

Michael Billington is worried by Trevor Nunn's debut production as head of the National Theatre

A bit too clever, Trevor

Trevor Nunn, who formally takes over as director of the National Theatre in 10 days' time, opens his account with Ibsen's *An Enemy Of The People* — an extremely bold choice, since the play champions the elite against the masses and questions the tyranny of majority rule. But while the evening has much going for it — not least Christopher Hampton's new version and fine performances from Ian McKellen, Stephen Moore and John Woodvine — I was dismayed by Nunn's reliance on Victorian scenic clutter. Visually, this is old-hat Ibsen.

In fact, there is a gnawing paradox at the heart of this production. Textually, it goes for the real, uncensored play. It is, of course, the story of Dr Stockmann, medical officer in a Norwegian coastal town, who discovers the local baths are dangerously contaminated. In Arthur Miller's highly popular version, Stockmann is turned into an heroic idealist. Hampton's infinitely superior translation reminds us that Stockmann's campaigning courage is allied to a fanatic streak. In the great scene where he confronts the townspeople, who see their livelihoods threatened, he divides humanity into pedigrees and mongrels, hymns the "spiritually superior individual" and claims that "anyone who lives by a lie should be exterminated like vermin". Ibsen's point is that the champion of scientific truth may also be a rabid anti-democrat.

At its best, the play is like a mixture of *Coriolanus* and *Jaws*, a portrait of a truculent individualist and of a society that puts profit before human life. But what Nunn gives us is a variation on *Nicholas Nickleby*. At a time when the trend in Ibsen production is towards the suggestively spare, he swaths the play in novelistic detail. John Napier's tiresomely revolving, stage-hogging set, crowns domestic interiors with water towers, forested hills and scudding clouds; Nunn fills in the crowded canvas with marching bands, jostling citizens and cawing seagulls.



Ian McKellen and Kai Pearce in *An Enemy Of The People*

Not only does this subvert Ibsen's selective realism; on several occasions it is misleading. And Nunn's ending is preposterous: Stockmann and his family ascend to the rooftop, striking an heroic, tableau-vivant pose, while below them an electronically enhanced crowd chants: "An enemy of the people." This is *Les Mis* kitsch, not Ibsen.

Underneath the ludicrously inflated staging, there is, however, a serious grasp of what the play is about — something you can gauge from McKellen's excellently judged performance. Ibsen said that the actor playing Stockmann "must make himself as thin and small as possible". And McKellen transforms himself into a lean-faced, straggle-haired, excitable figure whose life is dominated by domesticity and research — almost the epitome of the absent-minded prof. In his fine performance, private postures explain public attitudes: Stockmann's solitary obsessiveness translates into an inflexible aristocracy of spirit.

What you also learn is how much Stockmann is driven by antipathy to his big-wig brother: the scenes between McKellen's impulsive Tomas and Stephen Moore's sly, calculating Peter Stockmann are the highlight of the evening. When Moore quietly asks McKellen to return the mayoral hat and stick with which he has been cavorting, it is as if old nursery antagonisms are being replayed.

Psychologically, the production is acute. There is a brilliant cameo from John Woodvine as a printer who prides himself on having graduated from "the university of life", and a highly impressive one from Alan Cox as an opportunist liberal editor. Ibsen's unnervingly subversive play, which champions a spiritual elite while attacking the capitalist ethic, survives intact; I only hope that Trevor Nunn's monumental scenic realism does not suggest that the National is going to return to Victorian theatrical values.

In rep at the Olivier (0171-928 2252).

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ianlharris

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