

Frightful dwarf plays primeval man in death throes

Theater in the cinema

Pathé continues bringing top theater to large screens. Usually live, but 'The Crucible with star actor Richard Armitage was recorded earlier.

One five star review followed another – last fall British critics almost unanimously praised “The Crucible”, the grim piece by Arthur Miller, performed in London's The Old Vic theater. The fiercely empathic ensemble whose movements occasionally remind one of a procession, and the light that pierced through the darkness, all of it was described in superlatives. However, most of the praise went to the lead actor Richard Armitage who plays a victim of repression in a deeply Christian village in 17th century America, where people fanatically hunted the devil. Armitage, best known as the frightful looking dwarf leader in the film series “The Hobbit”, made this John Proctor a primeval man in the throes of death and left a deep impression on critics and the public.

The play has by now finished its run. However, the video registration will be shown on Wednesday evening in dozens of cinemas around the world, including four cinemas in The Netherlands. The event is part of almost monthly theatrical releases in the cinema of English stage productions – sometimes recorded in advance but mostly transmitted live. Nine years ago the National Theatre in London started this initiative (with Helen Mirren in “Phèdre”) and in time also other companies have joined in. Next week, for instance, “Love's labours lost” by the Royal Shakespeare Company will be shown live in cinemas.

Armitage (43) himself has not yet seen “The Crucible” he says in an e-mail interview. “But what I have understood from the reactions of the public is that even the people that came to see the play two or three times – sometimes in the back of the theater, sometimes closer up front – have valued the large format. And it is unusual to see such close-ups in the theater.”

Arthur Miller wrote “The Crucible” in 1952 when the American senator Joe McCarthy led a ruthless hunt for communists. Miller found a parallel in the 17th century farming village of Salem. “The voice of the writer is crucial to understanding the piece,” Armitage says, “and especially crucial to understanding Proctor who I believe voices a lot of Miller's own feelings and insights. Miller knew that this piece would not resonate in his own era of conflict but that it would gain in meaning later. That is why he dove into history in order to be able to clarify what was happening in his world. He tells us: look at what we did to ourselves then, and look what we are doing to ourselves now.”

In The Netherlands from the start the piece was staged with the title “De vuurproef” (literal translation of “crucible”) - it was last staged by Ro Theater in 1994. Ten years later, at the Nationale Toneel, it was however named 'Heksenjacht' (= witch hunt), referring to the original events that Miller describes. “We knew that this would be a visceral performance,” Armitage says, “with a high vocal tempo and a duration of 3.5 hours. That is why we trained conscientiously every morning. I also had fighting lessons. And I had to lead a monk's life. No late nights and parties for me.”

In the meantime he has exchanged the stage again for film and TV roles. His leading role in Tolkien's “The Hobbit” has brought him international fame. He consciously took the risk that his role in this film series would overshadow his other work: “The advantages are enormous, and it was a popular novel from classic literature, written by a highly respected writer. Let's be honest – many people may now know me as Thorin Oakenshield, but I do not believe that I will from now on be typecast as a character with a vertical impediment. I have, however, in the meantime read a few scripts in which the man wears a beard.”