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When Fear Becomes Authority

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Arthur Miller's "Hexenjagd" asks a question that remains profoundly unsettling: what happens when a community becomes more committed to preserving its certainty than discovering the truth? Theater Scala's production, directed by Sam Madwar and premiered on 1 October 2026, brings this disturbing drama to its October programme. The choice offers audiences an opportunity to confront a theatrical world in which fear becomes a source of authority and accusation acquires a momentum almost impossible to resist.

The published synopsis begins with an apparently contained transgression: women are observed dancing in the woods, and Salem's inhabitants become convinced that the devil is among them. From this suspicion emerges a destructive cycle of mass hysteria and denunciation. That progression gives the drama its terrifying logic. The threat does not arrive from outside the community; it develops through the explanations people accept, the accusations they repeat and the certainty they demand from others.

What makes this premise theatrically compelling is the transformation of private anxiety into public power. An accusation can offer protection, recognition or the opportunity to settle an old grievance. Once suspicion becomes an accepted language, almost any behaviour can be interpreted as evidence. Silence appears evasive; protest sounds defensive; hesitation invites further scrutiny. The dramatic trap lies in a system that can absorb every answer without ever allowing its own assumptions to be questioned.

For a director, such material offers more than an invitation to portray collective panic. Its deeper challenge is to make the process persuasive. A community cannot become frightening merely because everyone raises their voice. The more disturbing possibility is that cruelty develops through recognisable habits: deference, embarrassment, wounded pride, the desire to belong. The audience must be able to understand how people enter the machinery of persecution without being asked to excuse what they do.

From a theatrical perspective, "Hexenjagd" invites particular attention to the politics of listening. Who receives an uninterrupted hearing? Whose words are immediately doubted? Who can change the meaning of another person's statement simply by repeating it with authority? These are questions that theatre can embody with exceptional clarity. A pause, a redirected glance or a refusal to acknowledge another speaker can reveal an imbalance of power before any formal judgment is announced.

Equally important is the relationship between individual vulnerability and collective behaviour. A group

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can offer reassurance, but it can also make dissent feel unbearable. The tension between those possibilities gives this material its emotional reach. The spectator is invited not simply to condemn an intolerant community, but to consider the attractions of conformity: its safety, its apparent moral clarity and its promise that responsibility belongs somewhere else.

The central word is conscience. Yet conscience becomes dramatically interesting only when it carries a cost. To disagree with a powerful consensus may mean surrendering acceptance, security or reputation. That is why the ethical questions suggested by the play resist easy applause. It is comfortable to admire resistance from a distance; it is harder to imagine the precise moment when one would risk becoming the next object of suspicion.

A thoughtful encounter with “Hexenjagd” should therefore leave little room for historical complacency. The point is not merely that people elsewhere, or long ago, believed dangerous things. The more searching question concerns the conditions under which any community stops distinguishing conviction from proof. That distinction is fragile whenever uncertainty becomes intolerable and agreement begins to function as a test of loyalty.

Madwar’s production places this material before Theater Scala’s audience in a run listed from 1 to 22 October 2026. Without firsthand observation, judgments about the ensemble’s performances, visual language or dramatic pacing would be premature. Nevertheless, the production’s premise offers substantial grounds for interest: a tightly consequential story in which the destruction of trust becomes a public event, and every attempt at self-preservation can deepen the crisis. The lasting invitation of “Hexenjagd” is to examine not only the person who accuses, but also the person who watches, hesitates and eventually agrees.

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