

# The Crucible — An American Opera

## DISCOVERING THE CRUCIBLE

Certain things are life-changers. Such is the case with my discovery at fourteen years of age of Robert Ward's opera of Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*. So fair warning: rather than a detailed musicologist's analysis of every word and note of the opera of *The Crucible* (for that I refer you to the very good book *Robert Ward's The Crucible: Creating an American Musical Nationalism* by Robert Paul Kolt), this is my own peculiar journey of discovery with both the opera and ultimately its composer.

It was September of 1962. I was in my first semester at Hamilton High School in Los Angeles. Of course I was in the drama class and it was announced that the school play was to be Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. I didn't know from Arthur Miller or *The Crucible*, I only knew from comedies and musicals. But Mr. Gordon, our teacher, didn't like comedies and musicals; he liked serious plays with serious themes like, well, *The Crucible*, Miller's dramatized tale of the Salem witch trials, but really an allegory on McCarthyism, not that I knew what any of that meant at the time. We all auditioned for various roles and in the end I was cast in the not very interesting role of Judge Hathorne. But, it was only my first semester and I was thrilled to be doing my very first high school play and my very first play period. We went into rehearsals in mid-October.

One weekend about three weeks into rehearsals, I happened to be in Hollywood to see a movie. As always, I first stopped at Pickwick Books to look around, and then I went next door to Phil Harris Records, a wonderful little record shop. I rifled through the new release bin, looking carefully at each new release that happened to catch my eye. There was nothing there I really was burning to have so I turned to leave. As I walked towards the door, my eye caught the wall behind the counter, where several LP box sets were displayed. And there in the middle of them was a box set of *The Crucible*. I was very surprised by this and thought it must be one of those recorded plays – I'd seen box sets on Columbia of recorded plays, like *Waiting for Godot*. Well, interest piqued, I walked over to the counter and asked to see it. The nice salesman handed it to me. There was a photograph on the cover that looked like a scene from the play, but curiously at the top it said "New York City Opera" and below that it said "Based on the Play by Arthur Miller, Music by Robert Ward, Libretto by Bernard Stambler." What was this thing I was holding – an opera? Of *The Crucible*? Whatever it was, according to the cover it had won the Pulitzer Prize, whatever the Pulitzer Prize was. Well, I had to have it, whatever it was. I was impulsive that way (and still am). It was very expensive, maybe ten dollars, maybe even a bit more. Whatever it cost it didn't leave me enough money to see a movie – it left me just enough for bus fare home. And home I immediately went.

Once home, I went into my room, closed the door, and opened the box. There was a booklet on top of

the two LPs called Libretto. I opened it – it seemed to be the play I was rehearsing, maybe not all of it, but the dialogue was pretty much what we were rehearsing. Well, this was too intriguing to delay any further. I carefully removed the first LP from the sleeve and put it on my Columbia House Stereophonic Record Player with detachable speakers, carefully put the needle on the record, and sat cross-legged on my bed with the libretto. The music began and I was instantly hooked. The singing began and it took me only a minute to get used to hearing the dialogue sung instead of spoken. I sat, transfixed, listening to the glorious music I was hearing. Miller's play still worked beautifully, but it was the music – the melodies and the orchestration – that just grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. I listened to the whole hour and fifty minutes of it, then listened to it all over again. I loved every second of it – I loved the orchestra, I loved the singing, I loved its power. At that time I couldn't have told you what it was about the music that was so appealing to me – I wasn't that musically knowledgeable to articulate that. It just appealed to me – some music "got" to me and some music didn't. Robert Ward's music for *The Crucible* "got" to me.

My love for *The Crucible* opera made me go seek out other American classical composers like Copland and Howard Hanson, and I even found another American opera of a play I also did in high school, Jack Beeson's one-act opera of William Saroyan's *Hello, Out There*. It was a whole new world for me. I was just starting to write songs back then and I know Ward's harmonies and sense of melody influenced me tremendously.

Flash forward to 1988. I'd been a successful actor, had directed two films, and yet was at a really low point in my life. A decade prior to that I'd helped start the label Varese Sarabande and had passed on the opportunity to own a third of it for a very low amount of money. And now they were a multi-million dollar company thanks to the fact that I'd insisted they get into soundtracks (their very first soundtrack release was to my film, *The First Nudie Musical*). I was so irritated, that I roped in two friends and we each put up a little money and started our own damn label, which we called Bay Cities. The plan was to start by reissuing some wonderful American classical music because we were able to easily license from the label CRI's catalog. And in that catalog were several works of Robert Ward, the man whose music I'd so fallen in love with so many years before. Unfortunately, another company had licensed *The Crucible* the year before. So, we licensed all the other Ward material and our first release was an all Robert Ward disc containing his brilliant piano concerto and his second and third symphonies.

And then, one fine day the phone rang and it was Robert Ward, calling to thank me for issuing the CD and wondering if we would issue more of his music. Of course I kept him on the phone for an hour relating my tale of *The Crucible* and what it had meant to me, and I must say he was delighted by the story and my enthusiasm. I told him I'd sent our Ward

CD to Stephen Sondheim and Sondheim had written back that he was a big fan of Ward's and especially *The Crucible*, and that equally delighted him as well. We began corresponding regularly and spoke on the phone often over the next three years. We ultimately issued five or six albums of his music. We finally met in person and he was just the nicest and most gracious person, as was his wife Mary. When Bay Cities went under in 1993, we stayed in touch for a while, but then I went to Varese Sarabande to start a musical theatre division and we lost touch.

Of course, I'd bought the CD release of *The Crucible* when it came out but it was a huge disappointment to me. To my ears it sounded muddy and had no life and it was mastered at an irritatingly low level. I could barely listen to it. It was reissued with an even less interesting cover than the first uninteresting cover many years later but it was the same old, same old. Over the years, I never stopped thinking about the lost opportunity of issuing *The Crucible* and truly doing it justice, sound-wise. And for whatever reasons, in the year 2017 it was on my mind a lot. I knew the CRI catalog had been purchased by New World Records so one day I just wrote them. A nice lady by the name of Lisa Kahlden responded very quickly and within a week we'd made the deal for Kritzerland to do a brand new remastering and limited edition CD release. James Nelson, our brilliant mastering engineer, did, I hope you'll agree, an absolutely fantastic job of bringing the recording back to its original life, giving it depth and air and power. When I heard it I must admit I got more than a little emotional, because here we are, fifty-five years after that music changed my life, and I'm finally getting to issue *The Crucible*. Some things are worth waiting for. I only wish Robert Ward was still with us to hear it – I know he'd be delighted I was finally able to do my favorite Ward. He passed away in 2013 at the ripe old age of ninety-five.

— Bruce Kimmel

## SYNOPSIS

### Act I

The curtain rises on the Reverend Samuel Parris kneeling, distraught at the bed of his daughter Betty. She lies immobile and scarcely breathing, as she has lain since Parris came upon her and her cousin Abigail dancing in the woods the night before. Tituba comes to ask about Betty but is angrily sent away.

Abigail enters to say that the town is whispering of witchcraft and that Parris should go out to make denial. He bitterly turns on her to question her about the dancing and about her mysterious dismissal from the service of the Proctors. As she vehemently denies any wrongdoing, attributing her dismissal to Goodwife Proctor's arrogant desire for a slave, the Putnams enter to tell that their Ruth was stricken at the same time as Betty Parris and that they have sent to Beverly for the Reverend Hale, known for his skill in discovering witches.

While Parris, fearful of any suspicion of witchcraft in his own household, is anxiously doubting the need for Hale, Rebecca and Francis Nurse enter with Giles Corey. While Rebecca is comforting, old Giles is flippant about the illness of the girls. When Putnam insists that witches are at work in Salem, Giles accuses him of using a witch scare to defraud his neighbors of their land. John Proctor's entrance only brings this quarrel to a higher peak. (Abigail, though silent in the upper room, visibly reacts with excitement to John's entrance.) Rebecca reprimands the men for this untimely squabble in a house of illness, and calls them back to their senses. Giles departs with John.

They sing a psalm to beseech God's help. As the psalm proceeds, Betty begins to writhe on the bed and then with an unearthly shriek tries to fly out of the window. They rush to her side. In the midst of the commotion the Reverend Hale enters. He calms them with his air of authority and then methodically sets an inquiry under way. He soon learns that Tituba has played an important role in what has been happening, having also been present at the dancing. Ann Putnam asserts that Tituba knows conjuring. Tituba is sent for; at her entrance, Abigail, who has been under severe inquisition by Hale, lashes out to accuse Tituba of compacting with the Devil. Tituba, overwhelmed by the sternness of Hale and the malevolent intensity of Parris and the Putnams, finally confesses that she has been visited by the Devil, but denies that he has persuaded her into any wrongdoing – for a few moments she frightens Parris and the Putnams with a heartfelt fantasy of the hellish power to bring them harm that the Devil had offered her.

With Tituba's confession the spell over Betty is broken. All return to the psalm in great thanksgiving, while Abigail envies the attention now being given to Tituba, hysterically repents her own compact with the Devil, and visibly receives an answer to her prayer for forgiveness and for a call to mark out others of the Devil's crew.

#### Act II

John Proctor returns from a day's planting to find Elizabeth listless and moody. In her mind the witch trials have become an aggravation of her domestic troubles, with Abby at the center of both. She insists that John expose Abby's fraud to Judge Danforth; his reluctance to do this convinces her that he still has a warm spot in his heart for Abby. John's self-defense is double: that he has no witness to what Abby told him, and that she will avenge herself by revealing John's adultery with her. And he is fed up with Elizabeth's sitting in condemnatory judgment upon him. She gently denies this but regrets the vanished sweetness of their love. Abby, she says, will not confess the lechery lest she damn herself. And what of those who suffer in jail because of John's silence? No, John must tear the last feeling for Abby out of his heart, or she will never give up hope of some day having him for her own.

Mary Warren enters furtively from her day at court as

one of Abby's crew of witchfinders. She tells, breaking into tears, that the number of those arrested has tripled – and that Goody Osburn has been condemned to hang! She is truly troubled by this, and by her own part in it, but demonstrates how the mob excitement of the courtroom procedure turns her into a hysterical accuser even against her will. When John threatens to whip her if she ever returns to that court she blurts out that Goody Proctor herself has been mentioned in court and that only Mary's defense of her prevented an outright accusation.

Elizabeth is sure that Abby is behind this and is once more pleading with John to go to the court when Reverend Hale and John Cheever enter with a warrant for her arrest: that very evening Abby has charged Elizabeth with employing a witch's poppet to kill her. John makes Mary acknowledge it is her poppet, but Hale, although deeply troubled by these new directions of the witch hunts, feels that he must arrest Elizabeth for examination.

John is about to burst out wildly to prevent their taking Elizabeth away, but instead turns with intense but controlled passion upon Mary: she will tell her story in court even though it may provoke a charge of adultery from Abby and ruin both Abby and John completely – anything rather than that Elizabeth should be in danger for his sake.

#### Act III

*Scene 1.* Abby, with a mixture of scheming but passionate love for John and a mystical belief in her mission, tries to persuade John to abandon Elizabeth and to join her in the holy work of cleansing the puritanically corrupt town. He will not listen to this, but instead pleads that she free the town from the curse of her foolish wickedness, and then threatens to expose her fraud. She defies him: now any dire fate that descends on Elizabeth will be of his doing.

*Scene 2.* Judge Danforth's invocation in court reveals the strength and fervor of his conviction that God's will is working through him to cleanse the land of a plague of witches.

As court opens, Giles Corey accuses Thomas Putnam, in his greed for his neighbors' land, of having bragged of his role in the charges of witchcraft. Judge Danforth sends Corey to jail and torture for refusing to name his witnesses for this accusation. There is a great hubbub as Giles leaps at Putnam as the man responsible for the arrest of his wife and himself, and of Rebecca Nurse as well.

John Proctor presents Mary Warren's deposition that the entire crying-out against witches started only as an exciting game for the girls – and is a complete pretense and fraud. But Abby, he says, has continued the game in an effort to dispose of Elizabeth. Her encouragement to this arose from the adultery that took place between Abby and himself, which he is now confessing. When Elizabeth, ordinarily incapable of a lie, is brought in and fails to confirm John's confession, Abby counterattacks, charging that Mary herself has turned witch. Mary, helpless and then

hysterical, turns on John Proctor – accusing him of being the Devil's man who has forced her into trying to confuse and overthrow the court. All but the Reverend Hale close in on John Proctor with sadistic vindictiveness.

#### Act IV

Tituba and Sarah Good, crazed by the rigors of imprisonment, sing of the Devil and his broken promises to them. Abby comes into the prison courtyard; she has bribed the jailer to permit Proctor to escape. John, although broken by the months of prison and torture, scornfully rejects the freedom and love she offers him. Abby runs off weeping.

Hale, and then Parris, try to persuade Judge Danforth to postpone the executions of Proctor and Rebecca Nurse scheduled for that morning: Salem may break into open rebellion at the execution of such respected citizens. Danforth indignantly refuses, but agrees to ask Elizabeth to persuade her husband to confess.

John is brought in and left alone with Elizabeth. She tells him that Giles Corey has died, pressed to death rather than say aye or nay to the charge of witchcraft, but that many have confessed in order to save their lives. John reluctantly brings out his own wish to confess – if it will not make her think ill of him for lying. Passionately she answers that it was her lie that doomed him – and that she wants him alive. Exultant, he shouts that he will confess to the charge of witchcraft.

Danforth, Hale, and Parris rejoice – for their various reasons – over John's confession, and Parris tries to persuade Rebecca, who has been brought in on the way to the gallows, also to confess. She refuses to damn herself with the lie. John is asked to sign his confession, that it may be exhibited before the town. But this is too much: he has deeply shamed himself by confessing, but he will not set his hand to the destruction of his own name – and the eternal shame of his sons. He tears up the document. In fury Danforth orders John and Rebecca to be led out to execution. Hale pleads with Elizabeth that she change John's decision while there is yet time. She refuses: "He has found his name and his goodness now – God forbid I take it from him."