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Weekend Living

Virginia Wolf Casts Light on Connecticut Witchcraft

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By Jaime Ferris



Virginia Wolf as Mary Barnes during a performance of her one-woman show, “Panic in Connecticut: Accused Witches Have Their Say.” Photo by Steven Wolf



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It’s been more than two and a half centuries since residents in Connecticut were accused and convicted of witchcraft, but it remains a dark stain on Nutmeg history. We know accusations flew like witches on broomsticks, but why? Details of most cases remain a

mystery.

We do know that the settlers who came to New England seeking religious freedom encountered a land strange to them. They faced the unfamiliar with a firm faith in God, and an utter horror of the occult and anyone who practiced black magic. New Haven colonial records dictate that, “If any person be a witch, he or she shall be put to death ...”

Witchcraft was punishable by death in the Connecticut Colony, but its 1642 witch hysteria occurred half a century before the notorious 1692 witch hunt of Salem, Mass. And while Salem is more infamous for condemning its witches, magistrates and Puritan ministers in Connecticut fervently prosecuted alleged witches.—In fact, Connecticut’s witch hunt was the fiercest in New England. At least 40 people were tried as witches between 1642 and 1693,—and in 1647 the state hung a Windsor woman named Else Young, the first accused witch executed in New England.

Actress Virginia Wolf of Herstory Theater knows this history all too well. Having painstakingly researched 17th-century Connecticut, Ms. Wolf wrote “Panic in Connecticut: Accused Witches Have Their Say,” a one-woman show that sheds light on the Puritan society that condemned alleged witches to death decades before the hysterics in Salem, Mass. Ms. Wolf, fully costumed, fully incensed and fully frightened, takes audiences back to the 17th century and bring to life five women accused of witchcraft, letting them share their stories. The actress will do so in New Milford in a program hosted by the New Milford Historical Society and the New Milford Public Library Wednesday, Oct. 17, at 6:30 p.m. in Memorial Hall at the New Milford Public Library.

“This is a busy time of year for me,” Ms. Wolf said, noting that the show focuses not only on a frightening time in Colonial history, but on the people it affected. “... What I’ve discovered is that most people don’t know this happened in Connecticut.

“Between 1642 and 1693, at least 40 people in the colony of Connecticut were tried as witches, and at least 10 of them were hanged. Most of them were women,” she continued. “The [Connecticut] trial proceedings aren’t well documented. I grew up in Salem Mass. I was in ‘The Crucible’ and we all know the history of those trials and the people affected by them, but the records for the Connecticut trials are scattered. It was difficult to research, but I hope people will walk away with a better understanding of the trials and what these women went through.”

Dressed in 17th century costume, Ms. Wolf portrays five women accused of witchcraft in Connecticut—Mary Staples, Lydia Gilbert, Judith Varlet, Mary Barnes and Mercy Disborough—who share their painful and horrifying stories.

“As a woman, I always wondered what it must have been like for these women,” Ms. Wolf explained, noting that men were also accused. “I tie their stories together so people [in the audience] can understand how the panic spread.”

Mary Staples of Fairfield was accused twice of witchcraft—first in 1654 and again in 1692. She was acquitted both times. Ms. Wolf depicts Mary as a woman in her 70s, recalling the harsh realities of Puritan New England and the prominence of religion in everyday life. She explains society's distrust of strangers and anything out of the ordinary, of the Puritan settlers' need to explain God's will and how it was at work—even when the inexplicable occurred.

“You can't judge that time period by today's standards,” Ms. Wolf said, noting that science was not even a glimmer on the horizon. “The only reason for something bad happening was witchcraft. They truly believed the devil was at work when milk curdled or cheese molded. When Hartford experienced bad blights or plagues, when people grew increasingly frightened and scared, it led to accusations. Sometimes it was out of greediness or envy, but usually it was caused by fear. They felt they needed to cleanse the world of evil for better or worse. That is how many people's fates unfolded.”

Working forward chronologically, Ms. Wolf moves on to Lydia Gilbert of Windsor, who was accused of witchcraft, convicted and hanged in 1654. She, Ms. Wolf said, was, unfortunately, at the wrong place at the wrong time. Her presence during a series of misfortunes sealed her fate.

Then there is Judith Varlet of Farmington, accused and acquitted between 1662 and '63, whose only real crime was that she was of Dutch descent, a woman of great intellect who spoke her mind, and who had amassed personal wealth. She was also the sister-in-law of New Netherlands' governor, Peter Stuyvesant. Judith was eventually allowed to leave the colony for New Amsterdam, but only after a forceful protest by Stuyvesant against what he considered the Connecticut court's fictitious accusations of witchery.

Also represented is Mary Barnes of Farmington, accused in 1662, tried and hung in 1663. She was the last person to die in the Hartford witch hunt. Mary, Ms. Wolf said, lacked self-confidence, seemed quite helpless, and did not defend herself against her accusers. Rather, she acquiesced—after all, if so many people believed she were a witch, it must be true.

The courtrooms were then quiet for just over a quarter century with the return of Connecticut's governor, John Winthrop Jr., who had been in England securing the royal charter from Charles II. During his absence, the witch hunt hysteria reached its peak. Winthrop, according to state historian Walter Woodward, “forcefully intervened to end Connecticut's rush to judgment on witch suspects, saving them from a sure trip to the gallows.” In fact, he said Winthrop drew on his own fascination with alchemy and magic to save, rather than condemn, the accused.

Connecticut, the fiercest witch hunter, then seemed to be the most tolerant until 1693, when the sharp-tongued Mercy Disbrough of Fairfield was accused and found guilty of witchcraft. But she never saw the gallows. Rather, she was acquitted. According to state documents, however, she was subjected to the water test—suspected witches were sometimes dropped into a body of water to determine if they possessed evil spirits.

Theory dictated that if the person sank, he or she was innocent; if they floated, he or she was guilty because the pure water cast out the evil spirit.

“It was certainly an interesting period in American history,” Ms. Wolf said. “Cheese can go moldy, milk will curdle, cattle get sick, but to these people, it was the work of the devil. They didn’t understand science as we do today. ... Some people never knew this happened in Connecticut and, sometimes, I’m lucky enough to have a descendent in the audience. People still find the panics in [New England] fascinating. I hope I can offer a true picture of what it must have been like for these people.”

The New Milford Public Library is located at 24 Main St., New Milford. For more information, call 860-355-1191, ext. 203, or visit www.newmilfordlibrary.org.