In the Trump Era, One 'Enemy' Isn't Enough

Ibsen's 1882 drama suddenly finds itself of-the-moment.

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Costume renderings, above, by the designer Ana Kuzmanic for "An Enemy of the People" at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, whose cast members include Scott Jaeck, far left, as Mayor Peter Stockmann. Near left, "Traitor," an adaptation of Ibsen's play, written by Brett Neveu, at the Red Orchid Theater, also in Chicago.

Ibsen's 1882 play, "An Enemy of the People," is suddenly as timely as a tweet.

The political drama — about a scientist who tries to save his town from water pollution, only to wind up as a scapegoat — is being revived in several new productions across the United States.

Robert Falls, the artistic director of the Goodman Theater in Chicago, decided to stage the play after the election. "I needed to do something about our sudden/current/soon-to-be ongoing horrific life under Trump and majority Republican rule," he said in an email.

Little did he know that President Trump would stamp the phrase "enemy of the people" in the American consciousness when he used it to pillory the news media in a tweet last February.

The production at the Goodman, which last staged the play in 1980, began previews this weekend. In Minneapolis, the Guthrie Theater, which has not produced the play since 1976, will stage it in April. In the fall, there will be a Broadway adaptation by the MacArthur genius grant winner Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, directed by Thomas Ostermeier of the Schaubühne Theater in Berlin.

In the last year, there have been at least three significant new adaptations: In Chicago, the Red Orchid Theater put on "Traitor," set in a fictional Chicago suburb, written by Brett Neveu and directed by the actor Michael Shannon; in Los Angeles, CASA 0101 staged "An Enemy of the Pueblo," adapted by the playwright Josefina López, who moved the action to a Mexican border town; and in Flint, Mich., Purni Morell, a British director, helped lead "Public Enemy: Flint," a haunting, site-specific adaptation for a city where politicians had ignored citizen complaints about lead-contaminated water.

According to IbsenStage, a digital map of plays housed at the Center for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo, North American "An Enemy of the People" jumped to eight productions in 2017, from two in 2015.

Why are productions cropping up now? What started as a response to a Trump presidency now seems to speak to our times in many ways, with a plot that intertwines an ethically compromised antihero, political extremism, corruption, environmental activism and a lack of accountability for the destruction of a town.

"An Enemy of the People" was dashed off by Ibsen as something of a response to the scandalized reception of his previous "Ghosts," which was about the taboo subject of syphilis. He wanted to strike back at the liberal press, which he thought was hypocritical for panning his play while claiming to support free speech and progress.

The subsequent play features a divisive, punitive protagonist and whistle-blower, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, who tries to warn his town about contaminated water polluting the spa that keeps the town solvent. His brother, Peter, is the mayor, who, concerned about the economic impact of this crusade, wants to suppress Thomas's exposé.

Stockmann is able to persuade his friends, including the editor of the newspaper, that telling the truth about the water is important, but his environmental campaign falters. He lurches politically from the left to the right, and by the fourth act, Stockmann, outraged by the mob's resistance to his campaign, becomes a zealot and is demonized as the enemy of the people. He winds up defeated, but not before indicting the town in its own tragedy.

Ibsen's dark, realistic drama about "how the hero cannot win" resonates in our era, said Tore Rem, a literature professor at the University of Oslo and the general editor of a new set of Penguin Classics editions of Ibsen plays. But Ibsen, Mr. Rem said, "makes it impossible to sympathize with Stockmann completely," because he is self-aggrandizing and elitist.

At the Guthrie Theater, the British team that is staging "Enemy" feels the play carries global weight. "I'm living through a time when it's impossible to be a hero," said the director, Lyndsey Turner.

And the playwright Brad Birch, who set the Guthrie's pared-down adaptation in contemporary Norway, was particularly moved by the heightened political tensions in Britain over Brexit. "We wanted to challenge how being a liberal means being egalitarian but also it involves being quite righteous," he said. There seems to be a sense, he said, that those who voted for Brexit got what they deserved.

But for Joseph Haj, the artistic director of the Guthrie, one place engagement with the play began was with anxiety about the destruction of the environment. "The play is about the business economy versus environmental concerns, and how lonely that environmental voice can become," he said.

If anything, the play seems endlessly adaptable to fit the political times. In his McCarthy era adaptation in 1950, Arthur Miller softened Stockmann's harshest language in the remarkable town hall speech in Act IV, in which he advances the idea that some people — those who totally agree with his antipollution screed — are biologically superior to others.

"The most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom are the majority!" Stockmann yells. "The common people are nothing more than the raw material of which a People is made!" he shouts, before calling those who have turned against him, in some translations, "curs."

To our ears, his screed can sound reactionary, or even eugenicist, although when Ibsen wrote the antimob sentiments, they were shared by liberal thinkers such as Dickens and John Stuart Mill.

Mr. Falls argued that these lines are "not a cut and dried case of Stockmann advocating eugenics." His adaptation, based on a little-used 19th-century translation by Eleanor Marx, a daughter of Karl Marx, focuses on places in Ibsen's script where the doctor defended education as a way to change minds. "He believes people could be transformed, be made better," Mr. Falls said.

But Stockmann's Act IV speech can also be seen as a chilling reminder of how both ends of the political spectrum bear a measure of fault for some of our biggest political (and ecological) nightmares.

Neena Arndt, the dramaturge working on the Goodman production, said in an email that some of Stockmann's most egregious lines could be compared to "Hillary Clinton's 'basket of deplorables' comment, or other comments that people — perhaps audience members themselves — have made that imply that those they disagree with are inferior."

A plot that intertwines extremism, corruption and nonaccountability.

Given that scene's challenge to the audience, it is not surprising that several productions stage it immersively. "Traitor" asks the audience to move from the theater to a storefront next door, where the mob around them gets angry at Stockmann. "We wanted it to be intimate," Mr. Neveu said.

Mr. Falls, however, is taking a more traditional approach. "I'm staging it as Ibsen wrote it, as a scene in a public assembly hall."

These productions share a reluctance to find an easy moral in a play that ends with Stockmann destroyed and the town's environmental catastrophe imminent. Accordingly, the Guthrie and the Goodman productions both want audiences to see Stockmann's brother, the law-and-order mayor who wants to suppress the discovery of the contaminated water, as more than a villain and perhaps even a solution.

"The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone," is Stockmann's famous Act V line, pitched from the ruins of his heroism. These productions count the costs differently. Red Orchid Theater's "Traitor" adds the macabre touch of Stockmann's son dropping dead onstage, poisoned by the water.

Ms. Turner, the Guthrie director, imagined her ending as "a man confronting the necessity of action as well as the impossibility of action."

Mr. Falls was more interested in how Stockmann, whose idealism has lost him everything, now risks losing those who love him. "A man alone cannot accomplish anything," he said.

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