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<th>An enemy of the people, Ibsen adapted by Arthur Miller, Gate Theatre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Lonergan, Patrick</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Date</strong></td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Irish Theatre Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to publisher's version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://itmarchive.ie">http://itmarchive.ie</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6658">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6658</a></td>
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An Enemy of the People
Barry McGovern & Declan Conlon in the Gate Theatre production of 'An Enemy of the People'. Photo: Pat Redmond
Declan Conlon & Bosco Hogan in the Gate Theatre production of 'An Enemy of the People'. Photo: Pat Redmond
Declan Conlon & Fiona Bell in the Gate Theatre production of 'An Enemy of the People'. Photo: Pat Redmond
Declan Conlon & Denis Conway in the Gate Theatre production of 'An Enemy of the People'. Photo: Pat Redmond

by Patrick Lonergan Reviewed 28 May

An Enemy of the People is sometimes described as a problem play, in that it dramatises a compelling debate between two brothers about the nature of morality and individual responsibility. But that term might obscure the fact that it's also quite a confused play: Ibsen himself was unsure whether to see it as a comedy or something more serious. It has many of the ingredients of a Restoration-style romp (improbable entrances and exits, characters hiding behind screens to eavesdrop upon their enemies). Yet it also has what Ibsen called a “serious basic theme” – namely, the question of what happens when an individual forces a society to accept as true something we would much rather ignore. In exploring that issue, Ibsen was responding to the public outcry to Ghosts, a play notoriously described as an “open sewer” and a “loathsome sore unbandaged” by scandalised critics. Ibsen’s hero Dr Stockmann is thus often seen as a surrogate for Ibsen himself, and the play’s suggestion that the truth must be told, whatever the cost, is often viewed as Ibsen’s defence of the necessity of plays like Ghosts. But because of that identification between the writer and his hero, it’s sometimes forgotten that Ibsen was ambivalent about Stockmann, describing him as “an oddball and a hothead”, while also acknowledging that there was much to admire about him.

Arthur Miller’s 1950 adaptation of the play solves many of these problems – but it also introduces several new ones. By reducing the play from five acts to three, Miller brought focus to Stockmann’s struggle; he also streamlined the plot, making it more credible and
engaging. Yet he also toned down some of the play’s more provocative features, especially in his characterisation of Stockmann’s daughter Petra. And, as sometimes happens with Miller, there’s a tendency towards moralising in the stage directions and speechifying on stage. Miller’s *Enemy* can easily be identified as the bridge between *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*: his Stockmann is the link that allows us to understand how the self-deceiving Willie Loman led to the self-sacrificing John Proctor. But because Miller is (unlike Ibsen) unambiguously impressed by Stockmann, the play’s comedic elements seem even more out of place than in the original.

Wayne Jordan’s production of Miller’s adaptation adds yet another layer of meanings to the play. The action, it’s clear, is set in Norway in the late nineteenth century, as Ibsen had intended. Yet the set and costume designs – not to mention Miller’s language – locate the play firmly in late 1950s America. And then the cast deliver their lines in Irish accents, often with a contemporary intonation which is surprisingly compatible with Miller’s American-English. Jordan appears to be showing that Ibsen’s ideas are universal: that the Ireland we live in today can be mapped on to the America of McCarthyism, which can in turn be mapped onto the nineteenth century’s debates about equality and morality. Jordan is too intelligent a director to seek to make the play ‘relevant’; he instead does something far more difficult: he makes it resonant.

At first, the accretion of possible meanings threatens to submerge the play. In the opening act, there is quite a lot of fussy stage business with cigarettes, drinks, and a record player – all of which seems intended to underline the 1950s, *Mad Men*-esque aesthetic. In common with many other Ibsen plays (*Hedda Gabler* particularly), *Enemy* requires that part of the stage be used for an internal domestic space that is separate from (and more authentic than) the public drawing room area, where most of the action takes place. Paul O’Mahony’s set is beautifully designed, using a fine interplay between light and darkness, and cleverly shrinking the space available to Stockmann as his plight intensifies during the play. Yet because of Ibsen’s stage directions for the opening act, the action feels too dispersed in the play’s first minutes. In short, the play initially feels cluttered, both spatially and conceptually.

This problem is soon dispelled, however, as a tense second act gives way to a riotous public debate between Stockmann and the townspeople. Jordan uses the full auditorium in this scene, placing his actors into the aisles to harangue and threaten the characters onstage. Having people shouting around us adds greatly to the energy of the scene. And of course Jordan is also forcing the audience to play a role within the play: we are cast as the townspeople, silent witnesses of the dispute, refusing to defend Stockmann and thus implicitly condoning the action of his opponents. This technique briefly brings into a theatre the achievement of Louise Lowe in site-specific productions like *The Boys of Foley Street* ([Dublin-Theatre-Festival--The-Boys-of-Foley-Street.html](http://itmarchive.ie/web/Reviews/Current/An-Enemy-of-the-Peop...)) by immersing us in the action, Jordan (like Lowe) forces us to question our own responsibilities, our own failures to speak out and to act. In an Ireland that has mutely accepted austerity for five years – and in a world that is sleepwalking towards destruction due to global warming – this reminder that bad things happen when good people do nothing is both pertinent and theatrically thrilling.

As the production gathers momentum, its strengths come into focus. Miller’s underwritten female characters are redeemed not only by assertive performances from Fiona Bell and Jill Harding (as Mrs Stockmann and Petra respectively), but also by the costume designs of Joan O’Clery, who dresses the women in clothes that are stylish, harmonious, and individualised. The characters thus become immediately more interesting. But the most enjoyable aspect of the production is the confrontation between Dr Stockmann and his brother, the Mayor. In those roles, Declan Conlon and Denis Conway provide a fascinating and irresistible contrast in performance styles.
Conlon as ever is brilliantly charismatic – which means that we quickly forgive his character’s moments of vanity. And, again as ever, he impresses most in his ability to find surprising ways of delivering lines. The rhythms of Miller’s scripts often lend themselves towards declamatory speaking (which is why so many of his productions can involve three hours of people shouting at each other) – but Conlon adds musicality and subtlety to his character through sudden shifts in direction and tone in his vocal delivery. His Stockmann never quite reaches a fully heroic status: Conlon seems always to deflate expectations when we’re primed for uplift, and so we therefore recognise Stockmann’s contradictions. We admire the bravery that Miller emphasises in his version, but are also aware of Ibsen’s sense that Stockmann’s motivations are complex and perhaps not wholly admirable.

Likewise Conway gives us a character who is complex and multilayered – and if Conlon’s performance succeeds through the use of his voice, Conway’s works through bodily restraint. He is an actor whose movements can often be expansive – perhaps even operatic – but here his gestures are carefully controlled. We always sense from Conway that his character is struggling to subdue an enormous power (both political and physical) within himself. His careful movements thus show how he expects others to attain the discipline that he demands of himself. He allows us to understand that his character has the power to destroy Stockmann – yet he implies that the mayor cares deeply for his brother, much as he is maddened by his sibling’s willfulness.

The rest of the cast give similarly complex portrayals, and while they also have to overcome the script’s problems sometimes (Barry McGovern has to rescue a rather tired – and tiring – running joke about moderation, for example), the ensemble impresses throughout. With Miller as with Ibsen, we might go to theatre expecting to be preached at. There is a 'message' to be found here, for those who wish to look for one, but what makes this production seem both valuable and important is the depth and complexity of the performances.

Patrick Lonergan is Professor of Drama and Theatre at NUI Galway.

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**An Enemy of the People by Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Arthur Miller**

**28 May - 13 July 2013**

Produced by the Gate Theatre
In the Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Wayne Jordan

Set Design: Paul O’Mahony

Costume Design: Joan O’Clery

Lighting Design: Davy Cunningham

Music and Sound Design: Philip Stewart

With: Fiona Bell, Liam Carney, Steve Cash, Declan Conlon, Denis Conway, Siobhan Cullen, Robert Duff, Jill Harding, Bosco Hogan, Mark Huberman, Ronan Leahy, Callum Martin, Barry McGovern, Morgan Moore, Peter O’Byrne, Donncha O’Dea, James O’Donoghue