

# *Out of Norway*

– *Ibsen Attuned to Our Age of Populist Anger and Political Theater*

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## *I. Introduction*

“OUT OF“ (NORWAY) CAN MEAN both “grounded in“ and “departing from“ and dramatic adaptations draw on both meanings. The degree to which – and the manner in which – they navigate between the two in dealing with an original text and its context depends on the timing and the site of execution. Ibsen scholars have, especially since the 2006 centennial, cast a wide net over Ibsen performances and receptions: witness such an anthology title as *Global Ibsen: Performing Multiple Modernities* and the bookending sections of the Conference Proceedings, *The Living Ibsen*: “1. Ibsen as World Literature. Sources, Translation, Comparison,” and “5. Ibsen on Stage” (in a number of countries).<sup>1</sup> Yet even here adaptations are getting somewhat shortchanged.

My focus on recent adaptations of Ibsen in the American Midwest obviously falls within this global framework, but mainly to the extent these treatments of his plays can be considered radical ways of “translating” for the stage in general. For the following take on time-bound and culturally attuned traits of this “timeless” procedure – still viewed through a global lens – my specific cases in point are these Ibsen adaptations in Minnesota: *The League of Youth*, adapted in 2016 by American Jeffrey Hatcher for The Commonwealth Theater in Lanesboro – a respected if small regional theater, for two decades specifically devoted to Ibsen; and *An Enemy of the People*, adapted in 2018 by European Brad Birch for the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis – one of America’s most prominent regional theaters. Characteristic of both plays as Ibsen crafted them is a socio-political lingo of precisely the kind that 21<sup>st</sup>-century adapters would deem suitable for recasting in the current era of populist culture and political theater, tellingly labeled *The Age of Anger* (in a new book by Pankaj Mishra).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as the benefits in each case prove somewhat weighed down by the cost, I extend my cost-benefit analysis of both performances into musings about the conditions of possibility for adaptation overall. Since dramatic texts never operate in splendid isolation but are usually performed before an audience (i.e., beyond the experience of being read),

<sup>1</sup> *Global Ibsen: Performing Multiple Modernities*, eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Barbara Gronau, and Christel Weiler, New York: Routledge, 2011; and *The Living Ibsen: Proceedings – The 11<sup>th</sup> International Ibsen Conference, 21-27 August 2006*, eds. Frode Helland, Kaja S. Mollerin, Jon Nygaard, Astrid Sæther, Oslo: Center for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017.

adaptations in particular, when taking an original impulse beyond a certain critical point or red line, can be assumed to offer up unexpected opportunities as well as identity crises for the text at issue. In the case of the Commonwealth's *League of Youth* and the Guthrie's *Enemy of the People*, what makes the theatergoer's takeaway worthwhile is basically that each play's portrayal of our current cultural crisis – perhaps inadvertently, perhaps inevitably – *deepens this crisis by trading in its very currency*. May the ultimate gain of an adaptation as a cultural “translation” thus be (to be) lost in translation?

My answer proves to be a double-edged sword and reads that both of these Ibsen adaptations reclaim a serious progressiveness of bygone times, but do so by managing the political schisms involved more subtly than was typical in the past. As a result, we are led into a cul-de-sac of aesthetic correctness rather than into an open-ended field of promising socio-cultural disruptions.

## II. The League of Youth, *Commonweal Theatre, Lanesboro, MN, April 8-June 11, 2016*

At first glance, Jeffrey Hatcher's adaptation of *The League of Youth* seems a far cry from Ibsen's text. It shows in many ways, but most tellingly by comparing the way the two versions conclude. Ibsen ends his play with a final encounter between illusions and hypocrisy. Chamberlain Brattsberg reminisces about our better angels in a lukewarm breath of relief, while Mr. Lundestad, as worn a figure as the nobleman, at least takes the delusion down a peg by labeling the angels mediocre. Finally, the drunken printer Aslaksen skips the delusional chord entirely: It's the local reality, stupid!

None of this is in Hatcher's script,<sup>3</sup> but not because he eschews it. When he has Stensgaard, the play's “tricky, fortune-hunting striver” (16, 38), leap from one train-wrecked marital scheme to another as he approaches the final curtain call, called blackout, to deliver his ultimate blow of hot air about the Revolution of the Youth, the effect reaffirms Ibsen's conclusion. Stensgaard is a capital loser with a real political future ahead of him in this locale! Hatcher doesn't say it outright, but it's Trump time, stupid!

So, if both Ibsen's and his adapter's trains of action are derailed with a blast, what's the difference? For one thing, the passengers are not the same. Mr. Aslaksen is not even on Hatcher's passenger list and so could never have vouched for the adaptation's closure; nor do half of Ibsen's other characters figure on the list. It's a reduction that has its advantages but comes at a price – as do other parts of The Commonwealth's show.

Ibsen's piece, published in 1869, straddles several dichotomies. It is his first play to leave behind the idealistic closet dramas in verse in

<sup>3</sup> *The League of Youth by Henrik Ibsen*, adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher, April 5, 2016; subsequent quotes from this document are referenced in my text proper.



favor of actually staging contemporary reality in colloquial prose. As such it's pivotal to his development as a dramatist, certainly by his own account. Critics have been less enthused, and while it has been frequently shown and praised in Norway, performances abroad remain rare. Small wonder why! Just reading it is taxing, what with its countless historical references and entanglements, most of which bear little resemblance to current front-page news.

Scholars from James McFarlane to Robin Young have pointed to a host of literary and cultural underpinnings of Ibsen's setting, casting, and spirit.<sup>4</sup> Subtitled "A Comedy in Five Acts," it draws inspiration from Holberg, while its class struggle and value conflicts, which rage both among and within its characters, reflect the world of the author's youth in Skien rather than his later plays' more alien and gloomier locations in Western Norway. Nobility still speaks loud in the land of Brattsbjerg and Lundestad, but its highfalutin pretensions already fall prey to commercial interests and business machinations.<sup>5</sup> Squaring the circle of reality and ideality remains the thankless fate of its characters – and certainly of characters in Ibsen plays to come.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the display of the play's precarious mechanics is itself a double-edged sword. Ibsen, to his credit, dares to complicate matters so much in its first half that few in the audience are likely to fully grasp the intrigues. Yet, exhausted by the endeavor, they may appreciate the later acts even more, as it becomes clear that conflict resolution up to this point has been a failure and is certainly not to be taken as seriously as its agents take it. The only thing serious about it is the scathing humor with which it debunks human illusions as mere delusions, be they ethical or political, individual or collective.

Arriving, finally, as utterly delayed gratification, the comedic effects, one might think, would elicit extra appreciation from the audience. But because of changes in audiences' expectations and temperaments now a century and a half later, a difficulty is likely to emerge from Ibsen's composition. For how long is a theatergoer today prepared to negotiate a taxing dramatic maze with no exit in sight before distraction sets in and attention refuses to return for *any* final reward? Was this a concern Hatcher felt compelled to address?

By reducing the length of the play, its number of actors, even acts (from five to two, each consisting of two scenes), he has set up the audience's gratification to occur somewhere between delayed and instant. There is still a buildup of the prosaic ins and outs taking place in Act One, portending a more frivolous mood in Act Two; but unlike Ibsen's audiences, Hatcher's will find a shortcut between the initial legal and technical conundrums and the later phase of entertainment. And when they are finally presented with these just deserts for their patience, it's with a vigor that validates the road traveled – even though the compen-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Introduction," *The Oxford Ibsen*, Vol. IV: *The League of Youth, Emperor and Galilean*, eds. and tr. James Walter McFarlane and Graham Orton, London (New York, Toronto): Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 1-17, esp. pp. 1-7; and Robin Young, "Ibsen's 'lykkelige adelsmennesker': Commerce and Nobility in *De unges Forbund*," in *Scandinavica*, 29:2, 1990, pp. 181-192.

<sup>5</sup> Young, "Ibsen's 'lykkelige adelsmennesker'," p. 188.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

sation afforded is at least as deconstructive as in Ibsen's original.

Leaving the latter, and its bearing on Hatcher, aside for now, The Commonweal's play adaptation is timely and pedagogical in the positive sense of both terms. Its opening act is interspersed, yet not oversaturated, with clues to the (kind of) humor that awaits us later. Lundestad is a sure-fire deliverer of despairingly pompous vacuities. Referring to his own political tenure, he solemnly proclaims that "a public servant serves, and the reward for his service is his service" (40). In another hilarious pleonasm, he ponders who may fill his vacant political seat: "That's not for me to decide. I tell you this, though, it'll be someone. And whoever it is, once that someone's in the saddle, it won't be so easy to unsaddle him as when he wasn't" (41).

Eventually such unsettling doublespeak could be expected to be – unsettling (to remain in the pleonastic mode). But remarkably, that is not the case. Speaking to Stensgaard, who strives to succeed him in office, Lundestad offers this verdict about his young colleague: "I can see that you're all for other people, but when it comes to yourself, you're selfless!" (43) What may sound like praise here cuts both ways. As much as selflessness may be a virtue in one's relation to others, in relation to oneself it is quite the opposite. Though unbeknownst to both the addresser and the addressee, it signals that one has no self, which in turn precludes a selfless attitude to others. Being "all for other people" merely suggests an urge to have others meet one's own ends.

As students of Ibsen know well, people's inadvertent expression of thoughts meant to be withheld, or not even known to be in existence, is what his hermeneutic of suspicion typically x-rays and submits as code for readers and theatergoers to behold; Hatcher has not shortchanged the original *The League of Youth* on that score. In other respects, he has eased the dramatic fare, especially for readers of his script. On its opening page a few attributes have been attached to the list of character names (in place of Ibsen's ultra-brief titles and family indicators). Along with the tightened plot and storyline, these clues supposedly serve to make reader responses easier, as when Stensgaard is presented not as a lawyer but as "young, good looking, clever but not as clever as he thinks," and Mr. Brattsberg in the same vein not as a farmer but as "late middle age, stiff, smart but not as smart as he thinks."

The most exciting and debatable part of Hatcher's work, however, is a set of major revisions. There are several, and how they reconfigure Ibsen's groundwork is obviously at issue, but not to be detailed here. Suffice it to mention a case or two in point. Instead of Mr. Monsen, Ibsen's flashy and mildly crooked owner of a large farm, Mrs. Monsen plays the part for Hatcher – and does it with no holds barred. While Ibsen's chamberlain had his signature forged by his wholesaler son Erik as part of a murky business deal, in Hatcher's adaptation, Mrs. Monsen

forges the signatures of both father and son.

The purpose of this alternative casting may be manifold, but at a minimum it appears to strengthen the female segment – in compliance with Ibsen’s own bent for strong female characters. But further, Mrs. Monsen’s prowess is more for ill than good. Truly celebrating gender equality involves dismantling the pedestal onto which male chauvinists tend to elevate women for their virtues only. Hatcher, in tune with Ibsen’s playbook, respects female strength in its full moral complexity and thus adds to his casting of the “middle aged, full of life, lustful” Mrs. Rundholmen a truly tainted woman of his own design as a worthy counterweight to the usual suspects of reputable younger women (in *The League of Youth* both Mrs. Monsen’s daughter, Ragna, and the chamberlain’s daughter, Thora).

How much the play as a whole is enriched by the leveling of its gender base remains a question, though. Expanding the role for *any* senior Monsen after the original casting, composition, and dialogue have been considerably cut is unlikely to yield a win-win situation. Some deficits may have to be accounted for, which altogether occasions an invitation to Ibsen aficionados, even those who didn’t experience Hatcher’s text in performance, to acquire his script and contemplate some tricky intertextual questions.

Has the adaptation turned Ibsen’s original into a subtext, and what benefits or deficits might the intertext then produce? Is the adaptation an afterglow, or does it alert us to hidden treasures – or pitfalls – in the original? Does subtextual status enhance or diminish the original and its spirit? How does it impact the creativity of the adaptation? Have shortcomings of this Ibsen text, so frequently attested by critics, served the adapter’s creative freedom, much in the way great movies have profited more by adapting mediocre novels rather than awesome masterpieces? Or might original deficiencies have polluted the adaptation? In short, are the integrities of a text and its adaptation(s) separated by a red line, and should such a line therefore not be crossed? Would crossing it be in the original’s spirit or in (justifiable?) violation thereof?

While these questions cannot be adequately addressed here, I do note that the actual staging of Hatcher’s Ibsen in Lanesboro straddled about as many Ibsenian opposites as one could hope for. The effort in its second act to mend what its characters lost control of in its first – financial misdeeds, political schemes, you name it – only adds unwitting humor and spectacle to injury; in fact, it functions as a rearview mirror in which even the initial reality, now turning comical, shows up fraught with illusion from the get go. Taking things seriously or not makes no difference. Reality was always a play; it just takes a play to demonstrate it. The reaction, when that happens, comes as a relief, at least for the audience. The politician who sought to capture people’s imagination may

be less enthused, yet our naked emperor proceeds undaunted into the future. Losing his last moorings in reality only boosts his social appeal.



The Commonwealth's cast labored duly with the ins and outs that Hatcher had preserved for them. But in Act Two, after all pretenses were compromised, gravity could be defied so that actions and dialogues could pick up speed. Many balls were in the air, yet in portraying the self-destruction of pathetic characters, the actors were *having* a ball, relishing the comical double-talk that distinguished the process. Indeed, wallowing blindly in the ashes of their straitjacketed lives was a feat of straddling – toward the bittersweet ending and its vision of a future emerging from the ashes, completely unaffected by the demise of authenticity that preceded it.

Not surprisingly, this finale's mouthpiece was Stensgaard, our semi-slick protagonist, who fell into all of his own traps, but whose cockiness then proved all the more politically expedient (in Gary Danciu's performance). Unclear, though, was the extent to which his boldness went beyond his own belief. As a cheater, was he mostly cheating himself? As a speaker, was he mostly giving voice to the unspeakable? Here's where actor and play both stretched their capacity for straddling. The same goes, as intimated above, for the sultry Mrs. Rundholmen (Megan Pence), and grey-haired, hat-feathered Mrs. Monsen (Miriam Monasch), both of whom were entertaining borderliners exploiting their modernizing society's unstable order with raucous female maturity.

Other actors' performances, while less outstanding, aided Hatcher and director Hal Cropp in straddling the road of comical disillusionment as it winds down (or up) toward *The League of Youth's* definitive house of cards. Stage décor gave the direction like road signs along the way.



For starters, a blue cross/sword on a red backdrop, situated behind white birch trunks, formed the background for Act One’s opening scene. Nature and culture, sacredly or martially framed, were potentially in play, and little in that arrangement changed until Lundestad had assured Stensgaard: “that’s your gift ...: guts and the power of gab!” (41)

As his pronouncement suggests that empty rhetoric will override reality, the colors of the backdrop signifiers eventually fade and the set-piece in the background gets changed – or turned – into a brown wall above a light wooden panel with a vertical slice in the middle, with Mrs. Rundholmen eagerly kissing and drinking in front of it. The entire stage is set for what’s to come: free-wheeling disrespect for virtue and conventional wisdom, guided by no specific road signs but ready to serve the power of gab! Or as Ibsen’s original already had it, with a quote from Napoleon, “Double-dealing is the stuff of which politicians are made.”<sup>7</sup>

Stupid? Or perhaps as Denmark’s Queen Margrethe II might put it: dumb-smart!

### III. An Enemy of the People, *Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, April 28-June 3, 2018*

What turned Ibsen’s original Dr. Stockmann into *An Enemy of the People* was—the people. Or rather, the people’s indifference to their own best interest for which the doctor is struggling. He wants to protect the city dwellers – and their spa visitors – from the water polluting their town, but the powers that be, together with his brotherly city mayor at the helm, have managed to get these locals so invested in the new spa upon which their city will depend in the future that the residents care more about their financial livelihood than about their physical well-being or the pollution that threatens it. It is this corrupted form of self-interest that drives Stockmann out of his mind and into an angrily righteous version of Kierkegaard’s single individual facing the soulless crowd. Nikolaj Frobenius, in his Afterword to the centenary Norwegian edition of Ibsen’s writings, quotes from the play’s conclusion to this effect:

Doctor Stockmann: Yes, yes, you can shout me down, but you can’t deny me. The majority has *power* – alas – but *right* it does not have. Right is what I have – along with a few others, the chosen. The minority is always right.

Later, editor Hovstad declares that it “almost seems as though the doctor’s intention is to destroy the town.” In Stockmann’s own words “(*with growing fury*): It should be raised to the ground, I tell you! And wiped out, like vermin, all of those who live with the lie.” Ultimately this onetime friend of the people utters words that could have been heard in a Berlin bunker in the spring of 1945: “... let this whole land be

<sup>7</sup> This standard English translation renders a claim made at the very end of the play – and omitted in Hatcher’s version – by Daniel Heire concerning Lundestad’s prediction about Stensgaard: “Han sier omtrent som Napoleon; de tvilsomme, sier han, det er det stoff hvorav man gjør politikuser.” (Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Værker*, Vol. 2: *Fra Brand til Keiser og Galilæer* 1866-73, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962, p. 302.)

laid waste, let this whole people be exterminated.” To which Frobenius comments: “The unmasking of this rage, that for me is what *An Enemy of the People* is about,” a statement he backs up with a final quote from Ibsen’s text: “*The whole crowd (shouting)*: Yes, yes, yes! He’s an enemy of the people! He hates his own country! He hates everyone.”<sup>8</sup>

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This, however, was not what *An Enemy of the People* and its protagonist were about when the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis performed the play in the spring of 2018. But then it was not really Ibsen’s play either, but an adaptation penned by Brad Birch, initially for performances in Wales (June 2016) and Edinburgh (August 2016) preceding the staging (after further rewriting) at the Guthrie two years after the Welsh opening. Interviewed for the program by Elizabeth Deacon, the Guthrie’s associate director of marketing, Birch explains that when director Lyndsey Turner approached him in 2017 about a possible return to the play for a 2018 replay,

the world had changed so significantly in the time between 2016 and today that it felt right to ask new questions. It’s a unique opportunity to revise and find new life in my relationship with this play and work with Lyndsey on it. ... *The task has been to try to stay true to the spirit of Ibsen, while also creating a piece of work that stands up on its own two feet.*<sup>9</sup>

To achieve this latter balance, the setting in Norway of the Springs and the cast of lead characters have been maintained, while other characters have been cut out and some of the leads have changed gender and, to some extent, profession. But it’s the links to our current world culture that account for most of the changes from Ibsen’s play, and even from Birch’s own 2016 adaptation. Politics, he adds,

[f]eels the most polarized it has been in over a generation. Compromise, cohesion and unity feel qualities that are lacking in our political systems and the actors within them. And the adversarial nature of modern politics has led to a weaponization of fact and of truth. Things are now no longer true and false, but determined by political position. Which side you are on determines which facts (and which alternative facts) you accept, and we have become simultaneously trusting of the voices that we are ideologically aligned with, and deeply suspicious of those we are not.<sup>10</sup>

Birch is hesitant, and rightly so, to call the situation entirely new –

But having said that, there feels like there is definitely something different in the air. And so while it’s perhaps not new in DNA, it is new in scale and depth. I’ve never known a less trusting and less empathizing time in our political and cultural landscape. And this story, a story

<sup>8</sup> For these references to Frobenius, see his “Unniversary and Obstinacy: Afterword to *An Enemy of the People*,” in *Said about Ibsen – by Norwegian Writers*, tr. Robert Ferguson, Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2006, pp. 41-45.

<sup>9</sup> Guthrie Theater/McGuire Proscenium Stage/April 28-June 3, 2018 *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen: a new adaptation by Brad Birch [Program], p. 15; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

where a person stands out from the crowd and proclaims that something is wrong and is prepared to risk their entire reputation and standing in society to say it, feels important. *I hope our telling of this story can reflect and take stock of the world that we are currently living in.*<sup>11</sup>

This self-characterization hits the nail of the actual Guthrie performance on the head; and Birch's hope to address the current situation in our culture, as he describes it in his pronouncements, has not been in vain. Yet, precisely the manner in which his updated Ibsen responds to the challenges of our age makes it come at a heavy price: if not one that invalidates the effort, then one that recalls the adage about the surgeon who succeeded but whose patient died. In co-opting the dynamics of our cultural crisis, the images facing a Guthrie theatergoer feature this crisis spiraling out of control; so, as the anger of Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann yields the right-of-way to the civility of Birch's variant, the protagonist only sinks deeper into ever subtler self-delusions until he almost disappears into the twilight of Minnesota Nice!

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For a nice performance it is. Tasteful, balanced, technically impressive in many respects. An elegant simplicity reigns supreme from beginning to end as the rotating stage effortlessly, yet efficiently, allows for different rooms to succeed one another, spiritually wrapped in aptly discrete colors and atmospheric tones, from the moment Petra's semi-solo song sets the tone and the other characters suggestively move in and out of their acting space, one by one and all together. It's modernity at its best, but also its worst: the alluring counterpoint for the play's thematic bombshell that the water is poisoned.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.; emphasis added.



With a couple of exceptions, Birch's printed 2016 adaptation has its remaining fifteen scenes or so located indoors.<sup>12</sup> Not so at the Guthrie's play, where two key characters are seen on the beach with a mountain view in the background<sup>13</sup> – this time a different counterpoint to an indoor dialogue, again in Tom Stockmann and his wife Kate's living room but now with the verbal action steeped in increasingly intense exchanges about the poisoned water sample. Then the stage rotates again, taking us into Tom's study where Petra also enters – with a balloon – shortly before a new change of stage puts both in the background, while two adults, Kate and her brother Morten, engage in a detailed dialogue about dogs!

All the changeability of settings thus far rests in this canine image of family innocence – perhaps another counterpoint, though now to a darkening cloud on the thematic horizon, emerging here as Birch deftly subjects the entire fabric of human life to a storyline brimming with cerebral suspense. It's a pattern of variations before the storm, the last of which takes us outdoors, where the newspaper publisher and the mayor, Tom's brother, standing next to the city's shoreline, get into each other's hair – about the contaminated water!

Rounding off this larger vista while setting the stage for its embedded conflicts to burst, a brilliant stage rotation occurs, enabling soft-lighted, wordless views of riverside nature. We get the clear sense that the drama's antes are being upped. From here it's down to earth – and business – in the most private sphere of all. The scene is Tom and Kate's bedroom, with gloom and doom in the air as the newspaper that promised to be an honest outlet for Tom and his grievances appears to be as deceptive as the city council and the doctor's brother. The truth is fundamentally at risk, and his conversation with daughter Petra leaves no doubt about Tom's despondence. When she ends up asking where he is going, her question remains unanswered.

That Tom, and he alone, is putting his life where his mouth is as he fights for the truth – chiefly against his powerful brother – is made clear as Birch once again has him leave an indoor social space for outdoor scenery, a move that is meant to create a foil for an impending critical exchange. A dilapidated Tom is on the beach burning branches and other waste in a barrel, when Hovstad – exhausted by her profession in general and by servicing this truth-teller in particular – lets him know that the corporation behind the water pollution plant is coming after him.

<sup>12</sup> See Henrik Ibsen, *En Folkefiende*. A new version by Brad Birch, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Part of the Program's "Backstory: *An Enemy of the People*" gives quite detailed information about "the painted mountain backdrop in Merle Hense's set design [which] is based on an image by photographer Bjørg-Elise Tuppen, a native of Harstad, Arctic Northern Norway," p. 17.



Both his own evidence and what the paper had gathered in support of his claims – hard drive and the like – have already been confiscated. What she doesn't tell him, but what he learns from his brother, is that she too is jumping ship to save her neck, and that Tom is both in over his head and all alone. In fact, he is alone in a deeper sense than he ever realized, according to Peter.

For it was not, as the doctor insists, the people per se that caused the calamity. It was thanks to *the market*, and it alone, that the city's unsafe water pipes were chosen over safer models. The unsafe ones were simply the cheapest. And as puzzling as it may sound to him, the same market is the foundation of both the enlightened individualism and the rational science Tom himself holds dear. As in Ibsen's original case, the play's lead character and obsessive truth-teller fails to see how deeply entangled the truth that he champions is with the powerful forces he battles. And as Birch presents it, the link between the righteous individual and his cowardly surroundings is even harder to see than it was in Ibsen, including brother Peter's all but intangible complicity.<sup>14</sup> And when, finally, all the play's characters assemble, and things seem to have come full circle, the harmonious finish is beguiling as well. Its artistic symmetry, which does feel pleasant, rings unintentionally hollow. Yes, the play ends as it began, except the inception's light shadow has become the conclusion's treacherous twilight.

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This distance between Ibsen's original play and Birch's 21<sup>st</sup>-century adaptation spans generations, with stations along the way marked by Carla Steen, the Guthrie production's dramaturg, in a program article titled "Enemies of the People: A Century of Dr. Stockmann."<sup>15</sup> Beginning



<sup>14</sup> Already in his published 2016 adaptation, Birch replaced, and rightly so, details of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Norwegian politics and party strife with more current references. But his Guthrie adaptation goes even further than his book by blaming the market, not simply business, for the water contamination. As the saying has it that the business of America is business, the implication is that business is the way forward – or backward – for concrete Americans. The market, by contrast, is devoid of personal connotations. An abstract and autonomous concept into which everyone and no one is invested, it's a transhuman force and inescapable for even the good doctors of this world.

<sup>15</sup> Program, p. 13.

with Ibsen's own experience of having his preceding play, *Ghosts*, rejected "by the 'liberal press' and the 'tyranny of the majority,'" he, like so many of his colleagues at the time, vented a deep skepticism about liberal democracy – a stance that was eagerly seized upon by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutionaries. Witness an audience attending Stanislavsky's 1905 St. Petersburg performance and turning into a mob at "Stockmann's call for truth and freedom."

Then came the interwar period when German Nazis found backing for their eugenics program in Ibsen's play, and finally, after World War II, a similar moment in time as McCarthyism's insanity caused Arthur Miller to reach across the Pond for *An Enemy of the People* to be adapted for "our moment in America – the need, if not the holy right, to resist the pressure to conform," as Steen quotes from the adapter's *Timebends: A Life* (1987). She might have added what Miller had said already in the preface to his adaptation, namely, that it was inconceivable that the groundbreaking advocate of women's rights in *A Doll's House* just a few years later could have become a fascist, as the Nazis had implied by embracing this newer play.<sup>16</sup>

Fast forward to the present moment when "the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the resurrection of the phrase 'enemy of the people' by our president" have been added to the historical mix and "the play has renewed currency 136 years after its writing, and adaptations abound." Indeed, the full picture of its reception history cannot be painted by simply lining up these various reconfigurations in chronological order. A recent adaptation may be as impacted by its precursors (in various media) as by the original. Not only the history of literature and drama, but the cross-breeds of inter-textuality and -mediality must be taken into account before the picture can truly become *A History of the Present*.

As I mentioned earlier, the phrase is the subtitle of Pankaj Mishra's recent volume, *Age of Anger*, whose title I have appropriated for our own age in order to capture the whole scale of *An Enemy of the People*'s adaptations and predicaments unfolding over time, including the time we are in. Bearing in mind how Birch's Peter Stockmann took his brother to task for not realizing how much his enlightenment view of life and science was interconnected with the forces he sought to debunk from this very viewpoint, it is helpful to consider Mishra's basic depiction of enlightened modernity as initially a tug-of-war between Voltaire and Rousseau.<sup>17</sup>

In the former we have the inveterate universalist and cosmopolitan, passionately dispassionate, beholden to reason and abstraction only, and alien to all emotional locales of souls and nations. In contrast to this man of the world incarnate, Rousseau is the outcast, steeped in nationhood, emotions, fixed identities: a harbinger of concreteness for better or worse in human affairs, less the mouthpiece of haughty individualism than of

<sup>16</sup> See Arthur Miller's adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1977, pp. 10 f.

<sup>17</sup> See Mishra, *Age of Anger*, chapter 3.

frowned-upon populism.<sup>18</sup>

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Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann is a blend of these opposites. A Voltarian to the nth degree in his scientific purity and adherence to truth and rights and reason, yet so unaware of his emotions that when faced with opposition to his cause, anger gets the better of him and makes him all-destructive. His dilemma is not simply a clash between a Voltarian persona and a Rousseauian gut, but that the former has repressed the latter, so that no *person* is there to take ownership of the raw encounter. It's like a return of the repressed that leaves the repressor with no return! From friend of the people to the people's enemy, this Dr. Stockmann ends up viewing the people as the swamp he is going to drain – with populist fervor. His identity remains an enigma.

In Birch's adaptation, the split between the opposites consuming the protagonist seems mitigated, their blows softened. The entire Guthrie production succeeded in preserving the duplicities of its lead character on a more refined, contemporary level. But it did so – as perhaps the subtler part of culture now feels compelled to do – by blurring the line between his dual inclinations. As a friend of the people, who believes his science has the well-being of his fellow man as its key motivation, Tom is shocked to learn that people don't buy into his conception of their best self-interest. But instead of converting him into a man of rage, Birch rather turns this Dr. Stockmann into a role model for cultural conflict *management* – in *our* age of *anger*, a shaken idealist still speaking truth to power.

However, the peaceful coexistence of an inner Voltaire and inner Rousseau that he personifies may well be a sugarcoating that makes the bitter pill easier to swallow, only to make it all the harder to digest. What looks like a resolution for the current epoch of human resentment may not be the shortcut or exit road it claims to be, but rather a dead end. Or, what the Guthrie's self-deceptively smooth production might have named a *cul-de-sac*.

The problem with this outcome is not its irresolution, but its minimal open-endedness, which causes it not to stick after the performance in a way *radical humor* might have done. Ståle Dingstad, for one, has argued that this whole play, for all its politics, is a comedy and almost as farcical as its protagonist, a modern-day Erasmus Montanus, repeatedly comes across.<sup>19</sup> But by tempering the farcical with gravity the Guthrie seems to echo older performances as *they* had Stockmann speaking truth to power and gaining sympathy all along for his struggle for “truth and justice, for freedom and democracy, for the rights of the single individual in favor of the masses.”<sup>20</sup> On Dingstad's view, “this kind of perspective is welcome” but barely supported by Ibsen's textual evidence, which at

<sup>18</sup> See Poul Houe, “Vi lever i vredens tidsalder, hvor fjendtligheden hersker”. [On Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger*], *Kristeligt Dagblad*, November 14, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Ståle Dingstad, *Den smilende Ibsen: Henrik Ibsens forfatterskap – stykkevis og delt*, Acta Ibseniana IX, Oslo: UiO: Center for Ibsen-studier, 2013, pp. 247-76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274.

best may form the basis for discussing such progressive interpretations. “Hence, the conclusion must be that Ibsen is indeed political, but the political is mostly oriented towards the comical.”<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Dingstad is not alone in stressing the comical in *An Enemy of the People*; “where in all the world of modern drama ... is there a comedy so buoyant, so dazzlingly joyous,” asked one Alexander Woolcott back in 1917, for instance.<sup>22</sup> Treating the play in this way may be a stretch, but even so, open-ended comedy might have brought more precision to bear than did the Guthrie in 2018 on the exposure of today’s polarizing political culture that was obviously the motivation behind its production of Ibsen’s drama in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

Yet despite its comedy’s shortage of open-endedness, the Guthrie’s version of *An Enemy of the People* clearly reflects a confrontational hardening of politics since the Commonwealth Theatre’s staging two years earlier of Ibsen’s twelve years older comedic *The League of Youth*. The double-dealing that was always in the DNA of politicians, according to the younger Ibsen’s text, was in Lanesboro brought out in the open in all its foundational range. Still, even in its take on the original’s comedic aspects, the adaptation conforms with Ibsen’s rather moderate critique of the political. As Robin Young puts it: “Stensgaard wishes to use the system, not abolish it; and it is the furious energy with which he pursues this end ... which provides the comic momentum of the play.”<sup>24</sup> “Furious energy,” indeed, but not yet congealed into an age of ruthless anger.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Schanke, *Ibsen in America: a century of change*, Metuchen, NJ & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1988, p. 177.

<sup>23</sup> A scholarly volume that highlights the politics and other cultural dimensions informing (mostly recent) Ibsen productions around the world is Frode Helland’s *Ibsen in Practice: Relational readings of Performance, Cultural Encounters and Power*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015. As for *An Enemy of the People*, see esp. pp. 30-46.

<sup>24</sup> Young, “Ibsen’s ’lykkelige adelsmennesker”, p. 183.