

MRT has spooky, otherworldly tale of guilt, redemption



Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

Abigail (Rachel Napoleon) helps heal John Brown (Jon Kovach) of his smallpox, in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's presentation of "Abigail/1702."

By KATHLEEN PALMER
Staff Writer

What causes more dread and anguish: Fear of your posthumous comeuppance, or day-to-day living with your own guilt-ridden mind?

Through Nov. 6, Merrimack Repertory Theatre will present "Abigail/1702" at the Nancy L. Donohue Theater, 50 E. Merrimack St., in Lowell, Mass. The play by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa explores the telltale heart of a young woman battling her own demons –

and perhaps a literal one.

Picking up where Arthur Miller's classic "The Crucible" leaves off, we meet Abigail, tormented by guilt at her role of false accuser in the Salem Witch Trials. Abigail – portrayed by the riveting Rachel Napoleon – tries to run away from her old life and start anew in Boston. But she made otherworldly promises back then, and an evil presence is bent on making sure she keeps them.

It's another slam-dunk of

a set for MRT, which sets the bar very high visually. Abigail's coarse, early-colonial forest dwelling is a beautifully created arched roof of braided sticks, with a sparse, simple interior appropriate for the year 1702 and its poor inhabitant. There's even a dirt garden on stage. Anne Kennedy's costumes also set the tone in somber colors and fabrics – except for the brilliant exception of sparkling ruby jewels adorning one character. Lighting by Maria-

THEATER REVIEW

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'Abigail/1702'

WHEN: Through Nov. 6. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theatre, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$15-\$48. Senior, military discounts.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: www.mrt.org/show/abigail1702.

Cristina Fuste, with effects such as lightning bolts and a dominating moon, create a truly spooky environment throughout the show, as do David Remedios' startling sound effects (including some very creepy voice-overs).

One of the things I love about MRT is how often the plays run sans intermission; this one clipped along at less than 90 minutes for the performance I attended, and the story certainly lends itself to a nonstop build to the exciting finish. We're whipped along as Abigail's new life unravels and spins toward what seems to be an inevitable conclusion; but don't assume you know the ending until the final blackout.

The show is a wonderful blend of heart-quicken- ing spookiness, surprising moments of humor,

glimpses of romance and desire, and every emotion under the sun – or moon. Napoleon leaves it all on stage in her performance of the tortured Abigail. Jon Kovach believably portrays John Brown, a sailor with a questionable past who seeks her out for help in clearing his smallpox – and perhaps his conscience. His quiet masculinity and their slowly burgeoning attraction burn in the background, and finally drive Abigail to make amends for her own past. Mark Kincaid and Celeste Oliva each play multiple roles – tightly, cleanly and powerfully. Youngster

Trevor Dame debuts and also plays a surprisingly key role.

At the 4 p.m. performance this Saturday, MRT will provide free childcare by licensed professionals from Acre Family Child-care, so parents of younger kids (to age 10) can see the show without creating their own burden of guilt – though my nearly-11-year-old was enraptured by this show and was not creeped out.

Allegedly.

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