

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Witch Conjures a Potent Brew

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, September 11th, 2019

Is your soul for sale? And if so, what thing of value would you sell it for? Wealth? Fame? Power? These are the questions the characters in the play *Witch* find themselves grappling with. It's a tempting proposition and makes for an intriguing theatrical conceit, especially in the hands of its skilled writer, Jen Silverman, and a consummate cast. Playing now through September 29<sup>th</sup> at the Geffen Playhouse, *Witch* is a morality play that strikes at the heart of the existential crisis we find ourselves in the Trump era where those in power are perfectly willing to sell their souls for the right payoff. Which makes it all the more intriguing to find that the play is based on an Elizabethan tragi-comedy called *The Witch of Edmondton*, written in 1621, which features an older woman who enters into a bargain with the devil to seek revenge against those who've maligned her. Silverman credits the subversive nature of the original which drew her to the material which challenged the notion of witches as inherently evil amidst a more ingrained and widespread corruption among mere mortals which often goes unchecked.

Silverman updates the source material with a more contemporary vernacular, but retains the spirit of the piece, setting it in the non-specific past she references in the program notes as "then-ish." *Witch* features an exceptional cast led by Maura Tierney as Elizabeth Sawyer, an incisive woman of modest means who is the subject of gossip around town and is rumored to be a witch. It becomes apparent that she possesses no such powers of sorcery, but is more likely the victim of a smear campaign. While there are no overt references to our current political climate, the play explores a particularly relevant subject given the demonization of women in the public forum. The four Congresswomen otherwise known as "the Squad" and Christine Blasey Ford come to mind.

In Silverman's play, the devil takes the form of a handsome, well-dressed man identified as Scratch. Played by Evan Jonigkeit, Scratch is a smooth operator, the type of salesman who'd seem right at home as one of the realtors on Bravo's *Million Dollar Listing*. One of Scratch's first marks is Cuddy Banks, the closeted but demonstrably gay son of a wealthy landowner who stands to inherit a sizable fortune. Cuddy needs little prompting to express his seething hostility toward a man named Frank Thorney who seems to be the very bane of his existence. Frank worked on the Banks' estate and was rescued from a life of poverty by Cuddy's father, Sir Arthur Banks. Over the past 20 years, Frank has enjoyed the comforts of a life of privilege within the castle walls, alongside Cuddy. The problem is that Frank is everything Cuddy is not—dashing, confident, forceful and straight as an arrow. Further complicating matters, Cuddy harbors a palpable undercurrent of desire for the object of his contempt. When presented with the offer to be rid of his nemesis, Cuddy is all in. But Scratch is dealing from both ends of the deck and pays a visit to Frank. Frank initially balks at the notion that his soul can be bought. But he quickly caves at the

prospect of supplanting Cuddy as the rightful heir to his father's fortune. Ruy Iskandar takes on the role of Frank with a frat boy charm that puts him in sharp contrast to Will Von Vogt's soft and ambiguous Cuddy. Iskandar goes a bit overboard as the upright ass-kisser. I half expected to see a glint of sparkle off his teeth. But he eases into the role as the character shows his darker impulses. As for Cuddy, Will Von Vogt brings out Cuddy's peculiar mix of insecurity and desperation with flair and humor.



Ruy Iskandar and Will Von Vogt vie for control of the family fortune in "Witch."

Maura Tierney, perhaps the most recognizable "name" among the cast, brings a grounded realism to the play as Elizabeth. She seems a thoroughly modern heroine—guarded, empowered and all-too-aware of the injustices that have rendered her an outcast. Plainspoken and unflappable, she is the perfect foil for the devil. She rebuffs Scratch's overtures, who aims to ply her with the promise of revenge against her enemies. She counters that his watered down sales pitch would never fly if she were a man. Scratch raises the stakes, promising a tsunami of blood. Elizabeth remains noncommittal, but the power dynamic has shifted and Scratch seems to be falling under her spell. Scratch finds himself spending more and more time with Elizabeth, "off the clock" as he says. She asks probing questions, like why he took the form of a man rather than a woman. We also learn that Elizabeth once lived in the castle. Like Winnifred, she followed her heart and got burned and ultimately turned out and shunned. Elizabeth ultimately concedes that selling her soul would mean giving up the one thing that gives her power, the power to make others uncomfortable.

The play shifts back and forth between Elizabeth's humble abode and the castle where Cuddy resides with Frank, his father and a servant named Winnifred who turns out to be carrying Frank's love child. The clever staging makes for a sharp contrast between these two worlds while allowing a smooth transition over the course of the play. Frank has convinced Winnifred to play the part of faithful servant in the castle in order to keep their relationship a secret so that it won't interfere with his ambitions of currying favor with Sir Arthur and supplanting Cuddy as the rightful heir to his father's fortune. Privately, Frank tries to reassure Winnifred that he has no interest in the women Sir Arthur is trying to set him up with and that he's just humoring the old man so he can claim the inheritance and they can live happily ever after.

The drama (or more accurately, melodrama) ramps up as Sir Arthur breaks the news to Cuddy and Frank that he will be bequeathing the family name (and fortune) to Frank. Sir Arthur tries to soften the blow, telling Cuddy that he will be provided for, but he will be free to be himself. Seeing her prospects of a future with Frank diminishing, Winnifred blurts out the truth about their relationship to Sir Arthur. Frank shows his true colors, denying it outright, prompting audible gasps from the audience. Frank follows that up with the cruelest cut of all, telling Sir Arthur: "You've given me a new life. Why would I throw it away on a maid?" Once Sir Arthur leaves and the dust settles, Cuddy confronts Frank who shows a glimmer of empathy but no intention of relinquishing his newfound status. He invites Cuddy to fight him, as if that might help. Cuddy declines the offer, but then changes his mind. What ensues is a strange, but oddly comedic tussle as Cuddy, completely out of his league, takes on his nemesis. The quasi-homoerotic fight plays out over an extended and often very funny interlude when it suddenly takes a dark and bloody turn as Frank accidentally winds up on the receiving end of a knife in Cuddy's hands. Both men seem equally shocked as the blood pours forth from Frank's mouth. But there's no turning back. Frank is dead. Cuddy is completely undone by his deed (accidental or not) and goes into a rather bizarre dance which seems meant to convey his descent into madness.

The play ends curiously as Winnifred tracks down Scratch and offers to sell her soul. In return, she just asks to raise her child within the castle and to someday be laid to rest alongside the man she loved. Which seems a bit strange, given Frank's complete betrayal. But such is the concession she's prepared to make. She doesn't want to end up like Elizabeth, broke and shunned. As for Elizabeth, she says she'll sell her soul if Scratch pulls the plug. In other words, the only way she goes down is if she takes the whole system down with her. From the program notes, this stance appears to be the playwright's larger point about taking on the system in a radical way or fighting for smaller incremental progress and changing it from within. Scratch is the last to speak his piece. He addresses his boss (the Devil) in soliloquy and essentially tenders his resignation. It's less a full-throated resignation than a weary white flag of surrender, a need for a time-out, not unlike the disgraced or disgusted members of Congress and the Trump administration who've been leaving, either by choice or by demand.

While there's much to laud about this production, there seemed to be a disconnect between its message of empowerment and a reliance on old tropes and stereotypes. Elizabeth is smart and goes toe to toe with the devil. But it seems odd that such a smart independent thinker would have aspired to marry Sir Arthur and live in the castle. Winnifred seems to fare no better, putting up with shoddy treatment by the man she loves, even after his bald-faced betrayal. The role of Cuddy treads a little too close to the gay minstrel caricature. His sexuality is never explicitly addressed, but instead, it is a source of comic relief and derision, ending in violence and insanity. In a city where standing ovations are de rigueur and often obligatory, the lack of an ovation following the show felt like the audience wasn't entirely sure what to make of this thought-provoking but perplexing allegory. That being said, the writer is to be commended for tackling an ambitious project and trying to craft a meaningful allegory to frame contemporary issues.

*Photo credits: Jeff Lorch*

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