

Fuse Theater Review: A First-Rate and Relevant Version of “An Enemy of the People”

By Helen Epstein, October 7, 2014

So many things came into my mind as I watched this forthright and thrilling production that I don't know where to begin.

Let's start with Barrington Stage's Artistic Director Julianne Boyd's savvy decision to produce and direct Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's 1882 drama in its 1950 adaptation by American Arthur Miller. Boyd is a Miller aficionada – this is the third Miller play she has directed at Barrington Stage. *An Enemy of the People*, inspired by the true story of the discovery of poisoned waters in a Central European spa town, has multiple extra-theatrical resonances in the Berkshires of 2014.

For decades, General Electric has been the financial mainstay of Pittsfield, where Barrington Stage is based. Since 1900, GE employed thousands of local residents and made Pittsfield a prosperous city by manufacturing and servicing domestic appliances as well as military and aerospace ordnance. Between 1932 and 1977, those processes produced PCBs and other chemicals that led to extensive contamination in Pittsfield and down the 120-mile length of the Housatonic River through Connecticut to the Long Island Sound.

The parallels between Ibsen's Kersten Springs, a Norwegian health resort whose tannery poisons its water, and the Berkshires, a pristine tourist destination whose major employer poisons its water is crystal clear. It makes a 19th century theater classic as immediate as the projected 15-year EPA clean-up of the Housatonic.

But this drama of the lone whistle-blower faced with a disbelieving and/or self-interested society is, of course, far more than a local issue. Ibsen wrote *An Enemy of the People* as a response to the furiously



Steve Hendrickson and Patrick Husted as brothers in personal and political conflict in Barrington Stage Company's production of "An Enemy of the People." Photo: Kevin Sprague

condemnatory reception of his play *Ghosts*, a then-scandalous expose of syphilis in a respectable family. In his portrait of a man holding on to his truth in the face of hatred, scare tactics, societal ostracism, and several varieties of temptation and physical violence, he created a protagonist whose moral predicament is universal.

For Arthur Miller in 1950, adapting Ibsen's play was a way of responding to the Blacklist and the anti-Communist hysteria of a government and media-driven campaign to manipulate information. He later wrote that Ibsen was an inspiration, "a path that leads beyond the formulas and dried up precepts, the pretense and fraud, of the business of the stage. Whatever else Ibsen has to teach, this is his greatest contribution."

In 2014, we watch *An Enemy of the People* and recognize the many whistle-blowers of our time as well as our flocks of contemporary politicians, bureaucrats, local government officials, reporters, and media commentators. When the newspaper



*Steve Hendrickson as Thomas Stockmann in Barrington Stage Company's production of "An Enemy of the People."
Photo: Kevin Sprague*

editor excuses his reversal of position on the pollution of the water at Kersten Springs with the excuse, "We are not scientists," he could be commenting on climate change, genetic engineering of food, or fracking. Ibsen's and Miller's scientist hero must contend with denial, disbelief, ignorance, fear of change, malice, opportunism, greed, the abuse of power, censorship, betrayal, and violence. Sound familiar?

In her melding of Miller and Ibsen, Boyd sets her production in the Norway of 1950, with sets, costumes, and northern light smacking of realistic detail — down to the simple Scandinavian modern furniture. The straightforward smart set design successfully evokes Norway and gives Boyd plenty of room to visually diagram the many interpersonal conflicts in the play. She stages the speeches as carefully as arias in opera, but keeps the pace brisk and has more than a dozen actors making full physical use of the stage.

Three of the play's 14 characters are newspapermen: a publisher, an editor, and a sub-editor — nominally "liberal" but actually one more spineless than the other. Miller may have been thinking of the Hearst papers as he wrote their lines; I thought of Fox News, cable and radio talk shows. We meet the journalists first as dinner guests in Doctor Stockmann's home. They are delighted with him and their upcoming "scoop" about the poisoned water,

then turn against him as it becomes clear that in breaking the story they will lose their readership.

This earnest but feckless trio is beautifully played by Jack Wetherall as the publisher, who gives a complex portrayal of a cautious, jaded small businessman whose motto is "moderation"; Scott Drummond as the newspaper's self-important, ambitious editor and Christopher Hirsh as the self-styled radical young rookie reporter Billing. Though Miller's adaptation has streamlined the comedic elements of Ibsen's play, these three characters remind us of Ibsen's wit.

The main men, however are the duo of brothers, the emotionally crippled, scheming bachelor Mayor Peter Stockmann and the man he sees as his spoiled, wayward sibling Dr. Thomas Stockmann. Steve Hendrickson plays the town physician, who has returned home with his wife and three children after years up north, in a pleasingly low-key way. Tall, wiry, and understated, Hendrickson plays the physician as an absent-minded scientist and doting father, boyishly casual and politically naïve. We watch him grow over the course of the play as he begins to comprehend the chain of unwelcome events he has set into motion. His four dependent attachments — a wife, a daughter, and two young sons — are unrewarding roles. Dee Nelson, as his conventional wife concerned for the well-being of her family, makes the best of hers; Katya Stepanov, as the Stockmann's independent and stalwart daughter, has more of a chance to shine.

Iago lovers will be particularly pleased with Patrick Husted's creepy and complex portrayal of the chief villain of the piece, the Mayor, whose troubled relationship with his brother is of Biblical proportions, in addition to the perilous issues at hand.

The cast is nicely rounded out by Glenn Barrett as Dr. Stockmann's devious father-in-law and Don Paul Shannon as the "apolitical" Captain who offers the Stockmanns his home but does not intervene when the doctor is prevented from speaking at a lecture he has convened there.

This is a first-rate production that does justice to both Ibsen and Miller and offers a searching retrospective look at their work and their issues.