



PHOTOS BY NICK LACY

JUDY DWORIN DANCERS, from left, Tracy Lombardo, Heidi Klecak and Alexa Melonopoulos are part of "The Witching Hour" at Hartford's Charter Oak Cultural Center through Saturday. Below, from left, are Klecak, Melonopoulos and Lisa Matias.

Addie Avery was 12 when history came alive for her. The dusty recitation of facts and figures gave way to a vivid story about people trapped in a nightmare.

One of those people was her nine-times great grandmother, Mary Sanford, who was executed as a witch in Hartford in 1662.

As Salem, Mass., prepares for a month in which it will make money off its legacy of hanging 19 young women by their necks until they were dead, Avery and the Judy Dworin Performance Project are attempting to bring Hartford's history to life for the rest of us.

Dworin has created "The Witching Hour," a production that combines theater, puppetry, dance and stubborn, sober history.

The show, which starts today and runs through Saturday at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford, is part of a monthlong collaboration with the Connecticut Antiquarian & Landmarks Society (soon to be

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When Fear Reigns

A Performance Focuses On The Lessons Of Hartford's Witch Hunts

BY MATTEAGAN • COURANT STAFF WRITER



Witch Hunts And Their Legacy

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Connecticut Landmarks) and Eastern Connecticut State University that seeks to explore the trials and their legacy in greater depth.

"The story is still relevant today," Dworin says. "The scapegoating that took place still takes place. That is one of the reasons people keep coming back to this time and these stories."

The show's narrative begins with Avery, in her room, at her desk, scanning through the pages of history.

Something in the book touches her imagination, and soon she is transported back to when the Hartford area was mostly open, rocky farmland.

"The way this starts is exactly the way it happened for me," Avery says. "I could see it happening."

The show focuses on the story of Katherine Harrison, who was accused of witchcraft and eventually banished from her home in Wethersfield. Harrison is portrayed as a woman pushing against the boundaries of Puritan society. She rose from servant to widowed landowner of substantial wealth. She was interested in astrology and fortune-telling. She spoke her mind

more freely than women were allowed in 17th century Connecticut.

Her wealth made her a target for envious neighbors, and her interests allowed suspicion to build.

Dworin is not without sympathy for the people caught up in this hysteria.

The puritanical influence is driven home by the looming presence of three mammoth puppets who sit in judgment on the accused women, but their words, spoken in booming baritone, are often restrained.

There is no doubt they live in a society dominated by fear, but they are not raving things divorced from all reason.

"Magic was real for them, and it was something to be feared," Dworin says.

Others suggest we have repeated the mistakes of the Puritans.

"You look at the push for the Iraq war," says Sheryl Hack, executive director of the Landmarks society. "If you didn't support the war you were unpatriotic and un-American and only now is that [stance] being pulled apart."

Hack's involvement represents a new approach for an organization that preserves and promotes historic houses.

"We are dedicated to telling stories," Hack says. "All agree that a theatrical

production can touch the heart and soul much more fully than an inanimate object. We really need to be looking for these points of access."

The Landmarks society has organized a Saturday walking tour of Wethersfield, which highlights the places where many of the people involved in the trials lived. The tour starts at 1 p.m. at the Buttolph-Williams House in Old Wethersfield.

They are also sponsoring a symposium Nov. 7 at Eastern, which will focus on the impact on the witch hunts and their legacy. The day will close with a final performance of "The Witching Hour."

For Avery, and her mother Deborah, this remains a personal journey. They are hoping the performance helps build momentum for legislation they have proposed exonerating Mary Sanford and the other women executed in the witch scares of the 1660s.

And Avery is hoping people will start to look at history as something that happened to real people rather than a mere roster of dates. She says that will help people see the connections between an era when people were tortured and our modern times when people are still



NICK LACY

DANCERS (from left) Lesley Farlow, Daniella Perez and Alexa Melonopoulos perform in "The Witching Hour," the story of a Wethersfield woman accused of witchcraft.

tortured.

"We think torture is wrong," she says. "We just don't think it's wrong enough that we won't do it."

THE WITCHING HOUR will be performed today through Saturday, 7:30

p.m., at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, 21 Charter Oak Ave, Hartford. Tickets are \$20, \$10 for seniors and \$5 for students. For tickets to Friday and Saturday performances call 860-249-1207. For information, visit jdpe.info or ctlandmarks.org.