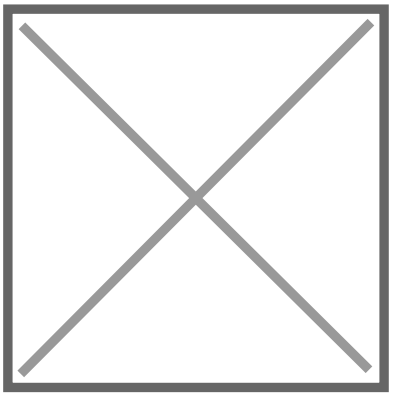

PYG Review: Becky, Nurse of Salemâ??Returning to the Past to Tell History Differently

Description

Salt Lake City, UTâ?? *Becky, Nurse of Salem*, in development since 2019, grew out of Sarah Ruhlâ??s sustained interrogation of *The Crucible* as the dominant American lens on the Salem witch trials. Presented by Pygmalion Productions, the play rejects reverent reenactment in favor of a restless conversation between past and present, using dark humor and rage to ask what it means to live inside a legacy shaped by accusation and erasure.

That interrogation is carried not only through language but through the body. Director Morag Shepherdâ??s striking movement choreography gives the play a visceral physical vocabulary. In several sequences, Lily Hildenâ??s character, Gail, is lifted into the airâ??her body hoisted, shaken, and displacedâ??rendering accusation as physical action rather than speech. The movement renders womenâ??s vulnerability visible as force: bodies acted upon, elevated, and exposed, rather than merely symbolized.

The result feels especially potent in a Utah context. Where local audiences are often offered narratives designed for clarity or uplift, *Becky, Nurse of Salem* allows women to be funny, furious, grieving, and wrongâ??sometimes all at once, without demanding moral neatness or redemption.

> An elderly woman poses with a mannequin dressed in traditional maid attire, both wearing white bon
> *Teresa Sanderson, Photo Credit: Robert Holman*

Structure, Labor, and Survival

At the center of *Becky, Nurse of Salem* is Becky, a contemporary woman in modern-day Salem who traces her lineage to Rebecca Nurse, executed during the witch trials. Working as a guide at a Salem witch museum, Becky delivers rehearsed scripts to tourists who want tidy history and marketable trauma. When she loses her job and begins to spiralâ??emotionally and financiallyâ??the play fractures, slipping between the present and 1692.

Beckyâ??s tour-guide monologue exposes how historical violence is flattened into customer service, sustained by souvenir shops, chain stores, and wax figures. When Becky deviates from the approved script and is replaced by a more standardized, sanitized form of historical narration, Ruhl makes a blunt point: the system does not just manage history; it removes the local body who might contradict it. Human memory becomes a liability. Salemâ??s violence is not only rememberedâ??it is monetized.


Black and white cover of 'The Crucible' by Arthur Miller featuring three characters in a dramatic scen
The Cover of an edition of the play The Crucible by Arthur Miller

Context & Background

Becky, Nurse of Salem emerges as Sarah Ruhlâ??s response to *The Crucible* and its long-standing authority as the dominant American framework for understanding the Salem witch trials. Rather than rejecting Millerâ??s play outright, Ruhl writes in dialogue with itâ??interrogating its moral assumptions and, in particular, its elevation of John Proctor as the storyâ??s ethical conscience.

One of Millerâ??s most consequential choices is also one of the most revealing. In order to render Proctor tragic and redeemable, *The Crucible* ages Abigail Williams up to seventeen, despite her being eleven in historical records. Ruhlâ??s play insists on restoring what that framing obscures: the material vulnerability of young women whose â??choicesâ?• were constrained by dependence, precarity, and punishment.


A couple embracing outdoors, smiling and sharing an affectionate moment, surrounded by trees.
Photo Credit: The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images

Ruhl has suggested that this narrative distortion cannot be fully separated from Millerâ??s personal and artistic context. *The Crucible* was written during a period when Millerâ??who was married at the timeâ??was involved with a much younger Marilyn Monroe, an age and power imbalance that complicates the playâ??s recasting of coercion as tragic romance. Monroe later expressed discomfort with how Miller transformed their relationship into material, particularly in *After the Fall*, where female vulnerability becomes the terrain for male moral reckoning. That history sharpens Ruhlâ??s critique: not of autobiography itself, but of how often male guilt is granted complexity while womenâ??s harm becomes raw material.

Written during the height of the Cold War, *The Crucible* also functions as an allegory for McCarthyism, reframing Salem around state persecution and the moral crisis of men asked to confess or name names. That political intervention was urgent in its momentâ??but it also reoriented the playâ??s moral center. By privileging male conscience and resistance, the allegory renders gendered coercion narratively secondary. *Becky, Nurse of Salem* does not reject this history; it exposes its cost.

That critique is made physical in this production. Shepherd has been explicitâ??both in rehearsal and publiclyâ??about resisting inherited narratives that center a single virtuous man while obscuring the deaths of women. As she has noted, *The Crucible* tells the story of one manâ??s moral struggle, while the historical Salem witch trials resulted in the deaths of fourteen women, many of them young. That imbalance shapes her staging choices. Lily Hildenâ??s physical performanceâ??twitching, shaking, repeatedly lifted and displacedâ??renders accusation as something done to womenâ??s bodies rather than spoken about them. Desire, shame, and temptation are no longer abstract moral ideas, but forces

imposed through power, age, and control.

What is at stake, Ruhl suggests, is not whether *The Crucible* matteredâ??but whose harm it asked audiences to overlook. Revisiting Salem now means asking different questions: whose pain is centered, whose conscience is protected, and whose bodies become collateral.

A theatrical performance scene featuring actors in various costumes: one dressed as a policeman, a

Design, Sound, and Staging

Staged in the Leona Wagner Black Box, the productionâ??s design choices favor intimacy and flexibility over spectacle. The space shifts fluidly between museum, courtroom, home, and ritual site, reinforcing the playâ??s refusal of linear time. Rather than anchoring the audience in a single era, the environment remains porousâ??capable of holding both present-day Salem and 1692 at once. History is not reenacted here; it arrives.

Director & Movement / Choreography â?? Morag Shepherdâ??s direction emphasizes fluidity, rupture, and embodied tension, allowing comedy and horror to coexist without smoothing their edges. The episodic structure moves quickly but never casually, keeping the audience alert to how past and present continually interrupt one another. Moments of stillness and acceleration are carefully calibrated, reinforcing the playâ??s sense of precarity. This is some of Shepherdâ??s strongest work yet.

Actors rehearsing a scene on stage with a green screen backdrop and various props including chairs

Stage Manager & Light/Sound Operator â?? Jennie Pettâ??s dual role is essential to the productionâ??s precision. Seamless transitions support the playâ??s rapid tonal and temporal shifts, maintaining momentum while ensuring that moments of rupture land with clarity rather than confusion.

Set Design â?? Syd Shoellâ??s minimalist, adaptive design allows the Leona Wagner Black Box to function simultaneously as a museum, courtroom, home, and ritual space. The exposed flexibility keeps the audience oriented while reinforcing the playâ??s refusal to separate past from present. Nothing is hidden; transformation happens in full view.

Lighting Design â?? Kai Sadowskiâ??s lighting shapes mood and memory, collapsing historical distance and signaling shifts in perception. Rainbow lightingâ??used sparingly and intentionallyâ??draws on a familiar theatrical vocabulary to mark the unnatural, visually cueing moments when reality destabilizes, and the world slips out of alignment.

Soundscape Design â?? Mikal Troy Kleeâ??s soundscape supports the playâ??s emotional accumulation, blending ambient, procedural, and ritual elements. Sound functions less as background than as atmosphere, reinforcing the sense that Beckyâ??s world is tightening rather than progressingâ??cycling, collapsing, and folding back on itself as past and present bleed together.

Live Sound Effects & Design â?? McKell Petersenâ??s live sound work deepens the productionâ??s immediacy and instability. During Beckyâ??s drug-induced spiral, sound shifts from atmospheric support into something invasive: synthesizer-driven music pulses, distorts, and fractures in real time, blurring the line between internal experience and external reality. Rather than signaling a clean theatrical break, the moment feels disorientingly present, allowing the audience to hearâ??and

feelâ??Beckyâ??s unraveling. It is one of the productionâ??s most visceral choices, collapsing the distance between historical accusation and contemporary crisis.

Costume Design â?? Rebecca Richards faces the considerable challenge of designing for two Salems at onceâ??seventeenth-century and contemporaryâ??without allowing either to harden into period display. Her costumes move fluidly across eras, emphasizing continuity rather than historical distance. Clothing becomes a visual reminder that the structures governing womenâ??s bodies and behavior persist, even as their outward forms change.

> A man with a beard and a plaid shirt embraces a woman wearing a patterned shirt, both smiling agai
> *David Hanson and Teresa Sanderson, Photo Credit: Robert Holman*

Performances

The ensemble meets the playâ??s tonal volatility with precision and care. Performers move fluidly between satire and devastation, often pivoting mid-scene without smoothing over the emotional rupture. Moments of comedy land sharply, but never at the expense of the harm being named; moments of grief are allowed to remain unresolved. The cumulative effect is a performance landscape that mirrors Beckyâ??s unravelingâ??restless, urgent, and unsentimentalâ??while keeping the audience fully implicated.

Teresa Sanderson anchors the production with a performance that is by turns caustically funny, emotionally raw, and quietly devastating. Her comedic timing is precise and unforced, allowing humor to land cleanly without undercutting the stakes of the moment. At the same time, Sanderson brings a distinctly maternal warmth to Beckyâ??an instinct toward care, protection, and endurance that makes her unraveling all the more painful to witness. That comfort never tips into sentimentality; instead, it underscores what is being eroded. Beckyâ??s exhaustion reads not as chaos, but as the slow collapse of someone who has been holding everything together for far too long.

David Hanson brings an easy likability and grounded calm to Bob, a character whose appeal lies in his apparent steadiness. Hansonâ??s performance is restrained and unshowy, offering warmth without insistence and presence without pressure. Bob listens more than he speaks, and when he does, it is to articulate moments of clarity. For example, when he says, â??At the end of the day, I think you can divide up Salem into two kinds of people: the ones who are buried in the town of their birth, and the ones who are buried way far away.â?• The line lands not as judgment but as observation, delivered with a gentle assurance that feels genuinely attentive rather than corrective.

Reb Fleming delivers a phenomenal performance as the modern witchâ??transactional, soothing, evasive, and unnervingly plausible. In the scene where the witch claims to see Beckyâ??s daughter and begins speaking on her behalf, Flemingâ??s control is extraordinary. The shift is almost imperceptible: her voice steadies, sharpens, and takes on the focused authority associated with practices like mediumship or trance-based channeling. Whether the moment is read as manipulation, projection, or genuine spiritual transmission is left deliberately unresolved. That ambiguityâ??held with absolute convictionâ??is what makes the scene so haunting.

Lily Hilden (they/them) brings biting wit and volatility to Gail, balancing sharp satire with flashes of genuine vulnerability that complicate the characterâ??s bravado. Hilden allows Gailâ??s humor to

function both as armor and invitation, revealing a character who resists easy categorization. As the play progresses, moments of tenderness and uncertainty surface beneath the sarcasm, suggesting a young woman actively negotiating belief, agency, and desire rather than performing a fixed ideological position. Hilden allows Gailâ??s sharpest reversals to land without apology, giving voice to critiques that the play refuses to soften or redirect. Their performance honors Gailâ??s contradictions without resolving them, leaving space for the audience to consider how choice, influence, and care operate unevenly across generations.

McKell Petersen (they/them) crafts Stan as an initially disarming presenceâ??quirky, gentle, and quietly attentive. Petersenâ??s performance leans into Stanâ??s softness early on, allowing his spiritual language and earnest concern to feel sincere rather than manipulative. This makes his appeal understandable, particularly for a character like Gail, who is seeking stability. Stan is not framed as an inevitable danger or an obvious mistake. Instead, Petersen leaves open the possibility that, for Gail, Stan may be an acceptable choiceâ??one that Becky cannot and should not control.

Whitney Black and **Bryce Fueston** round out the ensemble with crisp authority and tonal agility, shifting between roles in ways that reinforce the playâ??s argument about interchangeable powerâ??new faces, familiar logic.

A person with short hair, wearing a striped sweater, rests their head on their hands, looking thoughtf
Lily Hilden, Photo Credit: Robert Holman

Ruhlâ??s Critique: Power, Voice, and the Moral Economy of Salem

Ruhlâ??s most incisive intervention in *Becky, Nurse of Salem* is its refusal of a moral economy that has long governed American retellings of the Salem witch trialsâ??one that elevates male conscience while rendering womenâ??s harm expendable. In *The Crucible*, John Proctorâ??s shame is framed as tragic and ennobling: a private transgression transformed into a public moral crisis. Ruhl asks what that framing requires audiences to overlookâ??and who it protects.

Millerâ??s decision to age Abigail Williams up, recasting coercion as illicit romance, becomes emblematic of the system Ruhl dismantles. Proctorâ??s complexity is preserved by collapsing a young girlâ??s vulnerability into personal failing rather than structural abuse. Abigail is his servant; he is older, married, economically secure, and socially protected. Under those conditions, refusal would not have been safe. Ruhl shifts attention away from male guilt as tragic redemption and toward the consequences borne by those without power.

This critique extends into the present-day narrative, where authority continues to disguise control as care. Figures who present themselves as benevolent reproduce Salemâ??s structure in contemporary form: isolating, persuasive, and dangerous precisely because coercion arrives gently, framed as healing rather than force.

Power in the play is inseparable from voice. Beckyâ??s speech is repeatedly treated as a problem to be managedâ??at work, in medical settings, and within institutions that define truth without her participation. In the Salem scenes, Rebecca Nurse is punished for silence; in the present, Becky is punished for speaking too much. Ruhl collapses these opposites into the same outcome: speech

becomes guilt, and silence becomes guilt. The danger lies not in voice itself, but in powerâ??s ability to interpret it at will.

This logic crystallizes when Gail throws *The Crucible*â??s language back at itself, naming John Proctorâ??not Abigailâ??as the â??whore.â?• The moment lands not as provocation but as correction, exposing how abuse has long been displaced onto young women while men are granted complexity, regret, and redemption.

> An elderly woman with long, wild red hair, wearing a dark shawl over a colorful dress, holds a glowin
> *Reb Fleming, Photo Credit: Robert Holman*

Surrogate Care: Witches, Opioids, and the Price of Relief

One of the playâ??s most unsettling insights is that witchcraft is framed not as belief or superstition, but as a surrogate form of careâ??one that emerges where institutional care collapses. The modern witch, played with unnerving precision by Reb Fleming, is not an antagonist so much as a symptom. She appears not because Becky is naÃ¯ve, but because Becky has exhausted every sanctioned avenue for help.

Fleming grounds the character in reassurance rather than mysticism. Comfort is reliably delivered while meaning remains vague. As fees escalate, the economics beneath the ritual come into focus: belief offered as service, grief priced by the hour. The witch does not promise salvation; she promises attention in a world where attention has become scarce.

Ruhl refuses to position the audience safely above Beckyâ??s desperation. The witch is exploitativeâ??but she is also responsive. She listens. She does not demand proof or institutional translation. In this way, she mirrors the Salem museum itself: both monetize trauma while offering belief as temporary relief.

This logic extends to the playâ??s treatment of addiction. Beckyâ??s chronic pain and reproductive trauma are first treated as legitimate, then quietly reclassified as suspect. The shift is not about dosage or harm, but about legibility. Once Becky becomes economically precarious and publicly visible, her pain is no longer believed. Relief becomes evidence against her.

As in Salem, authority claims neutrality while relying on subjective judgments about whose bodies can be trusted. Addiction replaces witchcraft not as belief, but as accusationâ??a marker that authorizes surveillance, punishment, and exclusion. Beckyâ??s relative privilege does not protect her; it merely delays the fall.

Resonance

The power of *Becky, Nurse of Salem* lies in how unmistakably it maps Salemâ??s logic onto the present. Witchcraft appears not as superstition, but as a recurring accusationâ??one deployed whenever pain, grief, or vulnerability become inconvenient to authority.

Across employment, healthcare, recovery spaces, and the legal system, Becky encounters the same demand: pain must be legible, contained, and compliant to be believed. When it is not, it becomes

grounds for discipline rather than care.

By refusing the comfort of historical distance, Ruhl makes Salemâ??s logic visible as a living structure. The play asks not whether Salem was unjustâ??we already know thatâ??but why its mechanisms remain intact. Who is believed, who is monitored, who is punished, and who is allowed complexity? These questions do not belong to the past. The play leaves them deliberately unresolved.

Closing

Becky, Nurse of Salem is not an easy play, nor does it try to be. It contains strong language, dark humor, and themes that may feel uncomfortable. But for audiences willing to sit with its contradictions, it offers a theatrical space where womenâ??s anger, grief, and care are not treated as problems to be solved, but as truths to be witnessed. By returning to Salem and telling its story differently, Ruhl reminds us that revisiting the past can itself be an act of resistanceâ??and that sometimes the most radical thing theatre can do is refuse to let history remain comfortable.

Show Info

Becky, Nurse of Salem
By **Sarah Ruhl**

Presented by **Pygmalion Productions**

Venue: Leona Wagner Black Box
Location: Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center
Runtime: Approximately 2 hours, including one 10-minute intermission

Dates: Feb. 6-21
Audience Advisory: Mature audiences only (18+). Infants not admitted. All patrons require a ticket.

Tickets

Content Note

This production includes strong language and explores themes of gendered violence, addiction, mental health crises, medical trauma, and historical injustice.

Becky, Nurse of Salem is presented by arrangement with **Concord Theatricals** on behalf of **Samuel French, Inc.**
For more information: www.concordtheatricals.com

Originally produced by **Lincoln Center Theater**, New York City (2022).
Originally commissioned by **Tony Taccone** and produced by **Johanna Pfaelzer** (Artistic Directors) and **Susan Medak** (Managing Director).
Developed with the support of **New York Stage and Film** and **Vassarâ??s Powerhouse Theater**

Season, Summer 2019.

- **Publicity** â?? *Daisy Blake Perry*
- **Photography** â?? *Robert Holman*

About the playwright: Sarah Ruhl

Playwright **Sarah Ruhl** is known for work that blends humor, lyricism, and emotional intensityâ??often re-entering familiar stories and cultural myths in order to reframe whose experience gets centered. Her plays include ***Eurydice***, ***The Clean House****,* and ***In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)***, and sheâ??s also written widely across forms (including essays and adaptations).

About Rebecca Nurse (quick historical context)

Rebecca Nurse (born **Rebecca Towne**) was a respected Salem Village church community member who was accused of witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials and executed by hanging on July 19, 1692. She was later exonerated (and her family pursued legal reversal/compensation in the years that followed).

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