Implementation of Technology in a Musical Documentary Theater Production

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Abstract: Witchwife is a musical documentary theater production produced by WPI's Vocal Performance Lab singing group in the spring of 2005. This project sought to incorporate technology into that production and later analyze the efficacy of that incorporation. Slide shows were used to increase audience involvement in the social developmental themes of the work, and a web site was established to provide information about the play and the production, as well as to disseminate the music used therein.

Table of Contents

Index of Figures

1 Introduction

In the spring of 2005 Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Vocal Performance Lab (VPL) singing group performed the theatrical production Witchwife. VPL consisted of nineteen graduate and undergraduate WPI students, musically directed John F. Delorey and assistant directed by John Schnell, a graduate student studying conducting at Holy Cross. Theatrical direction was provided by Kristy Chambrelli. Witchwife is a musical, documentary theater piece written by Mr. Delorey and Ms. Janet Delorey. It describes, through the use of audience-directed narration and transcribed courtroom dialogue, the trials and executions of twenty men and women during the witch hysteria of 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts. My goal in this production, along with my colleague John Reilly, was to facilitate the inclusion of technology, on and off the stage.

2 Background

John Kenrick defines a musical as "a stage, television or film production utilizing popular-style songs - dialogue optional - to either tell a story... or showcase the talents of the writers and/or performers." According to Edwin Wilson in The Theater Experience "musical theater" can encompass a wide variety of forms including opera, operetta, musical comedy and more. Documentary theater defined in similar vague terms; judging from contemporary literature in the genre, any dramatic production including direct quotation can be considered to fit. Some productions have attempted to replicate actual events precisely, while others are completely minimalist in their staging and leave a lot of scene construction to the imagination of the audience. Any historically educational production can be classified as documentary theater, depending on how the

term is defined. To determine precisely what niche Witchwife fits into, some historical perspective is helpful. (Kenrick, 2003; Wilson, 1985; Arader)

2.1 Musical Theater

2.1.1 The Greeks

Musical theater, and indeed all theater, can be traced back as far as the fifth century BC. The earliest records of drama are plays authored by ancient Greeks, all the scripts that remain today having been written by Athenians. Drama was divided into tragedy and satyrs, and later comedy. Initially these were performed only at the festival of Dionysus. Of all the comedic playwrights in ancient Greece (somewhere around fifty) only the works of Aristophanes survived, and of the forty he is believed to have written only eleven remain. Of drama, all that remain are seven works of Sophocles, nineteen works of Euripides, and seven of Aeschylus. (Brockett, 1992)

All theater in Greece included music. A fifteen-man chorus of singers was standard for tragedy and a twenty-four-man chorus for comedy. A flautist accompanied the chorus. In addition to his melodic contribution, he wore a metal plate on one shoe to provide a percussive beat (this may be a precursor to the tapshoe). In Greek tragedies music was interspersed with the action and spoken dialogue of the play, not integrated with the plot. It was in Greek comedy that the makings of modern-day musical theater can be seen. (Flinn, 1997)

The comedies included a chorus of singers, like the tragedies, but often also designated a choral soloist, who would sing something like recitative. The actors on stage would also sing solos, and sometimes even the audience was involved in musical

2

numbers. How similar these melodies and recitative were to modern music is impossible to say, since there was no convention for recording music at the time. (Flinn, 1997)

Being the pioneers of both drama and musical drama, the Greeks were naturally also the pioneers of stage technology. A Greek theater was very large, compared to what might be expected of a theater today. The Theater of Dionysus in Athens was built to hold about fifteen thousand spectators, and for this reason was built into a hillside. The theater itself was semicircular, all of the seats facing the flat stage at the bottom of the hill upon which the actors and the chorus would perform. The structure was open-air and included no artificial lighting. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Fraser, 2004)

Figure 1: The Greek theater at Epidaurus, the most well-preserved specimen still remaining. [1]

A wooden building called a *skene* sat behind the stage and provided the backdrop for every performance; it also created convenient exits to the left and right of the stage between the building and the seats. To allow for more interesting character entrances and exits, the *skene* also included doors – initially two and later three. The roof of this building was used to create the illusion of characters being in the clouds, or to allow characters to play Gods. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Fraser, 2004)

Among the machinery the Greeks had at their disposal were a flying apparatus, trapdoors, some kind of wheeled cart and a device to imitate the sound of thunder. The

flying apparatus consisted of a boom crane operated from the roof of the stage building. It was not concealed from the audience, and was not meant to be. Greek theater required a little willing suspension of disbelief. Trapdoors were used as they are now, for furtive entrances and exits; no one knows exactly what the wheeled devices were or how they were used, but writing about theater from the period frequently involves the word "Ekkyklema," which means "wheeled-out". The workings of the thunder-making device, the earliest form of theatrical sound effects, is not well-documented. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Fraser, 2004)

Many Greek plays just used the stage and *skene* as their set, and let the audience imagine whatever they wanted to go on behind the scene. At some point, painted backdrops covering most of the *skene* were introduced into Greek tragedy, the earliest example of plot-related scenery. According to Aristotle this was first implemented by Sophocles. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Fraser, 2004; Wilson, 1985)

2.1.2 The Romans

The theater of Greece gradually degraded after Alexander the Great came into power and took more territory. The popularity never waned, but critics generally agree that the golden age of Greek drama ended during the fourth century BC, when Athens lost control of Greece to the less creative but better-armed Sparta.

The peak of Greek drama had long passed by the time the city-states were absorbed by the Roman Empire. In classic Roman fashion, they then absorbed Greek drama. The first playwright in Rome was Livius Andronicus, a Grecian employed to write drama for a Roman audience around 240 B.C. Soon the Romans started writing

drama of their own; the plays that remain include comedies by Plautus and Terence and tragedies by Seneca.

Little progress was made in dramatic literature with Rome at the helm, but the art did advance somewhat toward more musical involvement. Plautus was the first to really incorporate musical numbers into the plots of his plays, and all the playwrights of Rome eventually employed an orchestra with more members than just a flautist for instrumental music. *Scabillas* were used to enhance dance numbers; these were devices similar to the plates worn on the shoes of Greek flautists to keep time. This was a more direct precursor to tap-dancing. Livius Andronicus even became the first man known to lip-synch a performance when his voice gave out. (Flinn, 1997; Kuritz, 1988)

Rome's greatest contribution to theater was not in music, but in technology. The Roman theater was, relative to the Greek theater, an architectural wonder. Still semicircular and seating thousands, it now comprised a huge free-standing structure instead of seats on the side of a hill. One Roman theater was even built as two theaters back-to-back on pivoting platforms, that could be turned around to form a circus after a dramatic production

Figure 2: The classical theater at Taormina, Sicily.[1]

(or presumably two dramatic productions) and be used for other forms of entertainment (combat, for example). The *scaena,* the Roman update of the Greek *skene,* was now larger, sometimes stone, and attached to the seating section, creating one continuous building. The stage was raised for the first time and covered with a

permanent roof to protect it from the elements. A retractable linen roof was used to shelter the audience; this necessitated artificial lighting in both the audience and the stage sections. Roman theaters were the first to use curtains to conceal scene changes, but unlike the system typically seen in theaters today, the Roman curtain was drawn up from the floor and then dropped to reveal the stage.

Perhaps most surprising among their contributions to theater technology, ancient Romans invented an early system of air conditioning, using pipes running with cool water to maintain a reasonable temperature with a large crowd in the building. Most regrettable among them was the ingenious idea of planting audience members to instigate applause. (Flinn, 1997; Kuritz, 1988; Brockett, 1992)

2.1.3 Christianity

The last couple hundred years of Rome was of course the Holy Roman Empire, controlled by the Catholic Church. During this period and after, the church more or less outlawed theater, as a part of the general edicts outlawing things that people enjoy. Theater did persist, but performers were forced to lay low and travel frequently. Sometimes to avoid being beaten, jailed or killed they would use their performances to deliver news (and gossip); these performances hint at elements of modern documentary theater. (Flinn, 1997)

Theater was due for a comeback, however with a church governing thousands of people from different areas of Europe speaking different languages and typically reading none. By the beginning of the sixth century AD song had become an institution in the catholic mass, as a means of remembering and participating in the service for those who

6

were unable to read the liturgical literature. Soon it became necessary to include acting and dancing, since a growing number church-goers were not only unable to read but also unable to understand the spoken language of the clergy. Liturgical plays essentially reinvented drama, if not so eloquently as the Greeks had, even though the church official position on theater was prohibition. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997)

Since these church-based plays depicting biblical stories were the only form of entertainment allowed for centuries throughout Europe, even beyond the former borders of Rome, they were quite popular. At some point the dramas started moving out of churches and into town centers, run exclusively by amateurs and often funded by communities and trade guilds instead of the church. Until the renaissance this was to be the fate of theater.

Lacking the state funding and artistic appreciation it had enjoyed in its (first) heyday, theater was virtually without technological development until the sixteenth century. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Kuritz, 1988)

2.1.4 The Renaissance

The Renaissance of sixteenth century Europe saw a major revival of theater, and thankfully a permanent one. All of the arts flourished during the Renaissance, and theater borrowed and benefited from every one of them.

Commedia dell'arte, first recorded in Italy in the 1560s, pushed the art of acting to heights it had not seen since Greece – and then beyond. The setup of commedia involved a small number of actors playing predetermined, stock roles in a scenario selected from a much larger stock; over eight-hundred are known. Neither the action nor the dialogue

7

was scripted, but the actors were all practiced in a certain role and performed nothing else. Characters could be identified by dress, so the audience would generally know what to expect. (Flinn, 1997; Brockett, 1992)

The form made several lasting contributions to the theatrical world; among them are a wide variety of standard comedic plots, and not only the idea for but several common examples of cheap gags, or comic schtick. Referred to as *lazzi* at the time, these could include anything from smashing a painting over a character's head to pretending to forget about the audience and urinating on-stage. (Flinn, 1997)

Unfortunately, since commedia dell'arte was generally performed by traveling bands of players, it contributed more or less nothing to theater technology. Constant traveling prevented theater groups from employing much in the way of setting. Fortunately, the outstanding acting associated with Commedia forever validated the idea of minimalist staging, which continues to be popular today, and the *lazzi* and sensationalism was picked up directly by burlesque and American musical theater in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Flinn, 1997; Brockett, 1992)

Developing in parallel to commedia dell'arte, humanist theater was in many ways its antithesis. The nobility were the center of this movement, commissioning and paying for the plays and all the artists involved. Initially, they were also its entire audience, but the performances later went more public. Humanist theater focused more on production than acting, most often employing amateur actors, poor writers and large budgets for scenery and orchestration. (Flinn, 1997)

8

The comedies of humanist theater added little to the important literature of European theater, but did introduce some good concepts. The idea of a single trait defining a main character was first used by Pietro Aretino, and Machiavelli's *Mandragola,* the one exception to the sub-par literature trend, was the first to implement character development. Humanist tragedy was even more worthless than the comedy, as far as reproduction-worthy literature is concerned. No good works really came from this sector, and its only enduring legacy was the structure of the five-act play. This was altered to be the three-act play by the time the twentieth century rolled around.

Music was included in humanist theater, but as in most previous forms it was interspersed with the primary action of the plays and none of it was really vital to the plot. The only notable musical advance was the introduction of the orchestra pit, in Vienna in 1662, designed by Lodovico Burnacini. (Flinn, 1997)

Humanist drama bore one important similarity to Roman drama, in that what it lacked artistically it made up for by developing many of the technological habiliments of theater still in use today. Humanist theaters were the world's first truly indoor theaters, thanks to their large budgets and small audiences. It was in a theater built for such productions that Italian architect Aleotti designed the first proscenium arch, with wings, of the type often seen above the front of stages today. (Kuritz, 1988)

Perspective painting was developed to the point of near-scientific rigor during the renaissance, and this was applied to theater arts as early as 1508 in Ariosto's *La Cassaria.* Background scenery was created using calculated, measured perspective painting, sometimes having the background vanish to a single point. Raking the stage to further this sense of perspective was first done in 1545 by Sebastiano Serlio. These depth-

9

imitating techniques are still in use, though raked stages are not all too common. (Flinn, 1997)

The role of the curtain was greatly expanded by big budget renaissance theater. From the Roman drop curtain, which was literally dropped, medieval Europe had developed the front curtain, which lowered to shield actors dressing for a scene from the view of the audience. In a Renaissance play, the main curtain was only lowered at the end of the production, so all the scene changes were worked into the script. The biggest idea in curtains was the act curtain, which had a scene-related to the plot painted on it and could be used to separate acts.

Advances in lighting were probably the most important achievements of humanist theater. Joseph Furttenbach, a German who studied theater in Italy, who also happened to have invented the act curtain, was a major player in developing pre-electric lighting technology. Using candles and oil lamps as sources, Furttenbach developed methods of reflecting light using mirrors, tinsel and mica to create directional and scattering effects. He used containers of wine or colored water to change the color of light, and a variety of techniques to hide light sources. He also employed several techniques to bring down or black out the lights: extinguishing some sources, blocking them slowly with opaque cylinders, or simply turning the lights away from the stage. The period also saw the introduction of the darkened auditorium, but that one was not Furttenbach's. All of these ideas have obviously been refined and adapted to electric lighting since, but the same effects are still employed in theater and other stage arts today. (Kuritz, 1988)

Any discussion of renaissance drama would be remiss not to include Elizabethan drama, regardless of its lack of contribution to the technology of the period. Many aspects of Elizabethan drama are persistent in American musical drama through the early twentieth century.

Nationalism is a theme prevalent in the writing of Shakespeare – any foreign country or person portrayed in a Shakespeare play is heavily anglicized to make it more friendly to his audience. The same can be seen in American theater in shows like *South Pacific* (Logan and Hammerstein, 1958), in which other countries serve as primary settings but are clearly Americanized.

Elizabethan drama also played a major role in the commercial development of modern theater. The relationship between playwright and actor, playwright and playhouse, and actor and playhouse was first established in Elizabethan England. The first chain of commercial playhouses was owned for a short while by James Burbage. A large number of private acting companies entertained London in public theaters throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century, and this business dynamic still predominates in most of the performing arts. (Flinn, 1997; Kuritz, 1988)

The world's first opera was born in Venice, in 1594, when Jacop Peri and Giulio Caccini teamed up to produce *Dafne*. Opera reintroduced (and named) the idea of recitative, which had been missing from mainstream theater since antiquity, and created the aria. This use of music to accentuate dialogue would work its way into all kinds of musical theater for centuries to come, and has led some to the conclusion that early twentieth

century musicals descended directly from opera – there is some contention over this viewpoint. (Flinn, 1997; Kenrick, 2003)

Insomuch as technology is concerned, opera's contributions were not substantial. Being as grand as grand opera is, it did result in a lot of funding being poured into existing technology. Things were refined and scaled up for opera houses, but nothing veritably new emerged.
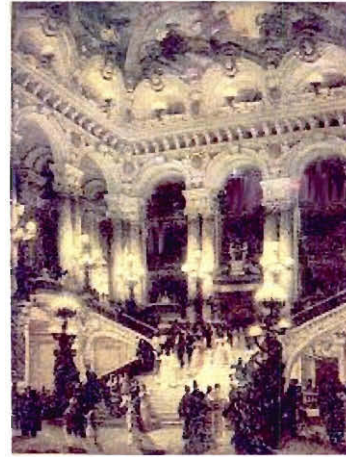

Figure 3: Garnier opera house in Paris.[2]

Looking to the latter half of the seventeenth century, a substantial refinement of the art of comedy can be seen in the work of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, also known by his stage name of Molière. Molière could be described as the Godfather of the French musical comedy. The genre was characterized by scripted plays which nevertheless left substantial room for interpretation by actors and directors; they required the acting to convey emotion the words alone could not. As such, French comedic musicals demanded a great deal of talent on the part of the cast, unlike most scripted plays that had come before, similar to the Athenian ideal.

French comedic musicals always of course involved musical orchestration, and most involved dancing. This was primarily to appease rich theater patrons who would otherwise ban Molière's and others' works from public exhibition. No major contributions to theatrical musical literature or production came from these plays, since music was never the focus. Their biggest literary contribution was another Greek throwback, the reinsertion of satire; in particular, political satire. Satire had been

12

growing steadily more taboo since Sparta took over Athens two thousand years earlier, so this was a big step. Since the seventeenth century, satire has become integral to musical theater, and to literature in general. (Flinn, 1997; Brockett, 1992)

Another very crucial development in drama occurring in France during the renaissance is the involvement of women. When other European countries (e.g. England) were writing scripts around all-male casts and making sure to minimize physical interactions with male and female characters, France was employing female actors – as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century. France predated the rest of Europe and the world by a good two-hundred years, discounting the beginnings of Japanese Kabuki Theater (in which women were also prostitutes, and from which they were quickly banned). (Flinn, 1997; Wilson, 1985; Kuritz, 1988)

2.1.5 Operetta

The comic opera, or operetta, is the direct precursor to American musicals of the 1930s and 1940s. Blooming first in Paris in 1858 with composers Hervè and Jacques Offenbach, operetta was almost immediately copied in Vienna. The operetta included satire, off-color humor, scantily-clad women, and musical numbers that were designed to be "catchy" (and succeeded). The music was not pivotal to the plot, and often the plot was not pivotal to the play. Music could be lifted from contemporary dances – the waltz which was immensely popular at the time – and plot was secondary to impactful satire and attractive women. Eventually the French lost their interest in satire, and began writing more plot-focused dramas in the same style.

In Vienna, the risqué waltz seemed to be the main component of the production – particularly when Strauss was the playwright. The dance was very popular and considered scandalous and sexual at the time, so his operettas were well-received by the young adult crowd. The plots in Viennese operetta were never satirical and always romantic, possibly a retroactive influence on the development of its French precursor, which later moved in the same direction.

Operetta spread through the rest of Europe within ten years of its inception, including England. Gilbert and Sullivan are widely considered to be the peak of operetta, as well as the last step in the process leading to the "modern musical." Gilbert and Sullivan took to heart the same ideals as Wagner, combining as many art forms as possible in their musicals and neglecting none of them. Their plays included creative, expressive lyrics, high-quality acting, music with its tone and emotion derived from the drama in the scene, and elaborate, well-built staging. While it cannot necessarily be purported that the Gilbert and Sullivan era provided for a lot of new theater technology, it gave the current state of the art quite a workout, and set the stage was for a boom in creativity; it was now hurting for a boom in science and engineering, too. (Flinn, 1997)

2.2 Documentary Theater

William Stott, author of <u>Documentary Expression and Thirties America</u>, describes the impetus behind documentary theater as a need to "record and clarify for the American people aspects of their experience, past or present, main-current or side-stream." What is classified as documentary theater, sometimes referred to as theater of fact, is not strictly defined. Early twentieth century documentary drama included the Living Newspapers of

the Federal Theater Project, which were designed to be informative social commentary. Today's documentary drama appears to include any drama with dialogue based on or transcribed from direct quotation, regardless of how true to reality or legitimately informative the production may be. The one thing almost all documentary theater has in common is its intention to change minds and call attention to pervasive social issues.

Greek satyrs, and later comedies, were big on political commentary and social criticism. When Athens ruled Greece, harsh criticism of political figures and government officials was not only allowed but encouraged by popular opinion and awarded by medals and financial gain. Without this early precursor it is hard to say whether later forms of dramatic satire would have developed; Greece is definitely a very important precursos to documentary drama. (Brockett, 1992; Flinn, 1997; Fraser, 2004; Kenrick, 2003; Kuritz, 1988)

Even through the age of church-limited liturgical drama, some hints of documentary theater can be seen. While the most prominent problematic social issue of the time, the Catholic Church, was not attacked in these plays, they were used to depict biblical stories. At the time these stories were accepted history, and all of them had some kind of moral applicable to daily life; biblical stories were intended from the beginning to change minds, or at least reaffirm them, through what was perceived as factual knowledge and direct transcription of the word of God. This is definitely reminiscent even of current trends in documentary art. (Flinn, 1997)

Though still not characterized as such, documentary stage-arts continued through the Middle Ages as well. While it probably would not serve traveling bands of actors

well to call attention to social problems in a society that already wanted to beat and imprison them, they did carry news. Though they may not have shared the goals of contemporary documentary theater, medieval actors did continue the tradition of spreading real, vital information through dramatic performances. (Flinn, 1997)

In Elizabethan England, Shakespeare's histories were intended to provide reasonably accurate accounts of history; Shakespeare also uses several of his plays to call attention to social problems, e.g. discrimination against Jews (Shylock). In France the comedians, Moliere in particular, reintroduced satire in drama both as a political tool to instigate social change and to entertain. Nineteenth century France and Vienna continued the use of satire, which eventually found its way around the world into other comic opera and even burlesque shows. The political fearlessness begun in Greece and perpetuated on and off throughout Europe over the last twenty-five hundred years has slowly but surely paved the way for modern theater, leading in some roundabout way to the 1920s and 1930s. (Flinn, 1997; Kuritz, 1988)

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht became the creators of their own genre: epic theater. Through the use of narrative and the virtual elimination of plot, epic theater seeks not to entertain the viewer by involving him/her in a character or a story, but rather to force him/her to think and make decisions. Inspiring self-examination and self-motivated change in the viewer was a major goal; entertaining was more de facto than anything. Epic theater also isolated scenes from one another in the play, at a time when the rest of theater considered seamless connection the gold standard. In a word, it was different. (Kuritz, 1988)

16

Calling attention to social problems was not breaking new ground, of course. As unique and interesting as epic theater was and still is, its primary conceptual contributions to documentary theater were in structure and staging, not objective. Piscator and Brecht's plays made use of photographic and cinematic projections, as well as moving scene elements integral to the "plot," which was really just a progression of events. They avoided the traditional set scenery entirely, and for the first time this was intentional and not the result of an inadequate budget. (Kuritz, 1988)

Thornton Wilder explored and expanded on the techniques coined by Brecht and Piscator's epic theater. In *Our Town* he has a narrator address the audience directly, and in *The Skin of Our Teeth* actors talk about the play to the audience during the play. Wilder also expanded the form to not only address problems but celebrate positive aspects of human nature, a relatively unheard-of angle for social commentary. (Kuritz, 1988)

Howard Brenton and other post-Brecht epic playwrights in Britain continue with the tradition, addressing the social issues of our day head-on. They deal with things like feminism and ethnic differences where Brecht dealt with capitalism and war, and continue to do so within the epic structure invented by Piscator and Brecht in the early twentieth century. (Reinelt, 1997)

Many of Piscator's and Brecht's techniques were picked up by the US government during the great depression, when in an effort to create new jobs while simultaneously keeping up public spirits and delivering news, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created the Federal Theater Project (FTP). The FTP's primary accomplishment was the Living

Newspapers, dramatic productions put on by federal employees used to educate the public about social problems. These Living Newspapers included projections, direct quotations and scene montages, lifted straight from epic theater, and constituted an almost complete evolution into what is contemporary documentary drama. (Flinn, 1997)

While the goal of documentary theater is to call attention to social problems, contemporary playwrights like Anna Deavere Smith and Moisés Kaufman do so in a format more like a dramatic play than an epic play. Both writers make extensive use of direct quotation from interviews with people involved in violent, politically important incidents, and use them to form a sort of plot.

Smith's plays *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Fires and Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1993) focus on the Crown Heights Riot of 1991 and the LA riots of 1992, respectively. These works both examine large-scale violent events instigated by sweeping social issues, things like class separation and racism. Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project produce plays focusing on smaller, high-impact events, like the Matthew Shepard killing upon which *The Laramie Project* is based. Kaufman uses reactions to that impact to get a picture of public opinion. Both these playwrights' goals can be traced to the beginnings of epic theater, and the roots of satire. They are the most recent incarnation of documentary theater, and outline the current definition of the term.

3 Witchwife

3.1 The Witch Trials

The Salem witch trials form the basis for the production Witchwife; they are a dark spot on the history of the state of Massachusetts and humanity in general.

In the year 1692 two girls, Betty Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams began suffering some very odd maladies, and a physician, William Griggs, suspected witchcraft might be the culprit. Once rumors of witches spread through Salem, more young girls started to become afflicted, and when girls started naming names, arrests were made.

At the start of the witchcraft hysteria phenomenon, the courts of Massachusetts were in a state of complete paralysis; Massachusetts had no government, as it was in the rebuilding phase of a coup d'etat that occurred in 1689. Thanks to the unavailability of a trial system, accusation upon accusation ended up piling over one hundred people in jail, even including a former minister, all accused of being witches and wizards. Upon the reestablishment of governance in the state, a court was set up immediately – and
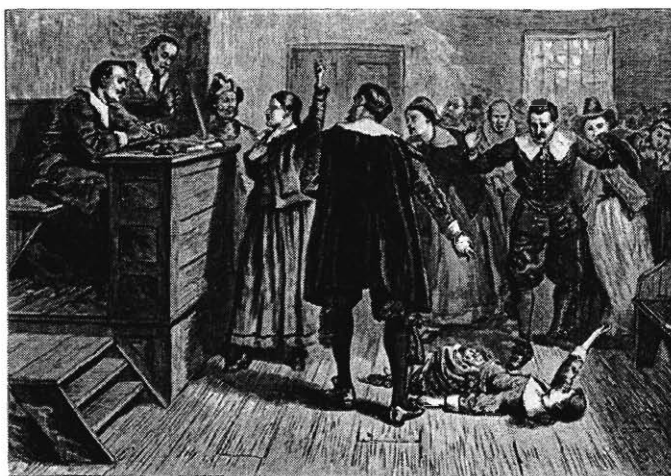

Figure 4: Sketch of the Salem witchcraft trials.[2]

probably not entirely legally, in accordance with the state charter – to deal with the situation. Known as the court of Oyer and Terminer, it resulted in the executions of eighteen accused witches. Sarah Osborne had already perished in prison. Giles Cory, refusing to enter a plea, presumably protesting the authority of the court, was pressed to death under weight of rocks in an attempt to extract a plea.

The witchcraft hysteria would not end until the ministers of eastern Massachusetts intervened and the new governor, William Phips, dissolved his appointed court of Oyer and Terminer. Twenty people had died including Susanna Martin, ancestor of

Witchwife's playwright. Many more had been imprisoned and subject to public

embarrassment, the result of accusations of witchcraft that started with two girls aged

nine and eleven. None of the accusations were, of course, ever really substantiated.

(Boyer and Nissenbaum, 1974; Hoffer, 1997)

3.2 Dramatic Characterisation

Consistent with contemporary American documentary theater, Witchwife focuses on a

relatively small, very violent, politically controversial event. Unlike much of

contemporary American documentary theater, it focuses on an event from the distant past.

The contemporary trend toward current events as a basis for a play does make sense; if an

author intends for a play's dialogue to come from direct quotation of first-hand witnesses,

current events work much better than historical ones – the witnesses are still alive.

Conveniently for the author, enough manuscripts from the Salem witch trials exist to

compile a documentary drama. A great deal of secondary literature was also available to

the author, in the form of social commentaries and books from the last three hundred

years and even previous dramatic literature related to the topic like Arthur Miller's *The*

Crucible (1953). This allows the focus on past events, an idea dating from the days of

liturgical drama and still common on the British epic stage, to be combined with the

quotation techniques common to American documentary drama.

In the tradition of epic theater, the play calls attention to a social political issue

that is incredibly relevant in today's America – the use of sensationalism to alter public

opinion. The "afflicted girls" of Salem used the influence of their emotionality on their

elders to cause the arrests of hundreds of suspected "witches," and eventually quite a few

executions. From arrest to conviction, every aspect of the Salem hysteria was based on just that – hysteria. There was never even a shadow of physical evidence. Sensationalism is used today in the "war on terror," the weapons of mass destruction scare and a variety of distracting political scandals, and is a major thorn in the side of the democratic process.

Witchwife also calls attention to the influence of religion and superstition on governmental policy and law-making. The existence of witches was clearly not backed up by any sort of empirical evidence and could not have stood up to any kind of scientific inquiry, rigorous or otherwise. Even the bible, which was assumed true at the time, did not include criteria for identifying witches. Any sort of literature used beyond that would be (and was) complete conjecture. To even think the claims of the plaintiffs to be potentially grounded in reality, the government had to assume to existence of Satan, a religious figure. The influence of religion on policy is a growing issue in America right now, with the stem cell debate raging and abortion being restricted in some of the red states. Witchwife calls attention to the kinds of human rights abuses that can be brought about by a lack of separation of church and state. It is an effective, timely use of documentary theater, even though its subject matter is over three hundred years old.

3.3 Musicality

Music was integral to the performance of Witchwife. While the entire story was narrated in a fashion similar to that used in Thornton Wilder's theater – audience-directed narration – and dialogue between characters was not set to music, it was used for more than scene transitions. American folk-tunes took up large portions of the play, and

21

effective, high quality rendition of that music was certainly one of Vocal Performance Lab's goals. In addition to standing alone as historical literature, the music served to break up the dialogue, which was fairly dry, and at times difficult to understand (a good deal of it was taken from three hundred year-old court documents). The piece was performed by a singing group because acting was not particularly critical; musicality bore the brunt of the entertainment responsibility, while narration related most of the important plot aspects. Dialogue was a useful counterpoint to the narration, and augmented its impact through emotive delivery, but this was a musical and narrative production at its core.

3.4 Implementation of Technology

There are three main aspects of this production in which technology was involved. Stage lighting was used throughout the performance to illuminate the cast and stage, projections on a screen at the back provided a scenic backdrop for the performance, and following the performance a website was designed to advertise it.

The stage lighting used was fairly standard. A rack of lights on a steel girder hung from the ceiling and halogen lamps covered with colored filters were turned on selectively to illuminate the cast member or members performing at any given time. Most of the time, the entire stage was somewhat illuminated. The audience portion of the auditorium remained dark throughout the performance. The only use of lighting that might qualify as creative was darkness as a substitute for a curtain. During scene changes the lights were lowered; this did not completely prevent the audience from seeing a scene change, and clearly did not make it any quieter, but it was effective enough given the

nature of the production. Witchwife employed minimalist staging, with no furniture more than chairs for the chorus and a podium for whomever was speaking at the time. The play's objective was at no point to create an immersive illusion for the audience, and as such, concealing scene changes was not necessary. In this type of production simply lowering the lights is more than adequate. Even a fully lit, visible scene change would likely have been fine.

A PowerPoint presentation was prepared for Witchwife, to be projected behind the cast during the production. The screen was a large, white bedsheet stretched over a wooden frame, designed for projection from the back. Originally a front-side projection was planned, but using a rear-side projection allowed the cast to move in front of the screen freely without concern about casting shadows on the slide show. Piping was considered for construction instead of wood because it is easier to disassemble, but that brings in either the additional weight and difficulty of working with copper or the unwanted flexibility of PVC. Wood, it was decided, was the best choice. To obfuscation of the image by the intense light from the projector pointed at a viewer on the other side of the screen, the projector had to be located below the bottom of the screen and angled up. This is almost necessary when using the back-projected technique, as having a bright light in the middle of the screen can make it difficult to read or see. Having a projector that can compensate electronically for an angle significantly increases the quality of the product.

The slide show included direct quotations from the characters in the play, emotive pictures related to the scene or to the historical era in which the events took place, and pictures of documents related to the play. The backdrop pictures were changed

23

frequently, once every five or six seconds, to keep the audience interested and reading. The idea was to bombard the audience simultaneously with speech or music and reading or pictures, as many senses as could be affected from that distance. We wanted to immerse the audience not in the illusion of the theater but in the ideology of the playwright, and technology was key to this process.

Typically websites for musicals are designed with the objective of selling tickets in mind. With Witchwife that was not the case – it was never the plan to post the website before the production of the play.

Figure 5: Picture of a woodcut from colonial Massachusetts. This picture was used both in the slide show and on the front page of the website.[2]

Instead the goal was to educate people about the Salem witch trials and about American folk music. Education is always the best way to avoid repeating the consequences of the social problems involved in Salem, and learning something about the lives of the people involved is a way of keeping their memory alive. The website also provides musical scores and libretti for all the folk tunes featured in the play, in the hope that other choirs might see it worthwhile to reproduce this historically pivotal and still entertaining American literature.

Witchwife was built on the shoulders of 1930s Federal Theater productions, the works of Piscator and Brecht, Wilder, nineteenth-century France and ultimately ancient Greece. The application of technology to Witchwife led to an effective iteration of the dramatic

24

art form, which managed to be aesthetically pleasing with only a minimum of staging. Documentary theater techniques involving direct source quotations and projections with interesting pictures helped keep an audience involved in a production that otherwise may have seemed like a history lesson. Hopefully the website will go on to educate more students about the plight of the victims of the Salem witchcraft hysteria and give them a sampling of American folk music at the same time.

Potential future applications of similar projection methods are promising. Using motion pictures at key points in a production, on a screen similar to the one used here, could divert the audience's attention when needed. Expanding the screen to take up the entire background of the scene could create a dynamic set – set changes could take nothing more than the click of a mouse, if screens and projections could be set up properly. Scenes could be as real or surreal or unreal as the playwright wants, and could move or change during the production, while still allowing the creative process to unfold on stage with live actors. If designed well it could even be possible to use a dynamic set with doors for entrances and exits and, and special effects. The possibilities for creative staging with projection technology are pretty limitless, and much less expensive than the alternatives. Projection technology in stage setting probably has not yet reached its zenith.

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