



School: Music and Performing Arts

Researcher: Silva Semerciyan

Project Title: Witches Can't Be Burned

UOA: 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

Research Timeline

Date	Rationale of research activities and decisions undertaken
Oct 2017	<p>Semerciyan pitched the idea for <i>Witches Can't Be Burned</i> to the National Theatre. She had watched a production of Arthur Miller's <i>The Crucible</i> at a major theatre in 2014 and was struck by the negative representation of girls and women in the play. She sought to write a response play which would challenge aspects of the masterpiece.</p> <p>She conducted a preliminary investigation of relevant scholarship and discovered Schissel's article 'Rediscovering the Witches in Arthur Miller's <i>The Crucible</i>: A Feminist Reading' which offered insights into the representation of the female characters. Crucially, Semerciyan was influenced by Schissel's alternative vision of the Miller play that could have achieved its same political aims of critiquing McCarthyism without maligning women. This would influence the writing of 'revised' scenes from <i>The Crucible</i> within Semerciyan's first draft of her play.</p>
Nov 2017	<p>After being commissioned by the National Theatre to write the play for their youth theatre festival, NT Connections, Semerciyan began with a close reading of <i>The Crucible</i>. This included a deleted scene (Act II, scene 2) from the original 1959 production of the play. In <i>The Crucible</i>, the main driver of the action is female antagonist Abigail Williams' lust for the male protagonist, John Proctor. The deleted scene shows Abigail as a more complex, vulnerable character and Proctor as a harsher, more manipulative one. Miller's subsequent removal of the scene would push Abigail's characterisation more firmly into the role of archetypal femme fatale/whore and Proctor towards a more Christ-like figure, thus deteriorating the representation of the female. This would later become a point for discussion among youth theatre groups at the Directors' Weekend in Nov 2019.</p> <p>Semerciyan also investigated the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive</p>

	<p>and Transcription Project by the University of Virginia. The key finding in the archive was that the true age of Abigail Williams was twelve, not seventeen as depicted in Miller's play. From this, Semerciyan considered Miller's reasons for increasing Williams' age and theorised that Miller had been motivated by the desire to align her representation with existing biblical archetype of Salome who both desires and destroys John the Baptist. This would later become a discovery by the main character in <i>Witches Can't Be Burned</i>, Anuka, as she undergoes an awakening to the play and its effects.</p>
Dec 2017	<p>Semerciyan explored a number of works on the theme of witchcraft/witch hunts including <i>Shooting Truth</i> by Molly Davies and Churchill's <i>Vinegar Tom</i>, and noted there was a repeated trend of victimisation and maltreatment of female characters, present in much feminist art and performance. Semerciyan theorised that this in itself contributed to negative representations of the female, continually replicating low status female victims and powerlessness in women. From this, Semerciyan decided that the female characters in <i>Witches</i> should demonstrate agency, creativity, problem-solving, legal acumen, loyalty to one another and ultimately win the day, in order to offer up a positive representation of the female.</p>
Jan 2018	<p>Semerciyan explored court transcripts from the Salem trials to sample the linguistic characteristics of the English language being spoken in 17th Century Salem. In early drafts of <i>Witches</i>, there were rewritten scenes from <i>The Crucible</i> in which the girls were depicted more positively, displaying loyalty and empathy. This historical language would later be found only in the initial scene of <i>Witches</i>.</p>
March 2018	<p>R & D sessions were conducted with young actors at the National Theatre Studio; ensemble scenes were tested in relation to stylistic aims; a search for a theatre language that enabled both earnest representations of the secondary school setting of the play as well as metatheatrical/feminist reworkings of <i>The Crucible</i>.</p> <p>Feedback from the workshop actors made it clear that the negative representation of girls and women in <i>The Crucible</i> was not immediately apparent to them. This enabled a dialogue between director Audrey Sheffield, Semerciyan, dramaturg Tom Lyons and the actors on the ways this negative representation manifested itself e.g. the interchangeability of the Salem girls, their hysterical behaviour and their disloyalty to one another.</p> <p>The workshop also revealed connotations of Semerciyan's character choices: the central character, Anuka, had assumed the role of director in the school's play within the play, however, the R & D process made it clear that the character became less sympathetic, the more she assumed a confident leadership role. From this, Semerciyan decided to draw her as less assured in the beginning and allow her to gain confidence across the play.</p>
Nov 2018	<p>Semerciyan attended a dramaturgical meeting with National Theatre Dramaturg Ola Animashawun. From this discussion, the multiple stylistic modes of Semerciyan's draft would be reduced to a single realistic one within</p>

	<p>the school setting that allowed for metatheatres to emerge through the students' performance of <i>The Crucible</i>. Animashawun noted that the patriarchal establishment was not a strong presence in the play. Semerciyan decided to include two drama teachers and the head teacher of the school.</p>
Jan 2019	<p>R & D sessions were held with director Lisa Gregan and the Bristol Old Vic Young Company. These allowed Semerciyan to assess the effects of young actors playing teachers/headteacher; the gravitas imparted by the presence of the older characters outweighed the detriments of requiring young actors to play parts outside their own playing age. The process allowed a dialogue with young company members in which girls imparted instances where they had been treated differently in school for being female. These testimonies would later be echoed in the education experiences of the young female characters in <i>Witches</i> and be addressed in Anuka's monologue to the head teacher in the play.</p>
March 2019	<p>Semerciyan listened to Aaron Mahnke's History Podcast <i>Unobscured</i> across 12 episodes which delved into the true history of the Salem Witch Trials and included interviews with key Salem historians including Emerson Baker, Stacy Schiff, Mary Beth Norton and Jane Kamensky.</p> <p>Through these podcasts, Semerciyan discovered that prior to the Salem Witch episode, the primary deterrent against false allegations of witchcraft had always been the fear of a lawsuit for defamation. It was the removal of this risk, along with the removal of the need to post a bond (previously, a requisite of levying an accusation) that allowed the events in Salem to escalate so quickly and unchecked.</p> <p>From this, the concept of 'defamation' would prove a crucial metaphor in Semerciyan's understandings of the effect of the negative representations of females in prominent works of art that have extensive reach in the wider society. <i>The Crucible</i> is more widely disseminated than the true events of Salem and due to its status as a masterpiece, is perceived to be an accurate historical record. Semerciyan also further explored the concept of 'spectral evidence', evidence based on dreams or visions, which provided the legal defence the girls would ultimately use in their own version of the courtroom scene.</p>
Nov 2019	<p>The developmental 'Director's Weekend' was held at the National Theatre. Participating directors from 19 UK based youth theatre groups met with Semerciyan and director Orla O'Loughlin, and dramaturg Ola Animashawun. Semerciyan conferred her objectives in writing the play towards initiating discussion with young actors about representations of girls in theatre and institutional sexism. Some youth theatre directors stated that they had not thought about <i>The Crucible</i> in this way before and had not considered the effects of the numerous stagings of the play with youth theatre groups.</p>
Jan to Feb 2020	<p>The 19 youth theatre groups conducted rehearsals of the play culminating in regional performances.</p>

	<p>The groups explored and staged the play, working in response to the discoveries of their drama leaders during the Nov 19 directors' weekend. The play opened up a dialogue about the wider experiences of girls in the British education system and how this impacted women in society in general.</p>
May 2020	<p>Semerciyan discussed her process on <i>Witches</i> with students at Bath Spa University and posed the question, 'To what degree can/should a canonical work be altered for a new generation to redress outdated gender politics?' Students commented that they did not believe the text should be altered at all, but that the director could manipulate meaning through their interpretation/staging. Semerciyan presented ideas from Elaine Aston's <i>Feminist Theatre Practice</i> about Resisting Performers, and strategies for these reinterpretations.</p>
July 2020	<p>The play was published in the <i>National Theatre Connections Anthology 2020</i> which will become a resource for youth theatre groups across the world for years to come.</p>