

TREVOR NUNN opens his account as the new boss of the National Theatre with this rare revival of *An Enemy of the People*. I'd like to report a terrific success and it's certainly a big splashy production. Alarming, however, it gives the impression that Nunn wishes he was still directing blockbuster musicals rather than Ibsen.

Though the fourth act contains an epic scene of public confrontation, in which our hero, Dr Stockmann, stands up to a mob, most of the play consists of intense, intimate discussions in small rooms.

Working with his regular designer, John Napier, however, Nunn's production initially comes over like a Norwegian *Oliver!* without the songs. Napier puts a whole town on the Olivier stage, in one of his famous split-level adventure-playground sets. It's a bit like the pirate camp at Legoland, all sails and barrels and recorded seagulls. We also get playful schoolboys and a marching band.

I suppose the idea is to create a tangible sense of the community that Stockmann is threatening with his insis-

Nunn shows off his big production values

Theatre

An Enemy of the People
National Theatre

tence that the water in the spa town is dangerously contaminated. The effect, however, is merely picturesque.

The play was written in angry reaction to the howls of outraged public morality that greeted Ibsen's previous drama, *Ghosts*, which concerned hereditary syphilis. And though Arthur Miller's famous adaptation turned *Enemy of the People* into one man's heroic struggle against a corrupt ruling class, Ibsen's play, now nimbly translated by Christopher Hampton, actually takes us into more dangerous territory.

Ian McKellen's Stockmann may look like a delightfully unworldly nutty professor, all frets and fidgets, wayward hair and unfortunate cardigans, but by the fourth act he

is less interested in public safety than in the sheer ghastliness of his moronic fellow humans. There is wild talk of wholesale extermination and human experimentation with the gene pool. No wonder the impeccably liberal Miller bridled. This is a play that loathes the liberal consensus.

Unfortunately the big confrontation isn't as electrifying here as it might be. The mob, spilling out into the stalls, is too carefully choreographed and at any moment you fear that the defiant Stockmann is going to burst into song (*My Way*, perhaps).

The drama has also lost resonance. The real cause for concern nowadays isn't health scares, but false health scares. At a time of perniciously nannyish EC regulations, it's hard not to feel a sneaking sympathy with the townspeople and some impatience with our apocalyptic do-gooder of a hero.

Nor is Nunn able to disguise the mechanical way in which Ibsen charts Stockmann's progress from public hero to *Enemy of the People*. McKellen's performance will undoubtedly find some admirers. It's busy, even virtuosic, ranging from whimsical good humour, through mental chaos to fanatical resolve. But this is curiously external acting and I was entirely unmoved, even during the most heavily signalled moments of distress.

The usually excellent Penny Downie can make little of Stockmann's dull wife, and Lucy Whybrow has an equally tough task with his saintly daughter. Stephen Moore offers terrific value, however, as Stockmann's brother, the devious mayor, while John Woodvine creates a richly comic impression of small-town pomposity as the printer Aslaksen.

This certainly isn't a disastrous start to Nunn's regime, but I hope there will be more substance and less directorial flash in the work to come.

Tickets: 0171 928 2252

CHARLES SPENCER

Enemy Spencer Telegraph



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ianlharris

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