the foster care system with their children. The greatest increase in opioid deaths has been attributed to synthetic opioids like fentanyl. In a bizarre Karmic loop, or bitter irony, the nineteenth-century opium trade with China, which destroyed many Chinese citizens, greatly enriched Boston. The money from the trade even helped finance cultural

institutions, such as hospitals and libraries in Boston, as well as the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. Even in nineteenth-century Boston, doctors like Dr. Fitch Edward Oliver warned against the dangers of opium, particularly for women:

"Doomed, often, to a life of disappointment, and, it may be, of physical and mental inaction, and in the smaller and more remote towns...deprived of all wholesome social diversion, it is not strange that nervous depression, with all its concomitant evils, should sometimes follow, - opium being discreetly selected as the safest and most agreeable remedy."

The current focus on the opioid crisis, which disproportionately affects white Americans, is in stark contrast to the lack of attention, empathy, and resources being directed toward public-health crises that feature fewer white faces on posters.

As for St. Anthony's fire, the disease comes from ergot - a poison produced by a fungus that grows on rye. The condition was named for St. Anthony, who was pursued by hallucinations of the Devil in the desert and resisted. Acute and chronic ergotism lead to convulsions, pain in the extremities, and delusions. LSD was originally synthesized from ergot, and medications derived from the fungus are used to treat migraines and Parkinson's disease. I don't wish to add to conspiracy theories by writing this play, nor do I want to ignore a biological explanation for hysteria.

If we are to insist on fact, it should be noted that Gallows Hill does indeed appear to be at the site overlooking a Walgreens in Salem, not a Dunkin' Donuts. Some townspeople and amateur sleuths have claimed that the original site is now a Dunkin' Donuts (a strange fact that led me down the rabbit hole of this play), but the Walgreens was designated in 2016 as the most probable site of the executions. Much of

the evidence was wiped away in an attempt to forget, and one of the few historical sites still preserved is the Rebecca Nurse Homestead, in Danvers.

I did a reading of this play on July 19th, in Poughkeepsie, and a descendant of Rebecca Nurse, who worked at the theater, wanted to mark the day; in 1692, July 19th was the day that Rebecca Nurse, Sarah Good, and three other women were hanged. Before she died, Nurse said, "Oh, Lord, help me! It is false! I am clear. For my life now lies in your hands." On July 19th, before the reading, we performed a ritual at a very large tree – it is said to have the largest self-supporting branch of any tree in the United States. I cannot tell you what we did around that tree. Today, August 19th, is the day that John Proctor was hanged. John Proctor, also an innocent victim, became the cultural symbol of the witch trials (rather than the large group of women who were put to death) as a result of Arthur Miller's outsized success in turning Proctor into a tragic hero.

Arthur Miller once lived in my neighborhood. Maybe we heard the same fog horns from the water in Brooklyn Heights while thinking about witches. There is a public way into a play and a private way in, like a worm turning over the earth. Earthworms are blind. So, frequently, are writers, especially when they're in the midst of writing. Often, a playwright will never recognize the private way into a play. Sometimes the playwright knows and keeps it secret. Sometimes the playwright does not know while writing but realizes, with some embarrassment, at the first preview, and blushes. Sometimes the playwright does not know while writing but realizes ten years later, and, like the great Arthur Miller, writes about it in a very thick memoir. Let playwrights have their secrets, their private lusts, their compulsions – but do let us free Abigail Williams from her manufactured lust for John Proctor. When John Proctor says, "It is a whore!" and the "it" is a child

called Abigail, let us consider that the real historical child was neither an "it" nor a whore.

As for my own private reason for writing this particular play, I either don't know or I will never tell.

– Sarah Ruhl