

Berkshire Bright Focus

An Enemy of the People

J. Peter Bergman, October 13, 2014

The late 1940s through the middle 1950s were dangerous times for men and women who thought about things. Thought was not encouraged by the US government and those who did think and expressed their thoughts were all too often brought before the Senate Subcommittee seeking out and prosecuting "communists." You could be classified as one just for thinking about things that didn't match the common ground, the party line. These were dangerous times indeed and free thinkers like playwright Arthur Miller were promised immunity for a confession and then forced to reveal information that would incriminate others. Miller resisted, was convicted and fined and only much later exonerated by a more reasonable government administration.

He had produced a masterpiece by this time, "Death of a Salesman" which already challenged many suppositions about humankind and Americans in particular. His next play, produced one year later, was a three act adaptation of an 1882 five act play by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen which Barrington Stage Company



is now presenting in a two act (five scene) version on their main stage in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Using Ibsen's drama about a man of principle who stands up to authority in order to save his town, his family and anyone who might visit them for the health restorative powers of local water, Miller crafted a tight melodrama that invoked a more modern theme of politicians and the press condemning truth and honesty. It was Miller's first rendition of the congressional trials ravaging the country and removing talent, truth and reality from the American scene (his second play on this subject, "The Crucible," followed three years later).

Director Julianne Boyd has brought Miller's version of the play to the stage with an abrupt honesty that is absolutely riveting. She involves us emotionally from the opening entrance of Dr. Thomas Stockmann in the first scene and never loosens her grip on her viewers, even bringing the mob essence into the audience when she needs it there. She is aided by a superb company of players who avoid the aspects of melodrama that infuse the dialogue and the situation. Now





and then it is possible, in a play, to create a complete sense of eavesdropping and déjà vu and both of those concepts prevail in "An Enemy of the People." It is eerie, so appropriate for this politically charged, pre-Halloween time, to be brought into the argument in so many ways.

We watch women and children being abused by their peers. We witness the betrayals of friends and family. We encounter the absolute lack of brotherly love between brothers. Still, the one thing that holds us, the only aspect that really engages us, is the thrust of honesty and faith and love of one's fellows. Ibsen gave this to the play and Miller never betrays that, though along the way he does write some very important statements, ones that stick after the show is over: "A politician never knows where he is going to end up." "There's one blessing above all others. To have earned the respect of one's neighbors." "You are trying to build a town on a morality so rotten that it will infect the country and the whole world." "Don't excuse it with humanitarian slogans, because a man who'll drag his family through a lifetime of disgrace is a demon in his heart!"

The people who spout these lines are played by a fabulous company of actors. Steve Hendrickson is the heroic "enemy" of his people. This actor uses simplicity to convey so much more. His naturalism is staggering as he fights to protect a

populace that turns on him. Hendrickson has played more difficult roles but he has never been better at directly confronting issues with honesty. Memories of him in other places are diminished by his portrayal of Dr. Stockmann. If they charged \$200 a ticket (which they don't) Barrington Stage would be offering up great work at bargain prices.

As his controlling and politically corrupt brother, Mayor Peter Stockmann, Patrick Husted is often on the verge of melodrama but he holds himself true to Miller's realism and avoids that over-the-edge possibility nicely. He is a perfect evil foil to the idealistic realism of Hendrickson's younger brother. There are even moments when he is so nearly convincing that it brings a chill to the spine.

Glenn Barrett plays Morten Kiil, the doctor's



father-in-law, superbly. His inherent cheapness is revealed easily by Barrett and when, in the final scene, he shows his true and honest nature it is with a coldness and openness that is almost a relief while leaving an actual chilling breeze in his wake. His daughter, the doctor's wife, is beautifully played by Dee Nelson. In 1950s costumes that leave her a bit isolated, physically, from her husband and children, Nelson assays the hard path from perfect hostess to complete heart-breaking anguish. This is lovely acting all the way.

Her daughter, Petra, is played with a curious combination of natural flirtatiousness and haphazard reluctance by Katya Stepanov. Not one moment in her performance was acted; rather she seemed to live her role, accepting Miller's words as superior to her own. Her renunciation of work offered, her deliverance of



reactions to her father's choices, her anti-romantic moments were all absolutely appropriate and right. Her younger brothers were nicely played by Noah Bailey and Joey LaBrasca.

Outside the family were the men who surround this deeply conflicted family and, like the actors above, were wisely portrayed by a group of



talented actors. Scott Drumond as the heavily conflicted editor Hovstad gave a deeply nuanced performance. Christopher Hirsh as the journalist Billing was able to be both sweet and deeply wicked without a break in the transitions. Don Paul Shannon as the faithful friend Captain Horster was almost a comic relief without a laugh in the only role that never has a moment of betrayal. As the publisher Aslaksen who leads the attack on a man he has always admired and respected, Jack Wetherall touches the heart and mind of those of us watching him change with the prevailing winds. Even the small, bystander roles played by Brian Litscher, Rosalind Cramer and Tony Pallone were rendered with that perfect realism that makes this all move so well.

David A. Berber's excellent sets define the time and place beautifully. His Norway and the upper Bronx of my youth were perfectly matched in this production. Sara Jean Tosetti provided costumes that mated the time and the mood. Scott Pinkney's lighting was well wrought and managed to add to the growing chill in the air inside the theater. Brad Beveridge provided absolutely wonderful sound to the enterprise. Julianne Boyd has chosen well for this production and the team of five have given the actors and the production exactly what Miller and Ibsen called for.

Take the journey to Pittsfield, find yourself in mid-20th century Norway and realize, as I did, that so very little has changed in this world. Issues of the day, and issues of the 1880s, are still our issues now and this production addresses the reality of dealing with environmental, political and personal tribulations the best way we can. Honesty may be the best policy, but in this play it is the accumulated weight of the world's troubles. Give life a chance, I say, and get your emotions in gear through this theatrical masterwork.