



SIBLING RIVALRY: (left to right) Boyd Gaines & Richard Thomas star as battling brothers in *An Enemy of the People*. Photo: Joan Marcus



Theater Review

An Enemy of the People: **Richard Thomas, Boyd Gaines in puzzling revival of Ibsen's classic**

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

By Henrik Ibsen

Adapted by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

Directed by Doug Hughes

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 W. 47th Street

(212-239-6200), www.anenemyofthepeople.com

By Scott Harrah

Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen was often called "the father of modern drama" because his stories focused on realism and social issues, so it is refreshing indeed to see a topical play such as the thought-provoking *An Enemy of the People* mounted in an era when Broadway is fixated on endless revivals of plays by tried-and-true American dramatists. However, one doubts that the Scandinavian bard ever had over-the-top acting, ear-drum-shattering delivery of dialogue, and preposterous 21st century liberties taken with the script in mind, as is the case with this ambitious but hollow, misguided interpretation produced by Manhattan Theatre Club.

It is perplexing that the usually competent, Tony Award-winning director Doug Hughes (*Doubt*) gave British playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz free rein with her updated, modernized translation of Ibsen's 1882 classic tale of social morality and responsibility, public health, fear of disease, and political grandstanding. What was once a subtle tale about the irrationality of the masses and small-town corruption has been turned into a two-act shouting match that is often more grating and shrill than dramatically satisfying or convincing.

Richard Thomas and Boyd Gaines, two stage veterans, play brothers Peter Stockmann and Dr. Thomas Stockmann, respectively. Mr. Thomas's Peter is the mayor of a southern Norwegian coastal town renowned for its public baths and the purported "healing" medicinal qualities of the water, while Mr. Gaines is a popular local doctor who has been a proponent of the baths and helped secure public and private financial support to turn them into a tourist magnet.

Problems arise when Dr. Stockmann discovers that the source of the water supply for the baths is actually toxic, but his brother opposes any exposé about the revelation, particularly in the town newspaper. What is especially puzzling is hearing two pros like Mr. Thomas and Mr. Gaines yell and scream their lines, as if they are both on some lowbrow syndicated TV talk show. Certainly a director with the skill and experience of Doug Hughes should have known it was often necessary to reel in the overdone performances of these two otherwise gifted actors.

There are a few bright moments here. Mr. Gaines is especially effective in a courtroom scene in the second act, when he speaks out against the dangers of the baths. However, his supposedly explosive scenes with Mr. Thomas come across as merely verbal brawls, drained of the theatrical force that makes most Ibsen plays so powerful.

Mr. Thomas, sporting dark clothes, a cape and hat, approaches the character of Mayor Stockmann with all the hammy zeal of a villain from a middling 1800s melodrama. As talented as the actor is, he has no grasp of the character, and comes across as merely a one-dimensional caricature. All that is missing here is a phony mustache, and Mr. Thomas could be Snidely Whiplash from the "Dudley Do-Right" cartoons.

Many of Ibsen's works, from *Hedda Gabler* to *A Doll's House*, focus on the harsh realities of truth telling, and the complexities and imperfections of democracy, but always with a reverence for soft nuances. *An Enemy of the People* is no exception, but this inept revival is not even close to being definitive, as one doubts Ibsen ever intended the story to be told in such a vociferous, strident, and exaggerated manner.

Edited by Scott Harrah

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