

BSC: 'An Enemy of the People' Miller drama speaks out

Jeffrey Borak, October 7, 2014

The setting for Arthur Miller's 1950 adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's 1882 drama "An Enemy of the People" -- which is being given a crisp, compelling and uniformly well-acted production at Barrington Stage Company -- is Kirsten, a small southern coastal town in Norway whose economic hopes are pinned on a healing spring due to open shortly. "Everything is shooting ahead," the town's mayor, Peter Stockmann (Patrick Husted), says in a conversation with his sister-in-law, Catherine (Dee Nelson); "real estate going up, money changing hands every hour, business humming.

"Give us a really good summer and sick people will be coming here in carloads. The springs will turn into a regular fad "

The springs, he says, "are enough to change the soul of the town."

While the mayor touts the springs' economic benefits, his younger brother, Thomas, a physician and the man who proposed the idea of the springs in the first place, has had his worst fears confirmed when he receives a lab analysis of some water samples he has sent to a university. The waters are polluted and the lowland siting of the health spa makes it impossible to purify the waters. Rather than run the risk of infecting all those health-seeking tourists his brother anticipates arriving by the carload, Dr. Stockmann wants to halt the project and relocate the spa on higher ground. He naively believes the full



community.

As it turns out, the soul of the town is exposed as morally corrupt and vulnerable to the ruthless exercise of power the mayor will wield to protect the project, even if it means having his brother declared an enemy of the people and driving him and his family out of town.



Betrayal runs high as the community turns against Dr. Stockmann and his family, leaving him with an ever-decreasing series of options.

Director Julianne Boyd has moved the play's time period from Ibsen's 1882 to 1950 when Miller crafted this adaptation in response to the House Committee on Un-American Activities and its relentless investigation of alleged Communist infiltration of Hollywood. Three years later, Sen. Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunts into what he asserted was Communist subversion of America led Miller to write the vastly superior "The Crucible."

The writing here lacks Miller's flair for nuance and subtlety. The characters, even in a production as flawlessly performed as this, are one-dimensional. The play coasts on Miller's convictions and the timeliness of his arguments.

Whatever the limits of Miller's writing, Boyd's cast makes the most, and then some, of Miller's material, especially in the intense second act.

Husted's smartly shaped Peter Stockmann is a rigid man whose chilling and ruthless application of power makes compromise outrageous and insupportable

Posed against him is [Steve Hendrickson's](#) affecting naively heroic Dr. Stockmann, whose journey from innocence to a coming of age, of sorts, is traced with consummate skill, intelligence and honesty.

The supporting cast is first-rate with especially noteworthy work from Glenn Barrett (how good it is to see this fine Berkshires actor on stage again) as Dr. Stockmann's not-so-innocent father-in-law; Nelson as Dr. Stockmann's supportive wife; Scott Drummond and Jack Wetherall as, respectively, the craven editor and publisher of the local newspaper; and Katya Stepanov as Dr. Stockmann's daughter.