



Boston

BWW Reviews: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE Erupts at Barrington Stage Company

Larry Murray, October 8, 2014

ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE is a play that roars, carrying its audience into the maelstrom of political trickery. A Doctor with conclusive proof that the water supply for a profitable spa is contaminated tries to inform the public, his neighbors, via the town newspaper. He is blocked. He tries to call an open meeting. He is branded a traitor instead of a hero. Among those out to destroy him - and his family - is his brother, the Mayor. Everyone has an angle, a reason to keep the truth from getting out - money. No play is better suited to our current times.

The fight for the truth is almost always a lonely one, especially in situations where money and power are involved. AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE is now playing at Barrington Stage in the Berkshires of Massachusetts and uses Arthur Miller's 1950 adaptation of the Henrik Ibsen 1882 Norwegian play. Ibsen wrote *En folkefiende* in response to the outrage over his play *GHOSTS* which ruffled all sorts of Victorian era feathers.

Rarely do we see theatre productions that so perfectly capture the temper of our times from a distance of 65 or 130 years. I think a large part of the reason that AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE works so well is the excellence of every aspect of the BSC production. Director Julianne Boyd has been doing these issue plays for many years now, and has yet to have one that has misfired. She staged *THE CRUCIBLE* in 2010 and *ALL MY SONS* in 2012. Her sense of historical importance (GE left the Housatonic River in Pittsfield where the theatre company operates poisoned and undrinkable) combines with some pretty innovative direction to bring a big, long, grey play like this into sharp focus. The fourteen actors - drawn as much from this region as from New York - are uniformly superb.



The arc of the play starts with the rumblings of trouble as Dr. Thomas Stockman awaits the testing results from water he suspects made a number of people ill. We briefly meet the many characters who will affect the family's life as his wife Catherine (Dee Nelson), daughter Petra (Katya Stepanov) and sons Morten (Noah Bailey) and Ejlif (Joey LaBrasca) dart in and out of the first scene as his brother the Mayor Peter Stockmann (Patrick Husted), dressed in the classic political power suit, learns of the tests and is outraged he was not consulted first. The solid ground under the Doctor's life is beginning to shift. The rumbling in the first act will soon unleash the fury of the mob in the second.

All this takes place against a background of an icy modernistic set and simple costumes, both of which read realistically. The forboding notes of a solo Cello punctuate the beginning of each scene. The eruption of two powerful forces are set to smash and grind against each other even as a family clings to each other for safety.

As the audience files in for the second act, they have no idea of what is about to engulf them as the clamor of the actors sets up a wild crowd scene which takes place only partly on stage. Here, the brilliant sound

designer Brad Berridge has devised an exceptional surround sound score, making the feeling of an impending riot so real that it seems to engulf the audience. Tensions build along with the natural buzz of still more actors scattered in the audience. The cumulative effect had me wondering how many extras they had in the lobby preparing to burst into the theatre to tar and feather our hero. The effect was big, but it is the attention to the tiniest details that make everything incerdibly real. Tony Pallone as the town drunk and Rosalind Cramer as a citizen added a great deal of authenticity to the scene. Small roles well played as these were can have amazing impact. So can a first class sound system in the hands of an expert who is told to "go for it".

It is at this moment that the play glues itself together even as the "enemy" and the "people" clash. Director Julianne Boyd builds the excitement of the citizens into a frenzy, and you experience it all around you. The ensemble brings the action of the mob into the midst of the audience, asking us to condemn the radical on stage as evil. Later in the second act, the father-in-law (Glenn Barrett in a delightfully venal role) blackmails his own son-in-law to cover up his role in polluting the water as the owner of a tannery upstream. In the end, it seems everyone is corrupt except for the Doctor and his immediate family as they dodge rocks being thrown though the windows and beatings at school. This Barrington Stage production does not dampen any of the dramatic events nor stifle the horrific treatment of one person trying to save the lives of its visitors, and - since he takes the long view - saving the whole town's economy.

Breaking the fourth wall is not that rare in theatre. Anyone who has seen *THE LION KING* or *HAIR* knows how well it works to create a feeling of a shared experience. But in this drama, it is a passionately breathtaking example of full-tilt theatrical magic at work. *ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* gives us the most memorable fifteen minutes of theatre you will likely experience this year, even this decade. It places us in the middle of an all-out assault on the truth by the classic powers-that-be

which is at the heart of this great human story. As the passage ends, the Mayor and his mob call for a show of hands to declare the good Doctor an enemy of the people. Most of the actors raised their hands. When those against branding him an enemy, many in the audience also raised their hands.

The audience became part of the play.

As the truth-telling Dr Thomas Stockman, Steve Hendrickson set the stage afire with his passion for the facts, his desire to see justice done, and the safety of his family. His eyes blaze, his arms beg us to embrace the truth and his heart breaks as friends and family succumb to deceit and treachery in order to cover up the news that the water for the spa is contaminated and has been making people sick. As his wife Catherine, Dee Nelson serves as the anchor to her husband's desire to share the truth, shoring him up when needed, but never failing to remind him of the repercussions on his family for being a whistle-blower.

Perhaps the toughest role was that of the Mayor Peter Stockmann (Patrick Husted) who also happens to be the brother of the doctor. I was delighted when he was politely booed at the curtain call, and graciously acknowledged the audience's ironic approbation with a smile and warm gesture of appreciation. Also exceptional are Christopher Hirsh, Scott Drummond and Jack Wetherall as the editors and publisher of the town newspaper. As Capt. Horster, one of the family's true friends, Don Paul Shannon shone like a beacon of hope.

This play may be fictional, but it is also an expose of what happens when people follow their leaders instead of questioning and verifying the truth for themselves. *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* will fuel interesting discussions for some time.

This superlative production on the Boyd-Quinson Mainstage of BSC deserves to be seen no matter where anyone's politics lie, especially since we all say we seek the truth,. Everyone filters stories through their own life experience, and just about everyone will find *AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE* the most exciting, thought-provoking and important play of the 2014 Berkshire theatre season.