

Dude, Don't Drink the Water

VLT's *An Enemy of the People* swings into the '70s

In a small provincial town in the 1970s lurks an unspeakable evil — an evil all the more horrible for its relative invisibility. Please understand that the place is hardly a backwater; in fact, it is exactly the town's healthful waters that connect it with the wider world, both in terms of tourism dollars and the progressive ideas carted in by visitors arriving to enjoy a rejuvenating spritz. The last thing this town needs is some wide-eyed whistleblower come to spoil the party by pointing out the capital-T truth: That those celebrated waters hide a monster that might just be killing people.

I'm speaking, of course, about *Jaws*, the 1975 Steven Spielberg movie that set the precedent for all future Hollywood blockbusters. *Jaws* — with its Freudian behemoth of mute, savage nature literalized by an erect gray shark's fin slicing the ocean waves — tapped into something primal in the collective psyche of American culture, which was reeling from the Vietnam War, Watergate, Kent State and ever-looming fears of nuclear holocaust.

But let's jump back a few years — to 1882, precisely, the year Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen unleashed *An Enemy of the People*. This archetypal drama, about a lone individual pitted against all of society in his fight to reveal

the truth (substitute polluted waters for shark), is about as open to interpretation as a play can get. Ibsen was grappling with the earth-rattling ideas unleashed by the collapse of Renaissance thinking: atheism and the death of God, existential solitude and the madness of crowds, the individual versus the "herd" mentality. And so the play takes aim at simply everything, and it does so in a loose-cannon manner, with a spray of vitriol that doesn't give a shit about collateral damage. Everyone and everything is fair game. This may explain the strange endurance of *An Enemy of the People*, which seems to pop up like a carnival whack-a-mole every few years. It's a funhouse fop of open-ended adaptation.

Very Little Theatre's production, directed by James Aday, sets Ibsen's socio-political potboiler in the Northwest of the 1970s, where — just like in *Jaws* — the music is bad, the clothes are worse and, in general, middle-class progressives and conservatives alike are still shaking off their Summer of Love hangovers. The play opens to the strains of Johnny Nash's "I Can See Clearly Now" (as in, "It's gonna be a bright, bright, bright sunshiny day"), thereby setting an ominously ironic tone that, unfortunately, the rest of the production never quite lives up to.

Some of the problems can be laid at the

feet of Ibsen. The play is at once unsubtle and uncertain, a wicked combination. This very indecisiveness calls for a strong hand to make the play work — to grab it by the scruff and shove it in one direction or the other. Aday, who also designed the sets, dresses everything up in the vaguest trappings of '70s stuff, but somehow fails to nail any of the big signifiers of the era: Gonzo, ganja, disco, decadence, Nixonian politics, etc. Bell bottoms do not a decade make. And so the era of the Eagles and key parties is reduced to a Brady Bunch reunion.

This failed grasp for surface-level authenticity extends to the mechanics of the play itself. Bruce Lundy is miscast as Dr. Thomas Stockman. Lundy — who appears more eager to please than persecute — comes across as a kind of addled Jimmy Stewart character, forever trapped between a hem and a haw. Don Aday, as Mayor Peter Stockman, is perfectly pompous as the bottom-line bureaucrat who treats his crusading brother with a combination of condescension, contempt and mealy concern, and Steven Mandell is delightful as the ink-stained printer Aslaksen, who touts moderation in all things. There are some very nice turns by minor characters, but they are lost in the



ambient miasma of a production that never really finds its footing on the slippery slope of Ibsen's demagoguery.

What Aday should have done is take the whole shooting match right over the top into madcap satire and slapstick. The time is ripe. After all, we are living in a crazy kaleidoscope age of Tea Baggers, talking heads and turd brains souring the political landscape. Instead of that Johnny Nash song, the play could open with, say, John William's theme to *Jaws* (*da da, da da, DA, DA...*), and take off from there into utter absurdity: sequined jumpsuits, disco balls, tube tops, pointless pontificating and lots of Elton John. Can't you just see it? The Stockman family waking up at home in the final act, their house trashed by angry mobs, while in the background "Rocket Man" plays like an ode to the good doctor's self-inflicted isolation. Might have been fun and funny, instead of just flat. **EW**

An Enemy of the People plays Thursday through Saturday this week and next week, with a matinee 2 pm Sunday, Jan. 23, at Very Little Theatre, 2350 Hilyard St. \$15 (\$10 senior matinees & Thrifty Thursdays), tickets at www.TheVLT.com or 344-7751.

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