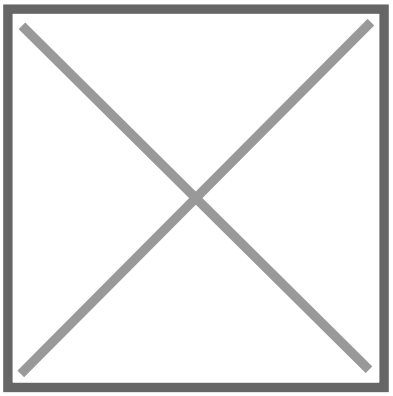

PYG Review: Becky, Nurse of Salemâ??Returning to the Past to Tell the Truth Differently

Description

Salt Lake City, UTâ??*Becky, Nurse of Salem*, in development since 2019, grew out of MacArthur Fellow Sarah Ruhlâ??s discomfort with *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 porous timelineâ??folding past into present with dark humor and rage to ask what it means to live inside a legacy shaped by accusation and erasure.

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

> 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 living in modern-day Salem who traces her lineage back to Rebecca Nurse, one of the women executed during the witch trials. Becky works as a guide at a Salem witch museum, delivering rehearsed scripts to tourists who want tidy history, digestible villains, and marketable trauma. Her job requires not truth, but consistency. When Becky loses her job and begins to spiralâ??emotionally, financially, and physicallyâ??the play fractures open, slipping between present-day scenes and moments from 1692.

Rather than staging the trials as linear history, Ruhl allows the past to intrude unpredictably. Rebecca Nurse and other accused women appear not as distant figures, but as living presencesâ??interrupting, commenting, and refusing to stay contained within museum placards or canonical texts. These scenes are darkly funny, unsettling, and intimate, collapsing centuries to show how accusation, surveillance, and gendered punishment repeat themselves. Salem is not a closed chapter, but an active structureâ??one that continues to determine whose pain is believed, whose anger is tolerated, and

whose bodies are deemed expendable.

One of the playâ??s sharpest critiques is aimed not at belief, but at public history as performance labor. Beckyâ??s opening tour-guide monologue shows how historical violence is converted into customer serviceâ??Salem reduced to bite-sized facts, digestible villains, and marketable trauma. Dunkinâ?? Donuts, souvenir shops, and wax figures are not incidental jokes; they expose an economy that depends on flattening atrocity into entertainment.

When Becky deviates from the approved script and is ultimately replaced by automated audio tours, the play makes a blunt point: the system does not merely sanitize history; it removes the local body who might contradict it. Human memory becomes a liability. Ruhl frames historical storytelling as a labor issueâ??who is allowed to speak, who is paid to repeat the sanctioned version, and who is discarded for telling the truth differently. Salemâ??s violence is not only remembered; 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 critical response to *The Crucible*, challenging its position as the dominant American framework for understanding the Salem witch trials. In interviews, Ruhl has described a pivotal conversation with playwright **Branden Jacobs-Jenkins** that sent her back to Millerâ??s play, biographies, and historical choices. Rather than rejecting *The Crucible* outright, Ruhl writes *Becky, Nurse of Salem* in dialogue with itâ??interrogating the playâ??s elevation of John Proctor as the moral conscience of the story.

One of Millerâ??s most consequential choices is also one of the most revealing. In order to frame Proctor as 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 the threat of punishment.

Ruhl has suggested that this narrative distortion cannot be separated from Millerâ??s personal history. *The Crucible* was written during a period when **Arthur Miller** was entangled with **Marilyn Monroe**, who was more than a decade younger than him. When their relationship began, Monroe was in her mid-twenties and Miller was nearing fortyâ??an age and power imbalance that complicates the playâ??s decision to age Abigail up and recast coercion as tragic romance rather than structural abuse.

Monroe herself later expressed deep discomfort with how Miller used their relationship in his writingâ??particularly in ***After the Fall***, where a character widely read as modeled on her renders female vulnerability as the terrain for male moral reckoning. Friends and contemporaries recalled that Monroe felt exposed and betrayed by the way her pain was transformed into material, her suffering folded into narratives centered on Millerâ??s conscience rather than her own interior life. That history sharpens Ruhlâ??s critique: the problem is not autobiography itself, but 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.

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

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.

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 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* lies in how the play refuses the moral economy that has long governed American retellings of the Salem witch trialsâ??one that elevates male conscience while rendering womenâ??s harm narratively 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 overlook, and more pointedly, who it protects.

Millerâ??s decision to age Abigail Williams upâ??recasting coercion as illicit romanceâ??becomes emblematic of the moral economy Ruhl is dismantling, one that preserves John Proctorâ??s complexity by rendering a young girlâ??s vulnerability narratively expendable and collapsing consent into personal failing rather than structural abuse.

Abigail is Proctorâ??s servant. He is older, married, economically secure, and socially protected; she is dependent, precarious, and legally exposed. Under those conditions, refusal would not have been safe. For a young servant girl in seventeenth-century New England, rejecting the advances of a powerful man could mean losing shelter, income, reputationâ??or worse. Rather than sentimentalizing this imbalance, Ruhl forces the audience to confront the consequences borne by those without power, shifting attention away from male guilt as tragic redemption and toward the structural violence that produces it.

This critique is not confined to the past. In the present-day narrative, Ruhl traces how authority continues to disguise control as care, often through figures who speak softly and position themselves as benevolent. Characters like Stan reproduce Salemâ??s structure in contemporary form: isolating, spiritualized, and persuasive not because they wield overt force, but because they frame obedience as healing and resistance as immaturity. It is coercion that speaks gentlyâ??and is therefore harder to name.

The playâ??s interrogation of power is inseparable from its treatment of speech. Across *Becky, Nurse of Salem*, Beckyâ??s voice is repeatedly treated as a problem to be managed. She is reprimanded for â??talking too muchâ?• at work, corrected in public, dismissed in medical settings, and ultimately disciplined by institutions that define truth without her participation. Her refusal to remain quiet, compliant, or legible becomes evidence against her.

Ruhl sharpens this dynamic by staging speech and silence as parallel traps. In the Salem scenes, Rebecca Nurseâ??s tragedy is not hysteria but silenceâ??she does not hear the question, does not respond in time, and is punished for it. In the present, Beckyâ??s problem is the opposite: she speaks too much, asks too many questions, and refuses to stay within approved narratives. Ruhl collapses these opposites into the same outcome. Speech becomes guilt. Silence becomes guilt.

By reframing Salem this way, Ruhl dismantles the familiar moral that restraint equals virtue. In *Becky, Nurse of Salem*, silence is not moral authorityâ??it is vulnerability. Speaking does not protect Becky, but not speaking would not save her either. The danger lies not in voice itself, but in powerâ??s ability to interpret voice at will.

This logic crystallizes in one of the playâ??s sharpest reversals: the moment Gail throws *The Crucible* â??s language back at itself, naming John Proctorâ??rather than Abigailâ??as the â??whore.â?• The line cuts through inherited Salem narratives, exposing how desire, abuse of power, and adult transgression have long been displaced onto young women while men are granted complexity, regret, and redemption. The moment lands not as provocation, but as correctionâ??a recalibration of accountability that *The Crucible* has historically avoided.

Together, these reversals reveal what is ultimately at stake in Ruhlâ??s project. *Becky, Nurse of Salem* is not simply a response to *The Crucible*, but a refusal of the moral systems that have made certain harms legible and others invisible. By collapsing past and present, speech and silence, care and coercion, Ruhl exposes how Salemâ??s logic persistsâ??not as history, but as structure.

> 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 *Becky, Nurse of Salem*â??s most unsettling insights is that witchcraft is not treated as belief, superstition, or supernatural danger, but as a surrogate form of careâ??a system that emerges precisely where institutional care collapses. The figure of the modern witch, played with unnerving precision by Reb Fleming, is not framed as an antagonist so much as a symptom: transactional, soothing, evasive, and deliberately ambiguous. She appears not because Becky is naÃ¯ve, but because Becky has exhausted every sanctioned avenue for help.

Fleming grounds the witch in practiced reassurance rather than mysticism. Her voice is calm, her gestures confident, her language vague but affirming. Meaning hovers just out of reach, while comfort is reliably delivered. As fees escalate and concern becomes increasingly calibrated, the economics beneath the ritual come into focus. This is not belief as transcendence, but belief as serviceâ??hope offered Ã la carte, grief priced by the hour. The witch does not promise salvation; she promises attention in a world where attention has become scarce.

Crucially, Ruhl refuses to position the audience safely above Beckyâ??s desperation. The witch is exploitative, yesâ??but she is also responsive. She listens. She does not demand proof. She does not require Becky to translate her pain into institutional language. In this way, the witch mirrors the Salem museum itself: both monetize trauma while offering belief as temporary relief.

Ruhl extends this logic through the playâ??s treatment of addiction, positioning the opioid crisis as a contemporary analogue to witchcraft accusations. If witchcraft in 1692 functioned as a mechanism for naming and punishing inconvenient bodies, *Becky, Nurse of Salem* frames addiction as its modern equivalent: a site where care, suspicion, and control collide, and where pain must be endlessly justified to remain credible.

Beckyâ??s medical history matters here. Her 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, emotionally unstable, and publicly visible, her pain is no longer believed. What was once care becomes contraband. Relief becomes evidence against her.

This logic mirrors Salemâ??s use of spectral evidence. In both cases, authority claims neutrality while relying on deeply subjective judgments about whose bodies can be trusted. Pain must be sanctioned to be real; otherwise, it becomes grounds for discipline. Addiction replaces witchcraft not as belief, but as accusationâ??a marker of deviance that authorizes surveillance, punishment, and exclusion.

Ruhl refuses to isolate this dynamic to Becky alone. The opioid crisis widens the frame, implicating entire communitiesâ??particularly Black and brown communitiesâ??who have long experienced medical neglect alongside criminalization. Beckyâ??s relative privilege does not protect her; it merely delays the fall. By the time she is punished, the machinery is already well rehearsed.

Seen this way, the modern witch is not an aberration but part of a continuum. When institutional care becomes inaccessible, privatized, or conditional, substitute systems rush in to fill the void. Some are spiritual. Some are pharmaceutical. All carry a price. Ruhl does not ask the audience to endorse these systemsâ??but she refuses to dismiss them. They are not the cause of harm; they are what harm looks like when care has been withdrawn.

Resonance

The power of *Becky, Nurse of Salem* lies not only in how it revises Salemâ??s past, but in how unmistakably it maps that history onto the present. Ruhl treats witchcraft not as belief or superstition, but as a recurring accusationâ??one deployed whenever bodies, pain, or grief become inconvenient to systems of authority.

That structure becomes visible across the playâ??s contemporary settings. Beckyâ??s experiences with employment, healthcare, recovery spaces, and the legal system reveal a consistent pattern: institutions that claim care while demanding compliance. Pain must be explained, justified, and made legible to authority before it is recognized as real. When it cannot be neatly containedâ??when it is messy, chronic, emotional, or disruptiveâ??it becomes grounds for discipline rather than support.

Historically, women were labeled witches not because they practiced forbidden rituals, but because they were inconvenient: outspoken, grieving, ill, poor, or insufficiently compliant. Ruhl draws a direct line from those accusations to modern forms of surveillance and punishment. Beckyâ??s struggles are not framed as individual failure, but as the predictable outcome of systems that pathologize vulnerability while protecting themselves from responsibility.

Seen this way, *Becky, Nurse of Salem,* refuses the comfort of historical distance. It asks not whether Salem was unjustâ??we already know thatâ??but why its logic continues to feel familiar. Who is believed, who is monitored, who is punished, and who is allowed complexity? These questions do not belong to the past. They belong to the present moment, and 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
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).

Category

1. Reviews

Tags

1. archival theatre
2. Becky Nurse of Salem
3. cold war allegory
4. Contemporary Theatre
5. feminist dramaturgy
6. Feminist Theatre
7. gendered punishment
8. historical revision in theatre
9. MacArthur Fellow playwright
10. McCarthyism
11. modern witchcraft
12. performance and power
13. public history

14. Pygmalion Productions
15. Rebecca Nurse
16. Salem witch trials
17. Salt Lake City Theatre
18. Sarah Ruhl
19. Sarah Ruhl plays
20. The Crucible analysis
21. Utah Theatre Review

Date
2026/02/11
Date Created
2026/02/09
Author
keola06