

Review: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE: 6th to 13th February 1999

The first major show at our wonderful new theatre was, fittingly, one of the greats: Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People". The play deals with the destructive power of the truth - a two-edged sword which can destroy its wielder.

This Victorian masterpiece still has contemporary relevance: think of Mordecai Vanunu. And the actions of the newspaper owner and editor - in first encouraging Dr Stockman to reveal all about the town's unhealthy spa water, then dropping his cause when they see it will cost money - horribly foreshadowing the present-day machinations of the Murdoch empire.

Why, then, did this tinder-box fail to catch light? The staging certainly didn't help. Setting most of the furnishings round the perimeter gave a two dimensional effect which was encouraged by the actors frequently facing each other from either end of the stage. Things often seemed very static. In the public meeting scene, scattering bodies round the stage accentuated the thinness of the crowd.

A real mistake, I think, was not to spend more time on adapting Arthur Miller's script. Miller's a great theatrical writer, owes a lot to Ibsen himself, and writes superb demotic American. But in the mouths of English actors phrases like "buck the public" or "my new pants" can only make an audience laugh.

Comparisons are odious. But I remember an excellent Theatr Mold version of this play where it was re-located in a small Welsh spa town. The names were Welsh, the references Welsh. As a result you could believe in the small, provincial community where the action unfolded. Our production called less for the suspension of disbelief than the suppression of incredulity.

Updating the costumes to the 1940's again seemed an odd choice. Why? It added no further dramatic dimension and raised unanswered questions.

Although Charles A. Halford has an engagingly honest stage presence, I felt he lacked the driven quality which must be a part of Dr. Stockman's personality. The man is so often referred to as being a socially-dangerous eccentric that he must surely have a bit of a glow to the eyeballs. This Stockman was more plaintive than messianic.

David Hannigan was more forcefully convincing as his brother the mayor. But in any social contest, you felt, this mayor would be winner. So the full dramatic tension between the two protagonists was missing.

Jack Smerdon's Morton (Dr. Stockman's father-in-law) was delightful. The show perked up on his entrance. He brought to the part an ample quantity of the kind of self-defeating cunning which it requires. As his daughter, Carolyn Williams was precise and always audible, and adopted a 1940's vocal style entirely in keeping with the costume, but slightly at odds with the rest of the cast.

Mike Waters' Captain Horster was convincing, and Bill Compton's drunk was worthy of note. But it seems unfair to single out actors for praise or blame in a show whose chief problem was, for me, a complete absence of that sense of community on which the play depends.

I went to the theatre that night full of hope, and re-reading what I've typed gives me no particular pleasure. I took part myself a few weeks earlier in an opening entertainment which got a mixed reception, so maybe this comes better from me. We need to inject a little more flair and imagination if we are going to fill every one of those 200-odd seats for seven nights a week.

Barry Evans

TEDDINGTON THEATRE CLUB

A classic tale

TEDDINGTON Theatre Club proudly presents its first full production in The Hampton Hill Playhouse from Saturday February 6th to Saturday February 13th at 7.45 each evening, doors open at 7.15.

The play is an adaptation by the eminent American playwright, Arthur Miller, of the play *An Enemy Of The People* by Henrik Ibsen and directed by Christopher Ivey.

Although written in 1882, telling the classic tale of one man's isolation by society as he struggles to prevent the greed of his neighbours from causing a

very real tragedy, it still remains relevant for today's society.

Dealing with health scares, cronyism and the power of the press, there are grand contemporary themes alongside personal intimate issues which compel attention.

Many of TTC's stalwarts appear in the cast including Jack Smerdon, David Hannigan, Carolyn Williams, Edward Jeoffroy and many others.

Tickets for members at £6 are available now from the box office which can also supply information - Mrs Linda Brignall, 5 Howard Close, Hampton TW12 2UB, 979 9499.

TEDDINGTON THEATRE CLUB

A commendable enemy

LONG-awaited, the first production came last week to Hampton Hill Playhouse, Teddington Theatre Club's splendid new home, in the form of Arthur Miller's adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, a weighty piece of theatre directed with clarity by Christopher Ivey.

Thought to be retaliation for the storm of abuse which greeted *Ghosts*, his previous play, it concerns an idealistic doctor, Stockmann, discovering that the waters of his native spa town are dangerously contaminated, and his ensuing struggle against the authorities, the press and the townspeople for the truth to be told.

It was first produced in 1882, but *An Enemy of the People* has obvious parallels with the present day.

The period of TTC's presentation seemed vaguely 1930s and in the role of Peter Stockmann, the doctor's elder brother, David Hannigan, was disadvantaged by his costume of lounge suit with just an ordinary tiffen and walking stick to denote his elevated status as the Mayor, Chief of Police, Chairman of the Board of the town's spa, etc, etc.

His performance, however, did convey a man determined to preserve his powerful position as representative of entrenched authority, Machiavellian in his manipulation of others, and masking self-interest as the 'common good'.

Although there could

have been more tension between the brothers, Charles A Halford as Dr Stockmann gave a convincing account of a man of integrity, albeit a shade too smug in his moral certainties, totally unable to see both sides of a question with no room for doubt.

His moral stance made him prepared to sacrifice everything, including his wife and children on the altar of his unshakeable beliefs. Admirable in a way, but one was left with the feeling that some kind of compromise would have better served the public and his family.

Carolyn Williams and Tracy Frankson as the doctor's wife and daughter made the most of limited opportunities, while newspapermen Hovstad and Billing, as played by Ben Davies and Andy Everett seemed rather understated for hated 'men of the press', following the crowd instead of leading it. Edward Jeoffroy's portrayal of 'moderate' Aslaken the printer was suitably ineffectual, permanently seated on the wall.

In fact the whole production, although commendably well acted, had a rather subdued air about it, perhaps due to the very wide playing space and the unaccustomed acoustics of the new theatre.

Jenny Scott

I apologise - this review should have appeared in our issue of February 19th. Unfortunately it was overlooked on press day. HT