

ARTS

Rubber City's version of 'Enemy of People' chilling look at right vs. might in Trump era



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Rubber City Theatre's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" is a chilling modern-day version that sets this battle of right vs. might in a Trump-era, mid-sized Rust-Belt city.

The adaptation by Les Hunter, professor of English and creative writing at Baldwin Wallace University, is Rubber City's first mainstage production as the new theater in residence at the University of Akron. Transported from Ibsen's 1882 setting to very recent history in the United States, this adaptation asks disturbingly topical questions about whether scientific fact can mobilize politicians to do the right thing in the face of economic difficulties and fear.

The play, performed without intermission and directed by Lana Sugarman, is highly thought-provoking. The problem is, the quality of the acting is inconsistent among four of the eight cast members.

In this story, Dr. Tammie "Tam" Stockman (Courtney Brown) trusts the science, to use the phrase that's become so prevalent during the current COVID-19 pandemic. She has discovered through science-based inquiry that the town's springs, which have been marketed to tourists as curative, are contaminated to the point where people's lives are at risk.

Tammie soon clashes with her brother, Peter Stockman (Jeff Haffner), the town mayor and an autocrat who swiftly denies the science-based evidence and manipulates public opinion by appealing to the community's fears. He downplays the danger and stokes fears about businesses in the struggling town drying up if the study's results aren't kept under wraps.

Tammie still clings to the scientific findings on the springs, proclaiming, "Truth will always win out over dishonesty and tyranny."

The sad thing is, Tammie believes she will be lauded for putting the health of the community first. But that doesn't happen, as numerous powerful people's self interests get in the way.

Dubbed an enemy of the people for championing the truth, that the town's springs are contaminated, she risks losing her profession, marriage and friends.

As Peter Stockman, Equity actor Haffner plays a mayor with a cheerful demeanor who soon shows his true ruthlessness. The problem is that Haffner's acting sounds affected, and we feel he's always playing a part rather than making it real.

Jennifer Ruth falls into a similar trap as Kate, Tammie's wife. Her nearly constantly chipper tone sounds artificial.

UA theater student Arianna Allen delivers most of her lines as Tammie's daughter Petra in a monotone, lacking a needed energy. And Keith Rasey has the opposite problem with his over-the-top delivery as Tammie's father, Martin. At one point he goes from talking at normal volume to suddenly yelling, with no gradual escalation.

Equity actress Brown, a theater professor at Kent State University, creates a strong characterization as Tammie, the most natural and believable person in this drama. Andrew Pope and Katie Wells also bring intensity to their roles as journalists Billy and Heather, and Stuart Hoffman creates charisma as Chamber of Commerce official Anthony.

Rubber City Theatre commissioned Hunter to write "Enemy of the People," based on an idea by Northeast Ohio artists Christine McBurney and Cathleen O'Malley, before the pandemic started. Original plans to premiere the work in 2020 were put on hold until now due to COVID-19 constraints. (Rubber City requires audience members to wear masks.)

Hunter's adaptation changes Ibsen's original doctor from a man to a gay woman. In the original play, the doctor's wife grows to support him against all odds. But in this new version, wife Kate doesn't overcome her resentments and fears.

The original play has the doctor rising to the level of a zealot when he condemns the whole town in a public meeting and calls for immoral politicians to be "exterminated." In Hunter's adaptation, Tammie does not reach such extremes, and the speech where she points fingers at the community is alluded to but not shown on stage.

Hunter also adds several conflicts of interest to the story that make this tale even more complex and the risks greater for Tammie. One of those conflicts of interests deals with an unethical press.

In one of the most chilling lines in the play, newspaper editor Heather says, "There's more than one version of the truth."

Dangerous words for dangerous times.

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Details

Drama: "An Enemy of the People"

When: Continuing through May 21, 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Rubber City Theatre, Sandefur Theatre, Guzzetta Hall, 228 E. Buchtel Ave., University of Akron

Onstage: Courtney Brown, Jennifer Ruth, Jeff Haffner, Andrew Pope, Katie Wells, Stuart Hoffman, Arianna Allen, Keith Rasey, Casey Venema

Offstage: Les Hunter, adaptation; based on the play by Henrik Ibsen; Christine McBurney and Cathleen O'Malley, conception; Lana Sugarman, director; Irene Mack-Shafer, costume designer; Patrick Johnson, stage manager; James Davis, lighting designer; Hazen Tobar, sound designer; Brian Seckfort, projection designer; Travis Williams, scenic design; Julia Fisher, intimacy director

Cost: \$12-\$40

Information: rubbercitytheatre.com or 234-252-0272

COVID info: Masks required