

by Andrew Beck October 7, 2014



In response to the governmental witch hunts of the early 1950's which focused on gays in the State Department and communists virtually everywhere especially the entertainment industry, playwright Arthur Miller not only wrote "The Crucible," but he also adapted Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" in order to demonstrate the easy development of mob mentality, as well as the temptation to place economic gain over the common good.

His adaptation is probably produced as frequently in this country, if not more so, as Ibsen's original, and it

is remarkable how well it continues to serve as a reflection of our society today, particularly as seen in the Barrington Stage Company's harrowing and suspenseful production, which opened on Sunday, October 6 on view the theater's Boyd-Quinson Mainstage and runs through October 19. Julianne Boyd, the theater's Artistic Director, has produced a clear, articulate evening that swiftly propels the action inexorably forward while managing to feel fresh and exciting even for those who are familiar with both Ibsen's and Miller's versions.

She keeps the production in Ibsen's native Norway, but sets it in the early 1950's, reflecting the period in which Miller adapted it, that makes the work feel all that more contemporary. The 20th century touches, thanks to set designer David M. Barber, from the so-called "Danish modern" furniture to relatable knick-knacks and housing style, resonate with today's audiences since many recall a number of similar items while growing up. The issues, too, carry an all too familiar spin as well.

Boyd has also cast the production with a plethora of outstanding actors who seem made for their parts, none more so than the play's two antagonists, Steve Hendrickson as the intelligent, well-meaning but frequently naïve Dr. Thomas Stockmann, the inventor of the local nurturing steam baths that promise an economic boon to the community, and Patrick Husted, as his older brother, the Town's



*Steve Hendrickson as Thomas Stockmann in "An Enemy of the People" at Barrington Stage Company. Photo by Kevin Sprague*

man who thrills at the knowledge and insights that science can bring, while unable to comprehend that others may have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Hendrickson's Thomas is quite believable as a devoted husband and father, who has clearly earned the admiration and love of his family, as well as a concerned doctor who acts in what he sees as the best interests of the town citizens. He demonstrates Thomas's excitability, which can go from earnest enthusiasm to loud righteous anger within a matter of seconds, while striving to maintain a sense of dignity even in the face of ever-increasing opposition.

He is matched step by step by Husted's Peter, played as a compact, grey-haired gentleman with the steeliest of dispositions and a sense of authority and entitlement that produces both respect and awe among his constituents. As played by Husted, Peter is a man with little patience for anything that distracts him from his mission, although one gets the impression that he has made some accommodation in the past for his brother and his family, who are indeed the only actual family that Peter has. Husted speaks in clipped, curt sentences, sometimes veering a little too much into cinematic villain status, but the way he presents Peter's imperious nature is indeed compelling.

Dee Nelson does a tremendous job as Catherine, Thomas's wife, who remains supportive of her



*Steve Hendrickson as Thomas Stockmann and Patrick Husted as Peter Stockmann in "An Enemy of the People" at Barrington Stage Company. Photo by Kevin Sprague*

politically astute and cunning Mayor, who ultimately represents the area's business and economic interests. When Dr. Stockmann presents a report that points to the inevitable pollution of the baths, he expects to be hailed as a hero and savior for preventing a public health disaster, while the Mayor rallies support to discredit the findings and keep the flow of water from the polluting tanneries up north, as well as the flow of money, continuing.

Hendrickson is remarkable conveying the almost child-like innocence and optimism of his character, a



*Katya Stepanov as Petra Stockmann, Steve Hendrickson as Thomas Stockmann and Dee Nelson as Catherine Stockmann in "An Enemy of the People" at Barrington Stage Company. Photo by Kevin Sprague*

husband throughout, but realistically wary and concerned about her husband's adamant determination in the face of increasing public hostility. She functions as the conventional 1950's housewife, accepting of the rather silent role women are expected to play in public while maintaining her dignity and integrity all the while. Katya Stepanov as daughter Petra, a local teacher, previews the more active, involved woman she is on the way to becoming. Stepanov displays Petra's pent up anger while emphasizing her character's sense of justice, which she sees heartbreakingly betrayed by some close friends and supposed allies.

As the two self-described "radical journalists," Scott Drummond as Hovstad and Christopher Hirsh as Billings, present two initially amiable intellectuals who have been willing to criticize the national government but become more reticent and subservient when their exclusives threaten to impact the local powers-that-be. Jack Wetherall plays the paper's owner as a once cynical man who has given up on all of his beliefs to become an essentially spineless toady for his fellow businessmen. Wetherall's Aslaksen is a tragic figure, particularly as he reluctantly and ineffectually assumes control of a public meeting where he has to work harshly to silence his one time friend.

Don Paul Shannon is fine as Captain Horster, who remains true to Dr. Stockmann and his family to the

end, detailing a figure who has sailed the world and seen the damage that human beings are capable of doing to each other. Glenn Barrett is fine in the small role as Catherine's father, Morten Kill, a conniving tannery owner so concerned with his ultimate legacy that blackmail is certainly no detriment to his plans.

Boyd's piece-de-resistance occurs right after intermission, with her staging of the town's open meeting to discuss the future of the baths, as she places townsfolk throughout the vast auditorium of the Main Stage to serve as hecklers and angry residents. The house lights are up and it is almost as if the play's audience is complicit in the hectoring and haranguing. At one point, Hendrickson as Dr. Stockmann, who has been prevented from speaking by both the rabble and the town's leadership, looks out into the Barrington Stage's audience and begs longingly for support. Though a few brave souls in the audience did raise their hands, the impact is that we all share collective blame and responsibility for what we are doing to our environment, for acquiescing to the powers that be, and for our willingness to stifle dissent out of fear or discomfort.

Scott Pinkney does a great job of coordinating the lighting for this latter sequence as well as for the haunting vision of a dangerous, tortured morning that follows in the Stockmann residence. Sara Jean Tosetti has provided an array of dark blended fabrics for the staid suits and attire of the older men in town, in contrast to some subtly brighter touches for the younger members of the Stockmann family. Brad Berridge's sound design accommodates everything from rocks being thrown through windows to additional shouts and epithets from the townsfolk that erupt stereophonically across the back of the theater.

Boyd has created a rousing and revelatory production of "An Enemy of the People," which despite the grim reality at its core, provides a hopeful beacon for the future, as long as, in Thomas Stockmann's words, people remember that "you are fighting for the truth... And that makes you strong... and the strong must learn to be lonely."