

The Crucible was written when America was hunting communists. **Nicholas de Jongh** reports on the National's cool revival of a play that still ought to burn

Body heat of the Puritans

SINCE witch-hunting and scape-goating remain two of mankind's most famous blood sports, with the weak, the unpopular and the vulnerable as the usual victims, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is perpetually of our time.

Although the play is set in late 17th century New England, where a troupe of hysterical girls are the direct cause of a witch-hunt which ends in hangings and ruined lives, its heart is in early 1950s. For it was in that cold-war phase of anxiety when Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee persuaded the country into a witch-hunt of his own against communists and communist sympathisers.

The play, the best by this otherwise overrated playwright, therefore, works through an apt forceful analogy between the America of the 1690s and 1950s, in a kind of

double focus and with double affect. It is also one of the modern theatre's most powerful examples of humanism triumphant: the final scene, when the adulterous John Proctor goes to the gallows rather than affirm his belief in the potency of witches raises a great theatrical candle for those who put conscience before state or religious uniformity. In such circumstances I was disappointed to come away so cool from Howard Davies's revival, the first of two National productions which will mark Miller's 75th birthday.

Laurence Olivier's definitive Old Vic production 25 years ago captured the play's sense of simmering hysteria and accumulated guilts, of a repressed sexuality in a high Puritan environment at last flaring up in the fires of accusation and apparent possession, of a community and even families set against each other. It is just

these emphases that Davies fails to discover. The slightly torpid production lacks a developed and developing emotional environment. Its climate is lucid but medium-cool. And Peter Salem's ghostly fluttering music seems both extraneous and intrusive. At least William Dudley's meticulously elaborate staging strives for a sense of New England by providing a series of fresh wood domestic interiors, with a two tier wooden framework for the final court scenes, which rise up upon the revolving stage.

But any production depends firstly upon a secret sexual network, of actual and desired associations, upon young Abigail Williams, the servant girl to whom the unhappily married John Proctor briefly succumbed, Mary Warren the latest serving girl and on John's wretched wife Elizabeth. The play then brings this stirred eroticism to the fatal blaze in

the Court room where Deputy Governor Danforth calmly puts the rule of law to such terrible use. Paul Shelley's preposterously hysterical Judge ruins the sense of judicial gravity and dispassion gradually subverted.

And eroticism fizzles here. Clare Holman's Abigail, pert and spirited and her troop of possessed young girls do not impart sufficient sexual undercurrents or fervent emotionalism. And though Tom Wilkinson's John Proctor acquires a true dishevelled desperation, vehemently fine in his late confession of lechery it is the peripheral citizenry, Michael Bryant's brilliantly stolid example of Puritan self-assurance and Elizabeth Bradley's doomed old matriarch, who bring the witch-hunt into shocking close up.



Serving her master: Julia Ford at the National DOUGLAS JEFFERY

Festival Hall

Meirion Bowen

BBC Welsh SO

IT'S high time the BBC and South Bank publicity departments did something for the BBC orchestras that perform at the Festival Hall so often to

Accompanying Howard Shelley in Gershwin's Piano Concerto, the orchestra coped easily with the fast cross rhythms of the Charleston-inspired first movement, but the slower reflective episodes also sounded heartfelt. Shelley himself was convincing above all in the restless variations of pace that occur in the bluesy middle movement, where the solos for

Drive, "upscale lifestyle".

Belinda Carlisle is a blue-stocking pop star who leaves no unpleasant after-taste. The trouble with this Wembley appearance was that she left almost no impression at all.

Belinda was a member of the Go-Gos, the apparently pure and innocent all-girl band who eventually disintegrated in a fog of substance abuse and

more glittery.

Her music is tightly-arranged adult pop, with additional dancing and harmonies from a couple of girl extras, and a touch of Cal-kitch in the form of a cellist. La Luna was a Spanish shuffle, Vision Of You was tender and sentimental (and would have been more so without the earth-moving drums), Shades Of Michelangelo a medi-

de Jongh on The Crucible

Clipped By:



ianharris

Sun, Jan 3, 2021