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THEATER

In the Woods, 'The Witch' Has Room to Fly

Director Megan Nussle takes it outdoors as part of the Tennessee Williams Fest

BY CAM BLAIR · SEP 22, 2021

In a memorable scene from Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*, three characters sing in a forest glade before flying off into the night. When audiences come to see the show as part of this year's Tennessee Williams Festival, they'll be sitting among the trees themselves.

The Provincetown woods is a fitting location for this production of Middleton's 1616 dramedy. In director Megan Nussle's reimagining, a group of women just disembarked from the *Mayflower* have smuggled the newly finished script out of England. While the men are busy at work in the new world, the women decide to do a different kind of world-building — not the Western colonizer type.

The characters' decision to put on a play is laden with significance. "Women weren't allowed to perform in plays," Nussle says. "They're doing this in secret, doing things that are massively taboo."

The specific choice of play also carries political meaning. *The Witch* was written at the height of anti-witch fear-mongering in England. In 1597, King James wrote an entire book on the subject, which Nussle calls "How to Persecute Witches for Dummies." *The Witch* was Middleton's response to this cultural craze, but it also fell victim to it — after a very short initial run, the play disappeared from theaters. The script remained unpublished until 1778, leading many scholars to conclude it was censored by the government.



The cast of *The Witch* rehearsing in the Provincetown woods. (Photo courtesy Megan Nussle)

year,” she says. “I’m not a religious person, but I felt what I think other people feel during Christmas, when you gather with your family. It was completely fulfilling, artistically and for the soul.” In 2017, she became the festival’s artistic associate. She has lived in Provincetown for three years.

Nussle first got the idea to bring theater to the woods last spring. With virtually every theater in the country shuttered, Nussle kept her connection to the stage alive by listening to recordings of plays and poetry read by actors. One day, while hiking the Old Colony Nature Pathway, she says the art form and natural world aligned in a moment of magical synchronicity. “It was this surreal experience of hearing the words at times when I was hitting different sections of the trail,” she says. When festival curator David Kaplan asked Nussle to direct *The Witch*, she set out to get permission from the town to use a section of its land for a performance.

Nussle says mounting a production outdoors is often challenging: “There’s strange stuff you don’t have to deal with in any other setting.” The stage is full of rocks and other tripping hazards, for instance. Mosquitos often attend rehearsal, and Nussle keeps finding sand in her script.

Despite the difficulties, Nussle is committed to making this show, and others like it, succeed. Her new stage company, Campfire Quorum, was built on the idea that theater is a more precious experience when it uses up fewer resources. “I think asking the audience to be complicit in the imagining and the world that you’re creating is what makes theater more effective and the effect more lasting,” she says. As for the name, the campfire is an age-old symbol for storytelling. “Quorum is about how theater isn’t possible without an audience and the performers. With no audience, it’s just a rehearsal in the woods.”

this year’s Tennessee Williams Festival theme: censorship. It will have a six-show run from Thursday, Sept. 23 through Sunday, Sept. 26. The cast is composed of nine women who live between Provincetown and Harwich: Alice Murphy, Brittany Rolfs, Jadah Carroll, Madison Mayer, Marcia Kostick, Marcy Feller, Sallie Tighe, Sam Sewell, and Sara Fitzpatrick.

Nussle’s involvement with the Tennessee Williams Festival began in 2013 when, living in Boston, she landed a job in the audience services department. “I kept returning every

show, some people have accidentally stumbled into the middle of rehearsal. “People walk by and they’re just like, ‘What the hell is going on here?’ We probably look like a coven — and that’s OK with me.”

Ultimately, though, for those who attend the shows, she says, “It’s about your willingness to take yourself to something that’s beyond the physical.” When ticket holders arrive, they’ll be ushered to the stage: a clearing in the woods backed by twisted pines. Two evenly spaced gaps in the trees serve as natural wings, and a small hill gives the stage a natural rake. The transition from sand to scrub grass delineates the boundary between audience and actors.



A scene from Campfire Quorum’s June preview of *The Witch* that took place in the dunes. (Photo courtesy PTWTF)

“I hope the audience sees it the same way I do,” Nussle says.

Something Wicked

The event: *The Witch*, part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival

The time: Thursday, Sept. 23 and Friday, Sept. 24 at 5 p.m.; Saturday, Sept. 25 at 10:30 a.m. and 4 p.m.; Sunday, Sept. 26 at 1:30 and 5 p.m.

The place: The woods, 63 Rear Howland St., Provincetown

The cost: \$40

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