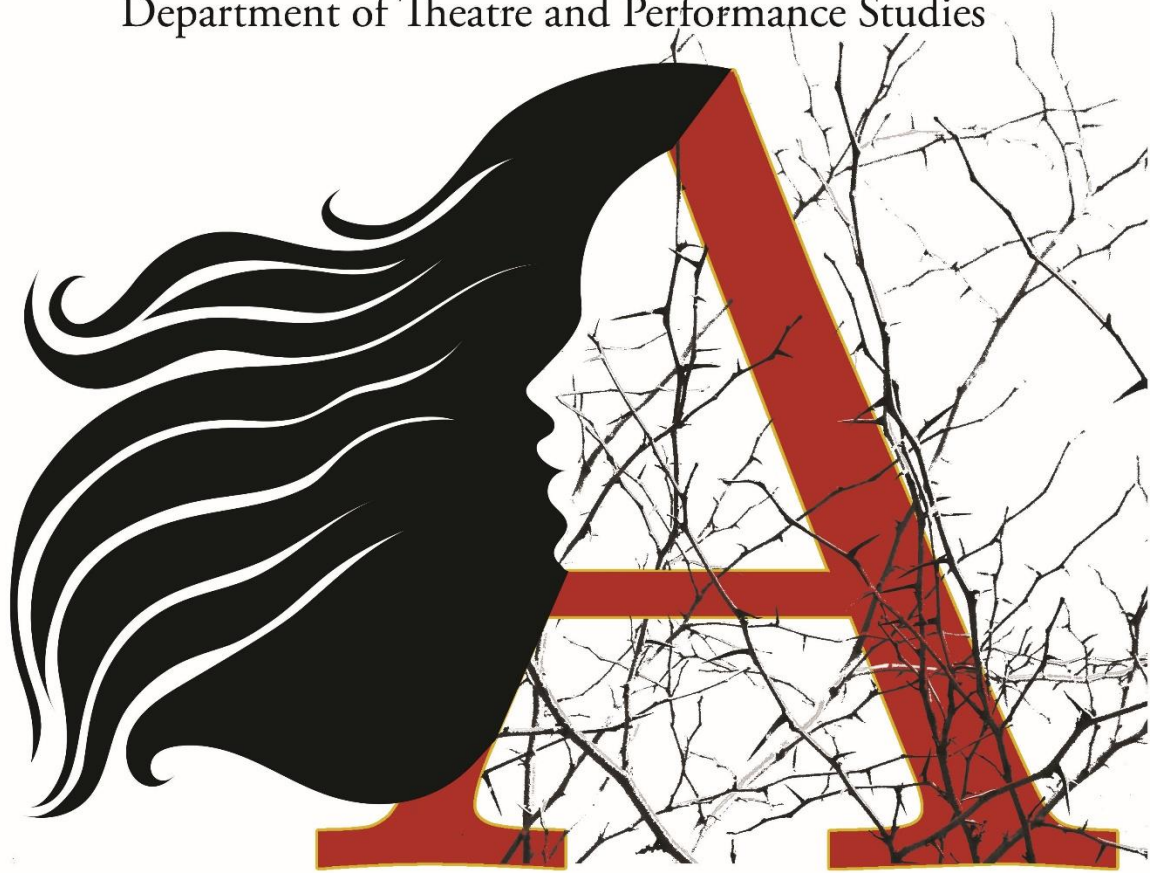


the SCARLET LETTER

By Sarah Saltwick, adapted from the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Presented by the

Department of Theatre and Performance Studies



November 4 at 8 p.m. & November 5, 2017 at 2 p.m.
GSU Center for Performing Arts

SYNOPSIS

A feminist adaptation of the original Hawthorne story, Sarah Saltwick's re-telling of the classic book is set in the historical time period that Hawthorne chose with reimagined characters and storylines. She paints the struggles –between judgment and freedom, desire and sin, the head and the heart—red. The scarlet “A,” meant to be a symbol of shame, becomes Hester's powerful symbol of identity. With vivid characters, iconic symbolism and veiled truths, *The Scarlet Letter* exposes the complexity of human nature and the capacity for both love and betrayal in all of us.

A young woman, Hester Prynne, has been found guilty of adultery and must wear a scarlet A on her dress as a sign of shame. Sequestered from the town, or place of her sin, Hester lives with her daughter Pearl at the edge of civilization—where the town meets the forest— and lives a quiet life doing needlework for the townspeople. Pearl is fascinated by the scarlet “A.” She is always asking questions about it and recognized her mother by it. Hester's long-lost husband, who had been presumed lost at sea, returns to town with a new name— Roger Chillingworth. He is a physician.

Dimmesdale's health has begun to fail, and Chillingworth, who is treating him with herbs, begins to suspect that the minister's illness is the result of some unconfessed guilt. He tries to get answers through what appears to be hypnosis, while the minister is in a drugged state. One evening Chillingworth sees something startling on the minister's pale chest: a scarlet A, and now knows Dimmesdale is Pearl's father.

When Pearl commits a crime of freeing Mistress Hibbins, who is suspected of witchcraft, the church members suggest that Pearl be taken away from Hester. Dimmesdale persuades the governor to let Pearl remain in Hester's care.

Tormented by his guilty conscience, Dimmesdale goes to the square where Hester was punished years earlier. Climbing the scaffold, he sees Hester and Pearl and calls to them to join him. He admits his guilt to them but cannot find the courage to do so publicly. Suddenly Dimmesdale sees a meteor forming what appears to be a gigantic A in the sky; Pearl points toward the shadowy figure of Roger Chillingworth.

Later, Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest, where she removes the scarlet letter from her dress and identifies her husband and his desire for revenge. In this conversation, she convinces Dimmesdale to leave Boston in secret on a ship to Europe where they can start life anew. Renewed by this plan, the minister seems to gain new energy. Pearl refuses to acknowledge either of them until Hester replaces her symbol of shame on her dress.

Returning to town, Dimmesdale loses heart in their plan: He has become a changed man and knows he is dying. Meanwhile, Hester is informed Chillingworth that he will also be a passenger.

On Election Day, Dimmesdale gives what is declared to be one of his most inspired sermons. But as the congregation leaves the church, Dimmesdale stumbles and almost falls. Seeing Hester and Pearl in the crowd he climbs upon the scaffold and confesses his sin, dying in Hester's arms. Later, witnesses swear that they saw a stigmata in the form of a scarlet A upon his chest.

Hester finally feels free and is able to share the story of her love and sin with Pearl.

CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Hester Prynne: A young woman sent to the colonies by her husband, who plans to join her later but is presumed lost at sea. She is a symbol of the acknowledged sinner; one whose transgression has been identified and who makes appropriate, socio-religious atonement.

Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale: Dimmesdale is the unmarried pastor of Hester's congregation; he is also the father of Hester's daughter, Pearl. He is a symbol of the secret sinner; one who recognizes his transgression but keeps it hidden and secret, even to his own downfall.

Pearl: Pearl is the illegitimate daughter of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. She is the living manifestation of Hester's sin and a symbol of the product of the act of adultery and of an act of passion and love.

Roger Chillingworth: The pseudonym assumed by Hester Prynne's aged scholar-husband. He is a symbol of evil, of the "devil's handyman," of one consumed with revenge and devoid of compassion.

Governor Bellingham: This actual historical figure, Richard Bellingham, was elected governor in 1641, 1654, and 1665. In *The Scarlet Letter*, he witnesses Hester's punishment and is a symbol of civil authority and, combined with John Wilson, of the Puritan Theocracy.

Mistress Hibbins: Another historical figure, Ann Hibbins, sister of Governor Bellingham, was executed for witchcraft in 1656. In the novel, she has insight into the sins of both Hester and Dimmesdale and is a symbol of super or preternatural knowledge and evil powers.

John Wilson: The historical figure on whom this character is based was an English-born minister who arrived in Boston in 1630. He is a symbol of religious authority and, combined with Governor Bellingham, of the Puritan Theocracy.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

Hester Prynne: Her quiet hides an inner fire. Stoic. Late 20s-30s.

Pearl Prynne: Half child, half spirit. Curious. The embodiment of Hester's heart. No one quite knows what to do with her. 7-9 years old.

Ann Hibbins: A possible witch hiding in plain sight. Sister of Governor Bellingham. Actor also plays **Mercy Wilson**, one of the Wilsons' girls, or **Martha Endicott**, wife of Judge Endicott. 30s-50s.

Ruth Campbell: Beatrice's older sister. Practical. Jealous of Hester. 30s.

Beatrice Brown: Ruth's younger sister. Pregnant. Sweet but meek. Actor also plays **Mercy Wilson** or **Martha Endicott**. Late 20s-30s.

Meg Wilson: A farmer. Wants all evil out of the town. Has a large family (children and pigs) to care for. 40s-50s.

Minister Arthur Dimmesdale: Romantic. An intellectual. Respected and admired by the town. His sickness defies easy diagnosis. 30s-40s.

Doctor Roger Chillingworth: Troubled. Powerful. Has cold hands. 40s-50s.

Governor Bellingham: Wants peace in his town. Cares about appearances. Protective of his sister. This actor also plays **Judge Endicott**, a harsh man. 40s-60s.

Henry Wilson: Farmer. Cares about the town and his wife. Works hard. 40s-50s.

The Town: Created by all actors with the exception of Hester and Pearl. The voice of the community. Often a voice of judgment. It is louder and larger than the group visible onstage. The voice echoes.

PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY: Sarah Saltwick

Sarah Saltwick writes fresh love stories between people, places, and things. Her plays are built of hope and danger; fantasy and history; that which is impossible and that which is necessary. In 2012 – 2013, her adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* was featured on UT Austin's mainstage, her play *She Creatures* was produced by Nouveau 47 in Dallas, TX and she developed *We Are StarStuff*, a theatrical experiment about the cosmos, for the Cohen New Works Festival presented by the University Co-op. Her work has been presented, developed or produced by the University of Texas at Austin, Nouveau 47, Westmont College, paper chairs theatre company, TheatreMasters, Scriptworks, WordBRIDGE, Bristol Riverside Theater, Shrewd Productions, and Last Frontier Theatre Conference. She has been a finalist for the Heideman Award and the Bay Area Playwrights Festival and was twice nominated for Best New Play by the Austin Critics Table. She's written plays inspired by giant rabbits, Texas, guacamole, Dolly Parton and more. Her fiction has been published by *Escape Into Life* and is forthcoming in *Timber Magazine*.

CONTEXT

The majority of Hawthorne's work takes America's Puritan past, but *The Scarlet Letter* uses the material to its fullest. The Puritans were a group of religious reformers who arrived in Massachusetts in the 1630s under the leadership of John Winthrop. The religious sect was known for its intolerance of dissenting ideas and lifestyles. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses the repressive, authoritarian Puritan society as an analogue for humankind in general. The Puritan setting also enables him to portray the human soul under extreme pressures. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth, while undoubtedly part of the Puritan society in which they live, also reflect universal and current experiences. Hawthorne speaks specifically to American issues, but he circumvents the aesthetic and thematic limitations that might accompany such a focus. His universality and his dramatic flair have ensured his place in the literary canon.

Sarah Saltwick's play is based on the book by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

From Sarah Saltwick

About this adaptation: This is a new play inspired by an old story. Plots have been changed, characters added, language re-imagined. Where Hawthorne offered the reader ambiguity, I offer my own dramatic interpretations. But at the heart of the play are the same essential struggles between judgment and freedom, desire and sin, the head and the heart. While the play remains in the time period of the novel, these struggles still speak to a contemporary audience that may also feel lost, lonely and judged.

From the Visiting Director Jess Hutchinson

This play is about how hate fueled by fear undoes a community, and the capacity for love to be bigger than those forces of destruction. We need to think about fear and hate and exclusion right now the way this play makes us think about those things because we're seeing the effects of this in Chicago, the election, the world – these are ancient problems we still haven't solved. The way this adaptation posits love as something worth fighting and risking our lives for feels as immediate as the dangers the play illuminates.

THEMES, MOTIFS and SYMBOLS

SIN, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Sin and knowledge are linked in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible begins with the story of Adam and Eve, who were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As a result of their knowledge, Adam and Eve are made aware of their humanness, and they are forced to toil and to procreate—two “labors” that seem to define the human condition. The experience of Hester and Dimmesdale recalls the story of Adam and Eve because, in both cases, sin results in expulsion and suffering. But it also results in knowledge—specifically, in knowledge of what it means to be human. For Hester, the scarlet letter functions as “her passport into regions where other women dared not tread,” leading her to “speculate” about her society and herself more “boldly” than anyone else in New England. As for Dimmesdale, the “burden” of his sin gives him “sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind, so that his heart vibrate[s] in unison with theirs.” His eloquent and powerful sermons derive from this sense of empathy. Hester and Dimmesdale contemplate their own sinfulness on a daily basis and try to reconcile it with their lived experiences. The Puritan elders, on the other hand, insist on seeing earthly experience as merely an obstacle on the path to heaven. Thus, they view sin as a threat to the community that should be punished and suppressed. Their answer to Hester’s sin is to ostracize her. Yet, Puritan society is stagnant, while Hester and Dimmesdale’s experience shows that a state of sinfulness can lead to personal growth, sympathy, and understanding of others. Paradoxically, these qualities are shown to be incompatible with a state of purity.

IDENTITY AND SOCIETY

After Hester is publicly shamed and forced to wear a badge of humiliation, her unwillingness to leave the area completely seems odd. She is not physically imprisoned, and leaving would allow her to remove the scarlet letter and resume a normal life. Hester’s behavior is premised on her desire to determine her own identity rather than to allow others to determine it for her. To her, running away or removing the letter would be an acknowledgment of society’s power over her: she would be admitting that the letter is a mark of shame and something from which she desires to escape. Instead, Hester stays, refiguring the scarlet letter as a symbol of her own experiences and character. Her past sin is a part of who she is; to pretend that it never happened would mean denying a part of herself. Thus, Hester very determinedly integrates her sin into her life.

Dimmesdale also struggles against a socially determined identity. As the community’s minister, he is more symbol than human being. Except for Chillingworth, those around the minister willfully ignore his obvious anguish, misinterpreting it as holiness. Unfortunately, Dimmesdale never fully recognizes the truth of what Hester has learned: that individuality and strength are gained by quiet self-assertion and by a reconfiguration, not a rejection, of one’s assigned identity.

CIVILIZATION VERSUS THE WILDERNESS

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the town and the surrounding forest represent opposing behavioral systems. The town represents civilization, a rule-bound space where everything one does is on display and where transgressions are quickly punished. The forest, on the other hand, is a space of natural rather than human authority. In the forest, society's rules do not apply, and alternate identities can be assumed. While this allows for misbehavior—Mistress Hibbins's midnight rides, for example—it also permits greater honesty and an escape from the repression of society. When Hester and Dimmesdale meet in the woods, for a few moments, they become happy young lovers once again. Hester's cottage, which, significantly, is located on the outskirts of town and at the edge of the forest, embodies both orders. It is her place of exile, which ties it to the authoritarian town, but because it lies apart from the town, it is a place where she can create for herself a life of relative peace.

NIGHT VERSUS DAY

By emphasizing the alternation between sunlight and darkness, the novel organizes the plot's events into two categories: those which are socially acceptable, and those which must take place covertly. Daylight exposes an individual's activities and makes him or her vulnerable to punishment. Night, on the other hand, conceals and enables activities that would not be possible or tolerated during the day—for instance, Dimmesdale's encounter with Hester and Pearl on the scaffold. This concept of visibility versus concealment are linked to two of the play's larger themes—the themes of inner versus socially assigned identity and of outer appearances versus internal states. Night is the time when inner natures can manifest themselves. During the day, truth may be hidden from public view, and secrets remain secrets.

NAMING CONVENTIONS

The names in this novel often seem to beg to be interpreted allegorically. Chillingworth is cold and inhuman and thus brings a “chill” to Hester's and Dimmesdale's lives. “Prynne” rhymes with “sin,” while “Dimmesdale” suggests “dimness”—weakness, indeterminacy, lack of insight, and lack of will, all of which characterize the young minister. The name “Pearl” evokes a biblical allegorical device—the “pearl of great price” that is salvation. This system of naming lends a profundity to the story, linking it to other allegorical works of literature such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* and to portions of the Bible. It also aligns the novel with popular forms of narrative such as fairy tales.

THE SCARLET LETTER

The scarlet letter is meant to be a symbol of shame, but instead it becomes a powerful symbol of identity to Hester. The letter's meaning shifts as time passes. Originally intended to mark Hester as an adulterer, the “A” eventually comes to stand for “Able.” Like Pearl, the letter functions as a physical reminder of Hester's affair with Dimmesdale. But, compared with a human child, the letter seems insignificant, and thus helps to point out the ultimate meaninglessness of the community's system of judgment and punishment. The child has been sent from God but the letter is merely a human contrivance. Additionally, the instability of the letter's apparent meaning calls into question society's ability to use symbols for ideological reinforcement.

PEARL

Although Pearl is a complex character, her primary function within the novel is as a symbol. Pearl is a sort of living version of her mother's scarlet letter. She is the physical consequence of sexual sin and the indicator of a transgression. Yet, even as a reminder of Hester's "sin," Pearl is more than a mere punishment to her mother: she is also a blessing. She represents not only "sin" but also the vital spirit and passion that engendered that sin. Thus, Pearl's existence gives her mother reason to live, bolstering her spirits when she is tempted to give up. It is only after Dimmesdale is revealed to be Pearl's father that Pearl can become fully "human."

PRIMARY DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Theatre and Performance Studies

English Literature

History

Psychology

Anthropology and Sociology

Philosophy

Identity Studies

Gender and Sexuality Studies

Religious Studies

Criminal Justice

SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss the function of physical setting in *The Scarlet Letter*. Do things happen in the forest that could not happen in the town? Does night bring with it a set of rules that differs from those of the daytime?

Discuss the relationship between the scarlet letter and Hester's identity. Why does she repeatedly refuse to stop wearing the letter? What is the difference between the identity she creates for herself and the identity society assigns to her?

Discuss the function of the following minor characters: Mistress Hibbins and Beatrice Brown.

Discuss the conflict between the Puritan law and the laws of nature or human law.

Explain the significance of the playwright's symbols, demonstrating how they evolve over time in the play. Do they have religious implications?

How do the townspeople's reactions to sin affect the evolution of the main characters and their futures?

In what ways could *The Scarlet Letter* be read as a commentary on the era of American history it describes? Could the play also be seen as embodying some of the aspects of American society today?

What does the play say about feminism? Had Hester not been a woman, would she have received the same punishment? Can we interpret Hester's actions as pointing to a larger political statement?

Children play a variety of roles in this novel. How do the children in the play differ from adults in their potential for expressing their perceptions about society?

How is the play a feminist revisioning?

Compare and contrast the novel with the play.