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Outdoor setting enhances The Crucible

Percy shines as husband struggling with consequences, scandal of adultery

By ANDREA NEMETZ Entertainment Reporter

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In a scene from Two Planks and a Passion Theatre's outdoor production of The Crucible are, from left: Katie Swift as Abigail, Andrea-Lee Norwood as Susannah, Margaret Legere as Betty and

Alexis Milligan as Mercy Lewis, with Leete Stetson as Marshal Herrick standing behind them. The Crucible runs at the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts near Canning at 6 p.m. Tuesdays to Sundays until Aug. 8. (Rene Pierre Allain)

The saying "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" is vividly brought to life in The Crucible.

Two Planks and a Passion Theatre's powerful outdoor staging of Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama at the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts in Canning bursts with anger, hurt, jealousy, pride and ambition.

Although the setting is Salem, Mass., during the 1692 witch trials, it is evident that, at heart, people have changed little.

And the scheming, manipulative Abigail Williams, who sets events in motion with more rapidly spiralling consequences than she expects, could be straight out of any number of reality TV shows from Survivor to The Bachelor.

The play, directed by Two Planks' co-founder Ken Schwartz, opens as a group of young girls watch Tituba, a Barbados-raised servant, prepare a charm for the wily Abigail designed to get rid of Abigail's

sworn enemy, Elizabeth Proctor.

While working for Elizabeth, Abigail had a brief affair with Elizabeth's husband, John, and although she was dismissed after Elizabeth learns of the affair, Abigail's passion for John remains undiminished.

As Abby drinks what appears to be blood, her friends get caught up in the spookiness of the situation and begin dancing like beings possessed before they are discovered by Abigail's uncle, the status-conscious Rev. Samuel Parris, whose daughter Betty falls into a mysterious coma.

Rumours quickly spread through the small farming community that Betty had tried to fly and the seeds of suspicion that witchcraft is in place are planted. They will later be used by many for their own purposes.

A quick-witted Abby explains away each of her uncle's accusations and he is only too eager to accept any justification that removes the taint of scandal from his house, even if he is not 100 per cent convinced. But horrified by what he perceives as doubts of his household's purity, he brings in the Rev. John Hale to investigate.

Hale turns out to be a thoughtful scholar, with his head perhaps stuck too far in his books to be too aware of reality. He is pious and truly believes in the presence of witchcraft and his duty to rout it out, but he is not a bad man. And he recognizes in John Proctor another truly good man.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of the rest of the Salem men, who are eager to solve old hurts or score personal victories through accusations of witchcraft.

So do the young girls who begin by pointing to easy targets, such as the homeless and
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...the young girl who begins by pointing to easy targets, such as the homeless and drunken old women, and move up to respected community members as they gain in confidence and reputation.

What is truly disturbing is how real the characters and the situation seem.

When people are threatened with death or torture, or even with being ostracized by their peers, they will cast false accusations. And once the wheels are set in motion, the lies can't be taken back.

Graham Percy, who starred in The Odyssey, Our Town and Jerome for Two Planks' Off the Grid series, gives a tour-de-force performance as John Proctor, a good man struggling with his conscience and his own failings.

Katie Swift, also an Off the Grid veteran, is chilling as Abigail, charming and cunning. It's easy to see how her peers follow her blindly and fear standing up to her.

John Beale, as the Rev. Hale, gives a nicely nuanced performance as he gradually realizes that evil can come in many forms and Cliff LeJeune is funny and touching as Giles Corey, a frank farmer who believes in the system till it lets him down.

Emma Slipp does a nice job as the snivelling Mary Warren, who tries to stand up to Abby but can't, while Burgundy Code is poignant as the upright, honest Rebecca and Kathryn MacLellan is heartbreaking as the betrayed Elizabeth Proctor.

The simplicity of the outdoor setting, with minimal props, nicely complements the intensity of the play, aided by the intimacy of the small performance space surrounded by woods. The cast's choral hymn singing is a lovely addition.

The Crucible takes place rain or shine, and a little rain, as happened on opening night, helps create an even more ominous atmosphere because the nearly three-hour drama ends by torchlight. Rain ponchos and blankets are provided and picnics are welcome, although some food is available.

The impressive and deeply affecting show, with an 18-person cast, runs Tuesdays to Sundays at 6 p.m. until Aug. 8. Tickets are \$11.50 to \$28.75 and family packages and discounts are available. Go to www.twoplanks.ca or call 582-3073.

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