

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

Northlight Theatre

By Anthony Adler

Back in high school I was friends with Ruthie Mendelsohn, whose father was a pediatrician. All I knew about Dr. Mendelsohn at the time was that he never felt that he had to clear out when Arnie and Jeff and I came over to see Ruthie. In absolute contravention of parental etiquette, he actually sat around and talked with us. About ethics, no less.

It turned out he had other idiosyncrasies as well. Though very prominent as both a practitioner and a columnist, Dr. Mendelsohn courted disaster when he started arguing that standard childhood immunizations are superfluous at best. That, in fact, most of what's standard in American pediatrics is a waste of time.

I became aware of Mendelsohn's rebellion when my first son was born and we started shopping for a doctor. As a baby-boom baby, I'd had the penicillin-for-everything rule shoved at me with a vengeance. I didn't trust the medical priesthood, with its tendency to give plenty of prescriptions but no reasons. And then, too, Mendelsohn's contention that shots are unnecessarily intrusive made a kind of meta-ecological sense.

Still, I never took my baby to him. His was, after all, an unpopular position. Unpopular in the extreme. And a voice came to me saying, *What if he's wrong?* I guess a widely held fallacy seemed safer, finally, than one man's truth. Even if that one man was someone I'd known and respected for years. My oldest boy is six now, and completely up-to-date on his shots.

I was reminded of Mendelsohn and my little failure of will when I went to the Northlight Theatre to see Russell Vandenbroucke's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. One of the great pieces of earnest, liberal turn-of-the-century *j'accuse* theater, *An Enemy of the People* tells the Mendelsohnian tale of Thomas Stockman: an earnest, liberal turn-of-the-century physician who discovers that the reputedly healthful waters at

the local spa are actually polluted with dangerous microorganisms. Stockman naturally wants to clean up the mess, and he's got some strong support at first. The progressive newspaper editor's in his corner, and so is the radical newspaper reporter. Even the obsessively moderate community leader's with Stockman, promising to bring along what he keeps calling "the solid majority."

But all this grand enthusiasm evaporates as soon as Stockman's brother, the mayor, lets it be known that fixing what's wrong will take years, cost millions, endanger jobs, and dry up the tourist trade. Loath to risk riling their various constituencies by telling them the facts, Dr. Stockman's allies suffer a failure of will. A widely held fallacy is safer, they figure, than one man's truth. So they try to suppress Stockman's findings; when that won't work, they try to suppress Stockman.

And I suppose they succeed, in a sense. At least insofar as the spa's concerned. But hell hath no fury like an idealist scorned, and Stockman refuses his tormentors a quiet victory. In what must be the single most fierce, exhilarating, splendidly indulgent, recklessly arrogant, and consummately ornery bit of wish fulfillment in Western drama, Ibsen gives Stockman his chance to tell the whole lamebrained town off to its face. To defend the right of the one against the many. To speak for all the Mendelsohns that ever were.

Directed by Kyle Donnelly to extend out into the audience—placing us among the lamebrained townfolk, forcing us to pick a side—Stockman's

smarting-off scene is every bit as electric as it's supposed to be. Unfortunately, a lot of what goes on around it lacks the same clear spark. The play opens on a fairly naturalistic note, with Stockman, his family, and friends and enemies evincing something like the arch sincerity of melodrama. As the play goes on, however, the acting turns toward comic, pseudo-Brechtian caricature. Gerry Becker's Stockman careens from his early, cornball complacency to a laughable fatuousness when he thinks the town's ready to give him a ticker-tape parade to a *Saint Joan*-like gravity once he's been through the wringer. Christopher Pieczynski's editor and David Alan Novak's community leader start out, meanwhile, as people—but end up offering us a vision of Fagin as Siamese twins.

There's nothing conceptually wrong with this progress from idealized portraiture to nightmare cartoonishness. In fact, it could be kind of neat: a reflection of Stockman's evolving mental state. But Donnelly never fully commits to it. A big chunk of the ensemble goes on playing it straight even as Becker's going wild. And Michael Merritt's sets, though characteristically strong and beautiful, don't hint at poetic license until the very end. Consequently, Donnelly's antirealistic touches come off not as part of a comprehensive design, but as nervous efforts to hold our attention.

Vandenbroucke's adaptation doesn't help, either. Transferring the action from Norway to our own midwest, his substitution of American po-

litical and cultural coordinates is almost too impeccable: it gives off the overly careful scent of a civics class.

Still, the point comes through. This is a confused production, but not a bad one. Not by a long shot. In the end, Becker gives you what for and you get it. At least I did, thinking of Dr. Mendelsohn and my own moment of cowardice.

In my March 1 review of *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* it says Robert McCaskill plays Robert. That's wrong. McCaskill plays Bernie. Sorry for the error.

MY BLUE HEAVEN

Footsteps Theatre

By Albert Williams

The publicity for Jane Chambers's comedy *My Blue Heaven* promises "Green Acres with a twist," but it seems to me more like a lesbian-affirmative variation on *The Fox*. Mark Rydell's 1968 movie version of D.H. Lawrence's phallogocentric fable depicts a metaphorical henhouse torn apart by a furry predator, when a male interloper disrupts two women living in a secluded farmhouse. In Chambers's play, a female couple homesteading in upstate New York are visited by not one but two men; these women fare considerably better than the poor doomed dykes in the Rydell movie, taking from the intruders what will strengthen, not undermine, their love. Along the way, in Footsteps Theatre's enjoyable production, the play provides plenty of laughs, a good deal of affectionate tenderness, and

some wry musings on such issues as same-sex domestic partnership, the impact of money on romance, and the problems facing a person whose homosexuality can affect her making a living.

Molly Sanford and Josie Williams—characters directly based on Chambers and her lover Beth Allen—have retreated from the oppressive environment of New York to make a go of country life. Molly, a writer, hopes the seclusion will help her write better; Josie has a hankering to open up a salvaged-goods store; and both of them anticipate that living together away from urban pressures will bring new intimacy to their somewhat stale relationship. Molly becomes a "homespun humor columnist" for a regional farmers' journal, using her experiences as a city gal trying to make it up country as the basis for her articles. In the column, Josie becomes Joe, Molly's virile husband and the father of their make-believe child. "You're a hypocrite," charges Josie. "No," parries Molly. "I'm a liar."

Molly lies because she's been burned before; her book on the joys of gay life led to her being fired from a teaching job. Farmhouse seclusion is her way of living as a lesbian without having to worry about other people's opinions; the only heterosexuals Molly and Josie have to deal with are a few overactive goats and cats and Arnold, a particularly horny rooster. ("Maybe you should tell him about birth control," says Molly. "I did," responds Josie. "He sees it as the hen's responsibility.")

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