

Adrift on a sea of hot air

TREVOR Nunn makes a big, bizarre splash of a debut as Director of the National Theatre — like a diver hitting the water rather than elegantly gliding into it. He directs Ibsen's satire at the expense of corrupt local politics, craven journalists and self-serving townfolk in the style of expensive, spectacular Victorian melodrama. Between the acts, what with Stephen Edis's music for a six-strong band, a jovial chorus of townfolk at full bustle or dancing about the revolving Olivier stage, Nunn imposes a touch of Lloyd Webber as well.

The conception, fortified by Christopher Hampton's eloquent new translation, seems alarmingly perverse — though it held me astonished and agog throughout, which explains my lavish one-star rating.

What on earth, though, persuaded Nunn to loose Ibsen's domestic drama, principally set in the Medical Officer's home and a newspaper office, upon the Olivier's infinitely vast spaces, with full cast of 40?

John Napier sets the misplaced, epic tone with a vista of fir trees and a cyclorama of clouds. On the stage-revolve, beneath a high platform and water-tower is both an ugly, open-plan house and newspaper editor's office where Alan Cox's bland young editor intrigues.

The epic look hardly suits this second-rate Ibsen, written in a hot flush of indignation after the abuse heaped upon him for *Ghosts*. In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen retaliated with polemic, suggesting the minority was always right: the masses were swayed by personal interest rather than public good and could do with eugenics to improve them.

An Enemy of the People ★
Olivier, National Theatre

NICHOLAS DE JONGH

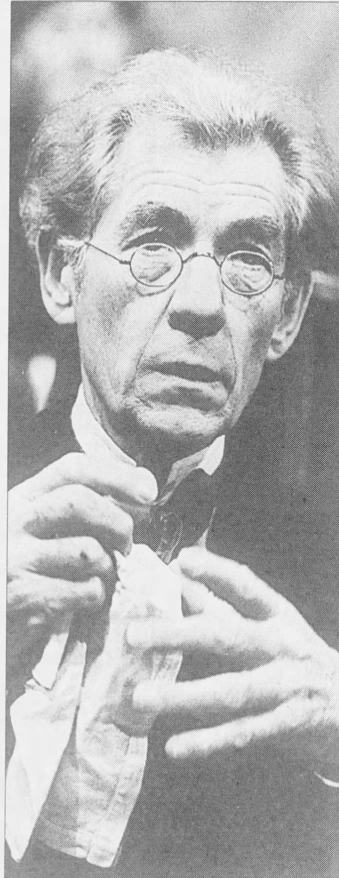
True to the play's schematic outline, when the town's medical officer reveals that the new health spa's water is polluted he's at first acclaimed as a hero. But when Stockmann's scheming brother, the mayor — to whom Stephen Moore powerfully lends an air of wily intrigue — explains that to purify the baths would necessitate increased taxes, local journalists and townfolk instantly turn against Stockmann. Real life, though, is a more subtle game.

The public meeting at which the altruistic doctor rounds upon his detractors, is played as melodrama, with townfolk in baleful uproar. This melodramatising tendency infects Ian McKellen's performance — perhaps the worst of his brilliant career — as the self-righteous Stockmann. Sir Ian is full of hot air and as emotionally hollow as a tin whistle.

He certainly gives the play a driving energy — right to the preposterous finale when Stockmann finds strength in standing alone. But when hard-edged rage and passion are required — never this actor's forte — Sir Ian resorts to winsome softness and whimpering histrionics.

In matching manner, Penny Downie plays his wife as a monotonously suffering victim. Only a terrific John Woodvine, as the Uriah Heep-like printer who preaches moderation and practices hypocrisy, catches rare, sharp Ibsenite notes of satire and fun.

● Box office: 0171 928 2252.



Ringling hollow: Ian McKellen in *An Enemy of the People*

Enemy de Jongh Standard



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