## THE NEW YORKER

## LIFE AND LETTERS

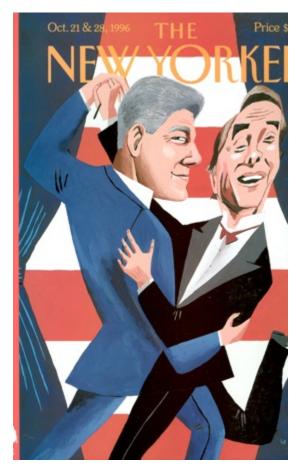
## WHY I WROTE "THE CRUCIBLE"

by Arthur Miller

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**ABSTRACT: LIFE AND LETTERS about the** inspiration for and influence of Miller's play, "The Crucible," a reflection of the Communist witchhunts of its time. Miller recalled the source of his creation while watching the filming of the new movie of "The Crucible." When he wrote it, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Comittee on Un-American Activites were prosecuting alleged Communists from the State Department to Hollywood; the Red hunt was becoming the dominant fixation of the American psyche. Miller did not know how to deal with the enormities of the situation in a play. "The Crucible" was an act of desperation; Miller was fearful of being identified as a covert Communist if he should protest too strongly. He could not find a point of moral reference in contemporary society. Miller found his subject while reading Charles W. Upham's 1867 two-volume study of the 1692 Salem witch trials,



which shed light on the personal relationships behind the trials. Miller went to Salem in 1952 and read transcripts. He began to reconstruct the relationship between John and Elizabeth Proctor and Abigail Williams, who would become the central characters in "The Crucible." He related to John Proctor, who, in spite of an imperfect character, was able to fight the madness around him. The Salem court had moved to admit "spectral evidence" as proof of guilt; as in 1952, the question was not the acts of an accused but his thoughts and intentions. Miller understood the universal experience of being unable to believe that the state has lost its mind.

He was fascinated by the language of seventeenth-century New England and enlisted a scholar to help him develop a new echo of it which actors would be able to adopt. Miller wrote "The Crucible" in about a year. Plays by Miller and others had already been boycotted and banned by various organizations. The play opened on Broadway to unfavorable reviews, perhaps because of director Jed Harris's stoic interpretation. About a year later, a new production, played with the required fervor, became a hit. It stumbled into history; today, the book is one of the most heavily demanded trade-fiction paperbacks in the country. It is constantly being staged. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the screenplay for the first film adaptation. The play gets produced around the world in times of political upheaval. Its message lends itself to accusations as contemporary as sexual abuse. "The Crucible" evokes a lethal brew of illicit sexuality, fear of the supernatural, and political manipulation, a combination not unfamiliar these days. The film, by reaching a broader audience, may unearth still other connections to those buried public terrors that Salem first announced on this continent. The crucial damning event in those trials was signing one's name in "the Devil's book." Nobody thought to ask what this meant. The thing at issue was the secret allegiances of the alienated heart, always the main threat to the theocratic mind, as well as its quarry.





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