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MOVIES



Suspenseful: Abigail Williams (Winona Ryder) tries to resume a forbidden relation-ship with John Proctor (Daniel Day-Lewis) in "The Crucible."

'The Crucible' remains a cautionary tale

BY MATT WOLF ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

LONDON (AP) Arthur Miller's benchmark play, "The Crucible," makes a stirring film courtesy of director Nicholas Hytnor, who proves that his 1994 movic debut with "The Madness of King George" was no fluke.

Madness of King George" was no fluke.

A sensoned opera and stage director in his native England and a Tony Award-winner for his Broadway production of Carousel, Hytner is that rare theater animal who seems fully assured on screen.

This time, he gets invaluable massistance from a screenplay by Miller that stands among the Siyear-old writers in less theivements. The play may have been written in 1953 in the heat of the McCarthy blacklist, but its resonances have not faded. There's not a more topical movie around. These days, the foar is no longer one of being-labeled a communist. Instead, Miller's depiction of the Salem with hunts in 17th-century Massachusetts taps directly into the deological baiting of the religious right and the persecution to the perceived norm.

That hard-warking farmer.

of "deviants" who fail to conform to the perceived norm.

That hard-working farmer John Prector (Daniel Day-Lewis) is brought down by adultery may strike a few chords, as well; the wages of sin, apparently, have per changed

wages of sin, apparently, have not changed.

The film begins with a covert ritual in the woods whose partic-ipants include the agent of Proc-tor's doom, Abigail Williams

(Winona Ryder), his family's enetime servant. Stripping off her clothes and smearing blood on her face, Abigail is one of several women in the town given to sudden transports of cextasy thought to be the work of Satan.

They soon are branded as witches. Frenzied necusations spread through the community abetted by the Rev. Hale (Rob Campbell), whose eventual recognition of the trouble he has helped sit comes too late.

The "witcheraft" turns out to be more like sexual hysteria _ a contagion that strikes both Protor and wife Elizabeth (Jonn Allen). Placed on trial before the visiting Danforth (Paul Scoffeld), a judge as concerned with saving face as he is with justice, Protor's morality is put to a potentially fatal test.

He must confront the wrath of Abigail, a woman spurned who sees herself as "God's finger." Once accused, she is more than able to act the accuser.

Few works have the sheer moral weight of "The Crucible," and it's among Hytner's achievements that he conveys this probity without letting the film become high-handed. (In this, he's helped by a final image that elicited an audible gasp at a screening.)

Any priggishness comes from Proctor himself. Day-Lewis plays him as a rugged Marthoro Man of unwavering principles. The film might have been even more disturbing if one felt Proctor drawn _ however subliminally _ to Abigail.

Instead, he's an almost Christ-

like martyr, a connection made explicit late in the film as Proctor announces that "God is dead" and stretches out his arms. More recognizably human is Elizabeth, his wife, whom Allea mearably imbues with the pinched severity associated with Dutch portraiture. With her sad eyes and sunken cheeks, she resembles a Frans Hals painting.
Allen is just one of a sterling supporting cast who tend to outshine the leads.
Scofield was an Oscar nominee two years ago for "Quiz Show" and is sure to be nominated for this role. Purging the town of Satan's disciples to the cheers of the townspeeple, the actor's

this role. Purging the town of Satan's disciples to the cheers of the townspeople, the actor's uniquely sonorous voice has rarely sounded so chilling. Other standouts include Karron Graves as Mary Warren, whose "evidence" of Statnic possession praves crucial to the trial: Peter Yaughan as Glies Corey, a town elder prepared to die rather than play the informant; and Mary Pat Glesson as Corey's sharp-eyed wife, who understands far more about a community blighted by fear than she is prepared to tell.

Forty years ago, "The Crucible" was a cautionary tale cloaked in thumpingly good entortainment. It remains that now, and Miller and Hytner deliver the material with the frencity it deserves.

deliver the material with the ferocity it deserves.
"The Crueible" is a 20th Century Fox release of a David V. Picker production, produced by Picker and Robert A. Miller (son of Arthur); co-producer is Diana Pokorny.

VIDEO

Australian 'Country Life' well-acted film

When films are adapted from

When films are adapted from Jane Austen, you can pretty much count on things working out to a happy ending. With adaptations from Chekhov, you expect everyone the opposite — nobody will end up happy.

That's certainly the case with the well-acted Australian film "Country Life" which was "suggested" by Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." Set in the Australian Outback of 1919, "Country Life" looks at the return of a native son after spending 25 years in

London. Writer-director Michael Blake-

Writer-director Michael Blake, more plays the writer, demanding, vain and self-centered man who left his infant daughter to be raised by his late wife's family on their sheep ranch. He arrives with his attractive much younger wife, played by Grata Scacchi, and the results of their visit are decidedly mixed.

The daughter Sally, played by Kerry Fox, is comfortable and confident working on the ranch but not so secure when it comes to personal relationships. Sally has been in love with the local

alcoholic doctor played by Sam Neill for years but has carefully hidden her feelings.

The doctor has no idea Sally is in low eith him and he falls in love with him and he falls in love with him and he falls in love with the writer's wife. Sally's uncle, who resents scrimping over the years to pay a monthly stipend to his elitist brother-in-law, also develops romantic feelings for the new wife and urges her to flee while she can. All of these conflicting emotions and relationships eventually come to a head.

Like their counterparts in Chekhov, these are characters who seem powerless in taking control of their fates. Sally, who views herself as plain, will continue working at the family ranch which has seen better times. Although he can be witty and charming, the doctor knows his drinking is a problem. He comments he would toll any woman interested in him that she could do better.

This is a wonderfully well done

she could do better.

This is a wonderfully well done film with fine performances by all the actors. Besides its setting, Blackemore has given the story an Australian spin through the hostility the doctor receives for being a pacifist, an environmentalist and for taking care of Aberiginal people. He also holds the a view referred to as being anti-British – although he actually seems to more accurately pro-Australian.

When the writer and his wife move on, the people left go back to their lives – a bit sadder and in some cases wiser.

