



**HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM:** Norbert Leo Butz plays CEO Jeffrey Skilling, speaking to press in *Enron*, British drama about Texas-based energy company's downfall. Photo: Joan Marcus

## *Theater Review*

# ***Enron*, British playwright & director's view of American corporate scandal, is eerie, stylized look at chicanery in global economics**

***Enron***

**Written by Lucy Prebble**

**Directed by Rupert Goold**

**The Broadhurst Theatre**

**235 West 44th Street**

**(212-239-6200), [www.broadwaysbestshows.com](http://www.broadwaysbestshows.com)**

**By Scott Harrah**

It is difficult to write about a drama like *Enron*, and not simply because it is such a simplistic, British interpretation of the complex American business tragedy involving the Texas energy giant at the dawn of the new millennium. Here is a story that is ugly but rings with sobering veracity in this era of economic downturn.

U.K. playwright Lucy Prebble, just 29 years old, portrays the power players in the *Enron* scheme as farcical villains in a flashy, highly stylized tale that reminds one of the Theater of the Absurd of Eugene Ionesco or Samuel Beckett and is hardly traditional American theatrical storytelling in the vein of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, or even Tracey Letts. The show was praised by press and public alike when it debuted on London's West End, but some have questioned whether Americans will find a foreigner's take on one of our most infamous domestic scandals palatable or, dare I say it, anti-American?

*Enron* the scandal may have transpired nearly a decade ago, but the machinations of corporate America in *Enron* the play are still eerily topical today. Ms. Prebble could easily write an entire series of West End and Broadway dramas about more recent newsmakers like Lehman Brothers, Bernie Madoff and his Ponzi scheme, and similar ilk.

What's remarkable about this play is the breezy, visually amusing manner in which playwright Lucy Prebble and director Rupert Goold recount the collapse of Houston-based Enron and the reprehensible corporate executives who worked there, swindled the public, and brought the company to its unceremonious, infamous downfall. Ms. Prebble and Mr. Goold use numerous entertaining props and sight gags to tell the convoluted tale of a company that hid debts through shady practices and inflated its stock price. The public is represented as Three Blind Mice (yes, literally, actors wearing mouse heads), the enormous debts of Enron are visualized as men sporting dinosaur heads (in a nod to *Jurassic Park*), and *Stars Wars*-style lightsabers are used to tell the story of deregulation of electric companies (and the

subsequent blackouts) in California in the first years of the new millennium. The now-defunct accounting firm Arthur Andersen is portrayed effectively by a ventriloquist's dummy. There are also dance numbers, pyrotechnics, partying cowboys, and countless video montages of Clinton denying the Monica Lewinsky allegations, the disastrous 2000 presidential election and the electoral mess in Florida, and the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Call this all thematic padding and "smoke and mirrors" if you must, but it's quite fitting when chronicling a company like Enron that was, after all, renowned for hype and hardly about solid business practices.

"24" star Gregory Itzin plays Enron founder Kenneth Lay, a man who was accused of lying to the public and company employees, and was indicted in counts of securities and wire fraud. Norbert Leo Butz gives a riveting portrayal of Enron CEO Jeffrey Skilling, a purported visionary who, along with CFO Andy Fatzow (Stephen Kunken), comes up with what they believe is a clever way to hide the company's mounting debts: creating a shadow company.

Marin Mazzie brilliantly plays Claudia Roe, based on real-life Enron executive Rebecca Mark. As the only female mogul in the sea of testosterone at Enron, she is dismissed by the men for wanting to build power plants and help the company have tangible assets. Mazzie, with her rapid-fire delivery of Prebble's crisp dialogue, is appropriately icy in all the right places, and is, at times, a voice of reason amongst her conniving male peers.

Playwright Prebble and director Goold make a mockery of all the tomfoolery going on in a manner that's easy to comprehend for almost anyone. They make corporate trading and other dry economic subject matter seem like the elements of a soap opera or pulp novel, and to our surprise, it works. One doesn't need to have read endless news stories about the company in *Forbes* or *The Wall Street Journal* to understand what really happened. *Enron* does for business and economics what the musical *Chicago* did for crime and celebrity, stabbing the satirical needle firmly into a sore subject, exposing how no amount of grandstanding and financial flimflamming can ever cover up lies and chicanery when the public and people and their livelihood end up being victims.

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'ENRON': (left to right) Marin Mazzie, Stephen Kunken, Norbert Leo Butz, Gregory Itzen. Photo: Joan Marcus



### ENRON

*Enron*, or more aptly put, "The People Who Create The Horrifying Economic Dream Bubble We Live In," is a thought-provoking play, set in the unmythical, mighty land of Houston, Texas, chronicling the company's rise and fall. A tale of greed and avarice of one of the most powerful energy companies, this ambitious drama is the second play by British playwright Lucy Prebble, and her viewpoint of the power players and the behind-the-scene struggles of this giant corporation. The key players are Enron founder Kenneth Lay (Gregory Itzin), Jeffrey Skilling, the CEO (Norbert Leo Butz) and CFO Anthony Fastow, (Stephen Kunken), Skilling's protégé, who engineered "mark to market accounting," a financial scheme that turns nothing into the guise of something. Butz and Kunken are exceptional in their roles. The real tragedy isn't just the downfall of the company. Even more appalling is the way the firm's shoddy practices ruined the lives of Enron employees who were advised to buy stock in the company, which ultimately ended up being worthless, while the executives were paid millions of dollars in bonuses.

BROADHURST THEATRE, 235 West 44th Street, (212-307-4100).

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