

Acting Edition

Becky Nurse of Salem

by Sarah Ruhl

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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BECKY NURSE OF SALEM was first produced regionally by Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Tony Taccone, Artistic Director & Susan Medak, Managing Director) in Berkeley, CA, in 2019. The performance was directed by Anne Kauffman, with scenic design by Louisa Thompson, costumes by Meg Neville, sound design by Mikhaal Sulaiman, lighting design by Russell H. Champ, and music by Daniel Kluger. The Production Stage Manager was Michael Suenkel. The cast was as follows:

BECKY Pamela Reed
BOB Adrian Roberts
GAIL Naian González Norvind
A WITCH Ruibo Qian
STAN Owen Campbell
SHELBY Elissa Beth Stebbins
THE JUDGE/THE JAILER Rod Gnapp

BECKY NURSE OF SALEM was first produced in New York by Lincoln Center Theater on December 4th, 2022. The performance was directed by Rebecca Taichman, with set design by Riccardo Hernandez, costumes by Emily Rebholz, sound design by Palmer Hefferan, lighting design by Barbara Samuels, projection design by Tal Yarden, and music composed by Suzzy Roche. The Production Stage Manager was Caroline Englander. The cast was as follows:

BECKY Deirdre O'Connell
BOB Bernard White
GAIL Alicia Crowder
A WITCH Candy Buckley
STAN Julian Sanchez
SHELBY Tina Benko
THE JUDGE/THE JAILER Thomas Jay Ryan

Developed with the support of New York Stage and Film & Vassar's
Powerhouse Season, Summer 2019.

CHARACTERS

BECKY – (in her mid-fifties to sixties), our hero, descended from Rebecca Nurse on one side

BOB – (in his mid-fifties to sixties), the man she loves

GAIL – (in her teens, but can be played by an actress in her twenties), Becky's granddaughter, also plays **ABIGAIL** in Act Two

A WITCH – (a woman in her sixties to eighties), plays a witch

STAN – (seventeen or eighteen but can be played by an actor in his twenties), a little bit androgynous.

SHELBY – (thirties), has several degrees in art history

THE JUDGE/THE JAILER – (man, ages thirty to fifty), virtuosic performer, also plays **MAGISTRATE** and **CREEPY VOICES**

SETTING

Salem, Massachusetts.

TIME

Act One – 2016, and an imagined 1692.

Act Two – 2017, and an imagined 1692.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many places can be indicated with one or two objects and light, without sketching in the details. For example, a bar is just a cash register on a counter. Scenes move fluidly. Subtitles might be used for scene titles to indicate location.

Act One

Bob's bar counter.

A museum with wax figures and weird historical dioramas.

Becky's living room, which might be just an old couch and a sweet old broken lamp.

A Marriott hotel counter.

A psychic's table.

Act Two

The town jail.

A courtroom.

And the outdoors, near a parking lot and an open sky.

*For all the so-called witches who got hanged with no proper burial,
for all the women who are still called witches in our place and our time,
for all the young girls who played Abigail in the school play,
and for my grandmother, Kay Kehoe.*

ACT ONE

1. At the Museum. A Tour.

Becky Nurse at the museum where she leads a group of school children.

BECKY. My name is Becky Nurse and I'll be your tour guide.

In the dark, a not-very-subtle voice comes on:

CREEPY VOICE. Do you believe in witches? Your ancestors did... Welcome to the Salem Museum of Witchcraft.

BECKY. Okay. I'm actually related to Rebecca Nurse – one of the so-called witches – you can see her in this wax statue.

Lights up on a weird wax statue of an old woman in pilgrim attire.

I'm like her great, great, great, great, great something once removed. Lucille Ball's related to her too. Fact. Mitt Romney too. Fact. Fun family reunions. Just kidding, I was never invited. Anyway, Rebecca Nurse was this old pious woman, a little hard of hearing in one ear. You might say she was put to death because she couldn't hear the judge's question.

She gestures to an invisible diorama with wax figures.

And here you'll see a wax figure of John Proctor. You must know of him from that play *The Crucible*.

(Pause.)

BECKY. No – you haven’t read *The Crucible*? I thought every high school kid had to read it. No?

Okay. Well, then I’ll tell you the story of it. It’s like our goddam Christmas pageant here in Salem.

It goes like this:

Little Betty is lying in kind of a coma. But she keeps heading to the window to fly out. Her father is concerned. So they call a doctor. Meanwhile Abigail, the niece, who is described as a “beautiful dissembler” in the play – basically, she’s an actress – comes in. So Abigail admits that she and her friends have been dancing naked in the forest. Abigail’s worried she’ll get in trouble for dancing naked in the forest. So she wakes up Betty. And Betty says Abigail drank blood to kill John Proctor’s pregnant wife. Abigail says Shut it, Betty. We just danced naked in the forest and tried to talk to dead babies and *that’s it*.

Now, in the *play*, the reason Abigail wanted to get revenge on John Proctor’s pregnant wife (this is what I could never really wrap my head around) is that this young girl wants to fuck an old man – Sorry, sleep with?

You guys are in high school, you know all about this stuff. Anyway, in the play Abigail was seventeen but in real life she was eleven. Fact. In the play he’s like: “You whore! Stop tempting me.” And I’m like, um, she’s eleven. More likely that John Proctor molested – (*Sees a teacher who looks disapproving.*) – sorry – courted – Abigail.

Let’s move on.

(*She gestures to another invisible diorama.*)

Now Tituba was the first woman to confess to witchcraft, which was the practical thing to do, because if you didn’t confess, you got hung. It’s like, some white pilgrim lady

asked Tituba to do a spell and then called her a witch for doing it. Sort of like an old man asking a little girl to perform a sex act and then calling her a whore.

Now, here you'll see the courtroom where these bewitched girls started having these weird fits.

Thrashing around – it was *violent*. Like one even dislocated an elbow. And the girls start naming the women in the town as witches, like Sarah Good, a single mother without a lot of money. She was said to mutter after begging. Like she'd knock on your door and say, "Can I have a potato? Or some firewood?" And people would say no. And she'd go off muttering "You goddam selfish piece of shit." And people thought she was cursing them. Her daughter Dorcas who was five had to come to jail with her and poor little Dorcas went crazy in jail. I mean who puts a child in a cage with her mother?

This is a disturbing thought. Becky recovers.

Someone asks a question: Don't some people say that the girls were poisoned by rye bread?

What's that? Yeah, some people say the girls' jerking around looks like rye bread poisoning. I'd like to write my own play of the Salem witch trials. I'd have a woman baking bread for half an hour. Then I'd show three girls eating it. Then I'd show them acting really strange. Then I'd show a lot of women getting hung from a tree.

I'll take you to the gift shop now.

2. Bob's Tavern. Lock her Up.

Becky at a local bar.

A bartender named Bob pours a beer for her.

A TV is on, with a Trump rally blaring.

People chant from the TV:

CROWD. Lock her up! Lock her up! Lock her up!

BECKY. Can you turn that shit off, Bob?

Bob turns it off.

Ugh, the world is so loud –

BOB. You okay, Becky?

You tired?

BECKY. Tired of giving tours, maybe.

BOB. What else would you do?

BECKY. Move.

BOB. Leave Salem?

BECKY. Sure, leave Salem.

BOB. I've known you too long, Becky. You're not leaving Salem.

BECKY. I could!

BOB. So where would you go?

BECKY. I don't know – Idaho?

BOB. Who would you know in goddam Idaho?

BECKY. No one. That's the point. No one would know me as the descendent of Rebecca Nurse, slightly deaf witch hung on Gallows Hill, which is now the site of a Dunkin' Donuts.

BOB. Gallows Hill was not at the Dunkin' Donuts.

BECKY. Bob, it is. Not the Dunkin' Donuts on Main Street – the other Dunkin' Donuts.

BOB. Bad coffee with a shitload of sugar.

BECKY. You a snob now?

BOB. No...

BECKY. I'm not a coffee drinker. Too bitter.

BOB. Sure you don't like bitter things?

BECKY. Yeah, I hate myself cuz I'm too bitter. Ha ha.

BOB. Well, I heard they invented coffee so Sufi poets could stay awake all night having mystical experiences and writing poetry and now we just drink it to get through the day.

BECKY. Where the hell did you hear that Bob?

BOB. PBS. PBS has great documentaries.

BECKY. The point is: The postcards I sell at the museum – that scary looking tree, with evil arms pointing to the sky? It's not where they hung the witches, it's just some tree. Gallows Hill is at the exact site of the old Dunkin' Donuts.

BOB. Nope, not my Dunkin's.

BECKY. THE OTHER DUNKIN' DONUTS, Bob.

BOB. If you say so. I heard it was at the Walgreens.

BECKY. Who the hell have you been talking to, Bob? I hate that goddam Walgreens. Anyway, my new boss annoys the shit out of me.

BOB. I love office politics. You own your own business, you got no villains. Sometimes you need a villain to get through your day.

BECKY. So you say. But you don't have to deal with *Shelby*.

BOB. What's wrong with Shelby?

BECKY. Oh she's so... (*making a face*) smug. And she's cutting jobs and putting in more videos so you don't need real people to give tours anymore. You just press the button and some creepy voice says: "Do you believe in witches? Your ancestors did." They hired her when Donna got the cancer and the board wants the museum to make money. Who ever heard of a frigging museum that turned a profit? And she wants me to follow the script all the time.

BOB. You don't follow the script?

BECKY. Well, the script bores me sometimes and then I deviate slightly.

BOB. Oh – well I could see where that would be – Maybe a mild irritation for her. If your job is to follow the script.

BECKY. I know more than Shelby about the witch trials. That's the trouble. I know too much. She might be a professor, but if she were a good professor she'd be teaching at a college, right – not working at the Salem Museum of freaking Witchcraft. And she wears – these – *blouses* – with these little *ties* – she thinks she's better than everyone in town – she thinks Gallows Hill was down by the Walgreens because someone at frigging Harvard said so, but if you're from this town you know that Gallows Hill is at the goddam Dunkin' Donuts! In the exact spot where you eat your morning jelly roll –

BOB. I hate jelly rolls – it's disconcerting when jelly flies into your mouth –

BECKY. Right, fine, or your CRUELLER – Some poor woman was being hanged. And denied a burial. With her daughters watching and weeping their eyes out.

Pause.

Becky is sad.

BOB. How is Gail doing?

BECKY. Oh, a little better.

BOB. When's she coming home from the hospital?

BECKY. They won't say. Once you get in there, it's up to the shrinks when you get out.

BOB. Right.

BECKY. Sometimes I worry so goddam much it takes up my whole goddam life. I don't know if I was cut out to be a mother. Or a grandmother. Or whatever the hell I am.

BOB. You were definitely cut out to be a mother.

BECKY. Thanks, Bob. I didn't exactly succeed at it. If you judge by outcome.

BOB. I don't judge by outcome.

BECKY. Then how would you know?

BOB. I can tell. From your worry.

BECKY. Oh right from my white hairs?

BOB. You don't have any white hairs.

Becky shows him a white hair.

BECKY. See?

BOB. Your hair smells good – like orange juice.

BECKY. Thanks. I dip it in my goddam Tropicana every morning.

BOB. You do?

BECKY. No. I better get back to work. Lunch break's over.

BOB. This one's on me.

3. At the Museum.

SHELBY. The schoolteachers were very troubled when you said “fuck.”

BECKY. I’m sorry, it just slipped out. I corrected myself and said sleep with. Immediately.

SHELBY. And “whore”?

BECKY. The word “whore” is in *The Crucible* like eight times, for Christ’s sake, and it’s required reading.

SHELBY. In any case, today’s group was from a Catholic school. The nuns complained.

BECKY. Oh – Well...nuns...you know.

SHELBY. Do you have your lunch at the bar?

BECKY. Sometimes.

SHELBY. Do you drink by any chance on your lunch break?

BECKY. Drink what?

SHELBY. Alcohol.

BECKY. I have a ploughman’s lunch. Pickles and cheese. It comes with beer on the side.

SHELBY. Well, regardless, we just can’t have you going off script. We have thousands of school children here every week. We’re going to have to let you go, Becky.

BECKY. Let me go? I’ve worked here for twenty years, and my God, I’m *from here*. I know more about the trials than anyone in this town. I may not have a college degree, but I should be running this museum by now.

Shelby smiles.

Are you laughing at me?

SHELBY. No, it’s just – you’d need a college degree to run a museum, I’d imagine.

BECKY. You are such a bitch.

SHELBY. You're fired.

BECKY. You can't fire me.

SHELBY. You just called me a bitch, Becky. What do you expect?

BECKY. I shouldn't have said that.

SHELBY. You can clear out your desk by the end of the day.

BECKY. I don't have a fucking desk.

SHELBY. Well that makes it easier, I guess.

BECKY. My own ancestor was hung in this town!

SHELBY. Hanged.

BECKY. What?

SHELBY. People are hanged, paintings are hung.

BECKY. Jesus Christ, I have to support my granddaughter.

SHELBY. That's beyond my purview.

BECKY. Your purview is to fill up the goddam gift shop with *Harry Potter* trinkets and fire the locals to save money. Because no one wants to remember a goddam atrocity in this country until they can make a buck from it. You know what's wrong with people like you?

SHELBY. People like me?

BECKY. Yeah, people like you. You act like you care about other women on paper but when it comes to actual women you toss them under the bus.

SHELBY. Becky, I don't believe in people like you and people like me. We need to lift each other up. That's what this museum should be about, teaching women not to accuse each other, and not to be divided by the patriarchy.

BECKY. What about my health insurance?

SHELBY. I believe you can purchase COBRA for six months.

BECKY. I'm taking Rebecca Nurse with me.

SHELBY. You can't take the wax works –

BECKY. She's my birthright –

SHELBY. Becky!

BECKY. She belongs with me and my family –

SHELBY. Security!

Becky runs out with the wax statue.

4. The Pilgrims and the Homebodies.

Bob pours Becky a drink.

BECKY. I can't afford fucking COBRA. And with my own health crap, and Gail in and out of the hospital –

BOB. Did you ask politely for your job back?

BECKY. I called her a bitch and ran out with a wax statue.

BOB. You're lucky she didn't press charges.

BECKY. She called a security guard so I gave it back.

BOB. You're always going and shooting yourself in the foot. Why do you do that?

BECKY. I get so mad. Sometimes I walk around thinking: I'd like to take my shoe off and just throw it at a person.

(A moment.)

You got the classifieds here?

BOB. Yup.

BECKY. Thanks.

Let's see...

Full-time nurse, nope –

Overnight clerk at the Marriott...I could do that...

BOB. I need my sleep, personally.

BECKY. I like my sleep, but I need the money, personally.

Bob – does it ever make you mad how hard it is to live and get by?

BOB. I'm not really an angry person.

BECKY. No, you're not. Remember, in high school, when you and the guys let a greased pig out in the cafeteria as a prank and you got all the blame for it? Because

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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