



Tom Wilkinson as Dr Stockmann and Connie Booth as Katrine in *An Enemy Of The People*

**Michael Billington** on a magnificent revival of Ibsen's *Enemy Of The People* at the Young Vic

## The Jaws of Ibsen

**I**BSEN'S *An Enemy Of The People* has not had a London run since 1962. I can only urge theatre-goers to besiege the Young Vic where they will discover a magnificent revival by David Thacker. I should not be surprised if, like the same director's *Ghosts*, it transfers to the West End; better, however, to see it at the Young Vic where it acquires a throat-grabbing power by being played in the round.

My one reservation concerns the use of Arthur Miller's 1950 translation which softens and subtly distorts Ibsen's purpose. You will recall that Ibsen's hero, Dr Stockmann, is the medical officer at a Health Institute in a thriving Norwegian spa. He discovers that the baths, on which the spa's fortunes depend, are a contaminated pest-hole and need to be closed down for two years. Expecting to be hailed as a public benefactor, Dr Stockmann finds that his report on the baths is suppressed by his mayoral brother, that the local paper deserts him and that he is branded by the townsfolk as a traitor and enemy of the people. Resisting escape to America or the chance to make a private profit out of a public crisis, Dr Stockmann decides to fight for truth with the help of his beleaguered family.

Miller, who adapted the play at the height of McCarthyism, admits that he was disturbed by some of Dr Stockmann's attitudes. Accordingly, in the famous confrontation with the citizens, he cuts Stockmann's division of men into grey-hounds and mongrels, deletes his plea for men to work their way "out of spiritual bondage into aristocracy" and no longer has Stockmann claiming that "those who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin". Ibsen's Stockmann is both Mr Vallant-For-Truth and a disquieting Norwegian Coriolanus. Miller's version focuses on the former and I find it somewhat ironic that one of the greatest attacks on conformism ever written has to be doctored for modern taste.

It remains, however, a mesmerising play and one of enduring topicality (has anyone ever noticed that it is the prototype for *Jaws*?) It is also a mark of Ibsen's genius that he combines a quasi-Marxist understanding of economic imperatives with a dazzling theatricality. Witness the superb scene where the Mayor comes to lean on the newspaper publisher and editor. It is only when they realise

that the baths, though privately owned, will have to be reconstructed at public expense that they change tack. And I defy anyone not to feel a thrill when Stockmann understands their volte-face through spying the Mayor's hat and cane on an office desk: that is real play-writing.

Although using the sanitised Miller version, David Thacker is intelligent enough to see (like Patrick Garland's 1975 Chichester production) that Dr Stockmann's weaknesses are as important as his strengths. Tom Wilkinson plays him beautifully as a naive, intemperate hothead who stumbles into idealism.

In the early scenes Mr Wilkinson radiates a broad-beamed, comic self-satisfaction as he hymns the virtues of home-life while being unable to remember the name of the maid. But in the great episode of public confrontation (excellently staged with the citizens' faces looming out of lamplit gloom) he acquires a tongue of fire: Mr Wilkinson also makes you feel that Stockmann's more extreme statements ("The majority is always wrong") spring not from instinctive elitism but from an emotional reaction to the blockage of his democratic rights.

David Henry is also admirable as his brother whom he plays not as an oily villain but as a smooth small-town pragmatist unable to credit, like all conservatives, that not everyone is motivated by money. Clive Swift exudes a wonderful gingery cynicism as Stockmann's predatory father-in-law. Tom Mannion plays the venal editor as a young man torn between desire for Stockmann's daughter and complicity with power and Richard Butler as his publisher offers a neat vignette of a man for whom moderation means swimming with the tide.

I still wish the Young Vic had used a translation that retained Ibsen's heroic objectivity. But it remains a great evening in the theatre: one reminding us that all first-rate drama intertwines private passion and social relevance and proving the eternal, topical truth that connivance at local corruption is a symptom of national sickness.

● *An Enemy Of The People* is at the Young Vic (01-928 6363) until November 12.

## Billington on Enemy

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