The Salem Witch Trials in Popular Culture

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**Josh Hutchinson:** Welcome to *The Thing About Salem*. I'm Josh Hutchinson. Today, we're examining how the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 and 1693 have been reimagined, reinterpreted, and sometimes completely reinvented by Hollywood.

**Sarah Jack:** Hi, I'm Sarah Jack. From serious historical dramas to Disney comedies to teen supernatural series, Salem has become shorthand for witchcraft in American popular culture. But how accurate are these portrayals and what do they reveal about our ongoing fascination with this dark chapter in American history?

**Josh Hutchinson:** We can't cover all of the hundreds and hundreds of pop culture depictions of Salem in just 15 minutes, so we'll focus on a selection of films and TV shows that are emblematic of the treatment Salem has received over the decades.

**Sarah Jack:**

**Josh Hutchinson:** When did Salem Pop culture start, and where do we begin our discussion of it?

**Sarah Jack:** With *The* [00:01:00] *Crucible.* Oh wait, was there something before *The Crucible* you just watched?

**Josh Hutchinson:** I just watched *Maid of Salem* from 1937.

**Sarah Jack:** The *Maid of Salem*, it's interesting, it features, Fred MacMurray and Claudette Colbert, and a lot of us remember Fred from things like *My Three Sons* and that one about the dog and that other one, *Flubber*, that he was in. It's interesting, he's a young leading man in this one, and Claudette Colbert falls for him, but then she gets caught up in this witch trial, and it's entirely fictitious, the whole story, but they do bring in some elements of truth by actually quoting from the records and from Cotton Mather's writings about witch trials.

**Sarah Jack:** And then as we mentioned, *The Crucible,* which is historical fiction, [00:02:00] was really a statement about the political climate in the United States in the 1950s, as much as it was about a witch-hunt.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Its timeless lessons in not jumping to conclusions and pointing fingers at people without solid evidence, those kinds of lessons, they still are good for today and we can still get a lot of value out of *The Crucible*. Unfortunately, a lot of schools use *The Crucible* as a substitute for the real history lessons.

**Sarah Jack:** Jumping all the way to 2003, there was a production called *Salem Witch Trials*. It was an American-Canadian miniseries starring Kirstie Allie and Alan Bates. And the aim of this production was for historical authenticity, while adding dramatic [00:03:00] elements. And it was dramatic. It is dramatic.

**Josh Hutchinson:** It is dramatic, but the story that it's based off of, the Salem Witch Trials, highly dramatic event, I'd have to say.

**Sarah Jack:** But Hollywood's relationship with Salem took a much more playful turn.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Enter Disney magic, and one that's about Salem, or at least set in Salem and features the Salem Witch Trials, is *Hocus Pocus,* the hilarious Disney romp featuring Bette Midler, Kathy Najimy, and Sarah Jessica Parker, who is a real Salem Witch Trial descendant of Esther Elwell of Gloucester. That movie is so hilarious. I watch it every single year. Can't get enough of it.

**Sarah Jack:** Disney released this Salem-inspired film, but it initially bombed possibly [00:04:00] losing 16 million.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Ouch.

**Sarah Jack:** But it has become beloved. In fact, when we started our podcast, we kicked it off with a historical commentary recording between Josh and I on *Hocus Pocus*. We were excited about *Hocus Pocus 2* having been released, and so we, that's how we celebrated Halloween in 2023 with our podcast.

**Josh Hutchinson:** It was such a wonderful time with *Hocus Pocus 2* coming out. I absolutely love so many fun things in these movies, but it basically follows this villainous, comedic trio of witches who are inadvertently resurrected by a teenage boy in Salem on Halloween night, when he lights the black flame candle.

**Sarah Jack:** And this narrative really transformed Salem from the tragic historical reputation into a magical [00:05:00] tourist destination.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Now let's talk about television. TV has provided a rich medium for exploring Salem's witch trial legacy, allowing for deeper character development and more complex historical exploration than a short movie can.

**Sarah Jack:** I don't know if you're like me, but I grew up watching Bewitched and laughing at the antics of Samantha's family, but they did take on some serious issues, and one of them was the Salem Witch Trials. Season 7, they went and they filmed 8 episodes in 1970 because a fire had shut down the Hollywood set.

**Sarah Jack:** When you're watching those episodes, you get to see them tour the House of the Seven Gables and criticize the logo. I love that part when they roll into town and her mother [00:06:00] and her are just like, well, this isn't gonna do, and you are expecting, well, maybe because in modern times, you know, there could be criticism to the logo if you're wanting to feel more of the history aesthetic versus the pop culture aesthetic, but you expect when they change the logo, maybe, to take the witchiness away, but they just made her cuter.

**Sarah Jack:** And so in one of the episodes, they actually go back in time to 1692 Salem and have a Witch trial.You think that maybe Samantha's gonna get tried, but they pulled the old switcheroo and it's Darren Stevens on trial for witchcraft for lighting a match in 1692.

**Sarah Jack:** And he also lent a ballpoint pen to Samantha, who was a barmaid at the moment, not realizing who she was, and she offered it to the community, and they were like, [00:07:00] "this is a piece of magic. This is from the devil." So that was fun. In the actual Salem Witch Trials, we know that they were doing experiments with magic, basically, to test whether someone was a witch. That's part of the record. But in this episode, she's like, "I'm gonna prove I'm a witch." And her shackles come off and, at one point, they disappear,so she like is, I don't know, I just found that ironic.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Yeah, that she proves that Darren's not a witch, but that she is a witch. So it's a very different take on a witch trial.

**Josh Hutchinson:** The plaintiff in the case takes the match from Darren that he's already used, Darren has used, and they challenge him to light a fire with it to show that anybody can do it, it's not witchcraft. And then that's when she goeswiggle, wiggle on her [00:08:00] nose and throws the spell out there and shoots up a flame from a dead match.

**Sarah Jack:** It's really great torecollect those pieces of the *Bewitched* stories, because when you see her in Salem right now as this beautiful statue,she would, her character would be thrilled to see that there. It's the right representation of a witch, according to Samantha.

**Josh Hutchinson:** People love to stop and pose for pictures with it. It's right downtown. Very popular destination, but it was controversial when it was put in place in 2005.

**Sarah Jack:** It was interestingly financed by TVLand cable network.

**Sarah Jack:** and it's located at the corner of Washington and Essex Streets.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So next time you go to Salem, be sure to keep your eye out for that.

**Sarah Jack:** And Bewitched isn't the only show that decided to have a Witch trial in old Salem. [00:09:00] In *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the Sabrina character actually goes on a field trip with her class and they have a mock witch trial.

**Sarah Jack:** The teacher hands out cards in envelopes to all the students and says thatsome of you are gonna get a card that says witch, and the others of you are to determine who is the witch among you and try them and see if you've got the right person.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So they try Sabrina's friend, Jenny, and put her through this real trial. One of the other girls gets real mean and just starts acting like she's an afflicted person and blaming everything that she's seeing, all these terrible specters tormenting her that she's seeing, she's blaming on Jenny, and then Sabrina steps in to try to [00:10:00] help her friend, and she gets caught up in it. And in the end, I don't know if they learn a lesson or not.

**Josh Hutchinson:** So we definitely need to mention *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, but we are working on an episode completely dedicated to that story. So we'll just touch on her. Yeah, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is based off of a comic, just like the original *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* was based off of a comic in the *Archie* series, and so *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* the show follows the same character who's also in the show *Riverdale,*  and they present a darker, more chilling version of witchcraft and the powerful evil forces that Sabrina has to [00:11:00] contend with.

**Sarah Jack:** Like the previous Sabrina, it is a coming of age, and the reason we can enjoy making an episode about it is because there is an endless amount of tropes just in that first season that we can tie back to how we look at the witch and define the witch as a culture across history. And so *The Chilling Adventures*, it is dark, but so is the actual history of Salem and the previous witch trials, and if you really think about some of those episode themes, they're not much darker than the reality.

**Josh Hutchinson:**

**Sarah Jack:** For a more serious portrayal, which actually brings you the emotions that were really experienced by the people involved in the actual as Salem Witch trials look no further than the PBS miniseries *Three Sovereigns for Sarah*. [00:12:00] It follows the story of Sarah Cloyce, the sister of Rebecca Nurse and Mary Esty, and Rebecca and Mary were executed for witchcraft in Salem. Sarah Cloyce survived, and this movie is about the struggle to get some recognition that a wrong was done to her and to get some restitution for her suffering, because she was in horrible jail conditions for months and months awaiting trial and witnessing her two sisters leave the jail one last time.

**Josh Hutchinson:** And this film, which stars Vanessa Redgrave as Sarah Cloyce, was actually filmed largely in Danvers and Salem, and the meetinghouse that's used is a replica of the original meetinghouse of Salem [00:13:00] Village that was built in 1672, on Joseph Hutchinson's land, and they built this replica meetinghouse for this movie, they put it on the Rebecca Nurse Homestead, and you can actually go to it today. It's very, like, historically true and accurate. They use the exact dimensions that are referenced in the Salem Village church record book, and soyou can get a real perspective of what it might've been like to be in the meetinghouse during those examinations of the suspects, while the afflicted girls were wailing and convulsing and accusing people of being spectors and all of that stuff they were doing.

**Sarah Jack:** Salem and pop culture serves as an ongoing conversation between past and present, even when the portrayals are historically inaccurate or purely fictional. [00:14:00] They keep the conversation alive about persecution, justice, and the importance of protecting those who are different.

**Sarah Jack:** The challenge for future creators will be finding ways to continue to honor both the historical reality and the cultural legacy that has grown up around it.

**Josh Hutchinson:** Thanks for joining us on this journey through Salem's pop culture evolution. Whether you prefer your Salem stories serious or supernatural, historical or comedic, the important thing is remembering the real people at the heart of these tales.