

Theater professionals address the Flint water disaster

***Public Enemy: Flint*, an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's classic play: A remarkable artistic event**

By Joanne Laurier
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Written, directed and produced by Purni Morell, based on An Enemy of the People by Henrik Ibsen

A remarkable cultural event took place last week in the devastated city of Flint, Michigan, whose 100,000 inhabitants have been systematically poisoned with dangerous amounts of lead and other deadly contaminants.

Actors from across the US, assisted by a British writer-director, performed *Public Enemy: Flint*, an adaptation of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play, *An Enemy of the People*, on June 8, 9, and 10 in the gymnasium of a former school.

Ibsen's famed work concerns a doctor, Thomas Stockmann, who tries to warn the local authorities—including his brother, the mayor—about water contamination problems and is persecuted for his discoveries. Parallels to the present catastrophe in Flint are striking, and hundreds of residents from the city and surrounding area responded enthusiastically to the performances.

British theater directors Purni Morell and Christian Roe learned about the Flint water crisis in January 2016, while touring the US. In an interview, Morell explained to a reporter: "It's not about doing a play about a water crisis in a city experiencing a water crisis—it's about the underlying issues, like what made the water crisis possible in the first place. In the play, as in Flint, the water is a symptom of a bigger problem, and I think that needs to be investigated because it affects all of us, not just the city of Flint."

Morell's version follows the general outline of Ibsen's play. Dr. Heather Stockman has ascertained through laboratory tests that the water in the town's economic "salvation," its Wellness Resort, owned by Mineralcorp, is contaminated with lethal chemicals and carcinogens.

Stockman tells the newspaper editor Oscar Hofford: "I mean contaminated, Hofford. Polluted. Impure. Mercury, in high proportions, chloroform off the scale—that means legionella; copper levels way too high...I'm saying the Wellness Resort is a danger to public health. Anyone who uses the water is endangering himself." It turns out, she explains, that an industrial plant upriver is "seeping chemicals into the groundwater. And that groundwater is the same groundwater that feeds the pipes into the pump room."

Hofford, at this point supportive of Stockman's exposé, thinks the contamination speaks to broader issues: "What if the water isn't the problem, but only a symptom of the problem?... I think this is the perfect opportunity to talk about what's really going on. The vested interests, the—well, maybe not corruption exactly, but the system, Heather—the system that means these people can do whatever they like without any comeback."

The newspaper's publisher, Stephanie Anderson (Ibsen's Aslaksen), representing the city's small business concerns, makes an appearance. The embodiment of petty bourgeois philistinism, Anderson's watchword is "moderation" in all things. As a founding member of the Homeowners' Association and the Temperance Club, she informs Stockman that the "resort is the backbone of our enterprise...Especially for the property owners."

Anderson too is initially supportive of Stockman's revelations, even suggesting that the doctor be recognized for her "contribution to the city's welfare."

Everything changes when Stockman's brother Peter, the mayor, outraged by word of the doctor's findings, bursts in and demands that the truth be suppressed to protect Mineralcorp's interests. He claims that re-laying the pipes, to avoid the contaminated water, will cost \$7 million and mean closing the resort for at least two years. "Do you have any idea, any idea at all, what this means? ... This would finish us. We close the resort, everyone else capitalises on our idea, and in three years' time, when, if, we reopen it again, this city will face ruin. And it'll be your fault."

In Ibsen's play, Act IV is entirely taken up by a public meeting at which Stockmann denounces town officials and imparts "a discovery of a far wider scope than the trifling matter that our water supply is poisoned ... the discovery that all the sources of our moral life are poisoned and that the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood." He passes on from that insight to a misguided conception, the defense of "isolated, intellectually superior personalities" and the notion that the "majority never has right on its side."

In the Morell-Flint adaptation, the director and actors have decided to turn over this portion of the play to a genuine public meeting.

Tyee Tilghman, the actor playing Jim Horster, a soldier who faces deployment to Mosul in Iraq, addresses the audience directly: “What we’re going to do now is change things up a little bit because in the next scene in the play, there’s a town meeting and what normally happens in it is that Stockman tells the people in the town about the water problem, and they call him an enemy of the people because they don’t want to hear about it—but we thought it would be more interesting to do this a different way, since we’re here and you’re here, and so we thought we’d set up a little town hall of our own.”

This prompted audience members of all ages, children, teenagers and adults, to discuss their appalling and inhuman conditions. One man described having to lug endless cases of water up flights of stairs. Some audience members reported owning houses that were literally crumbling. Others bitterly denounced the bullying of the authorities, who threaten to take their homes and even their children. Still others recounted how they had received water bills higher than their mortgages, and how the homes of protesters had been broken into by police who confiscated computers. Angry residents explained how they contracted health problems and even debilitating diseases from the poisoned water.

All of this was reinforced by the fact that signs in the restrooms alerted users not to wash their hands with water from the taps! Cases of canned water were stacked against the wall.

When *Public Enemy: Flint* resumes, Dr. Stockman and her daughter, Petra, a teacher, both lose their jobs. Moreover, Stockman’s mother-in-law, Eleanor, the owner of the polluting plant, threatens the doctor and her daughter with financial disenfranchisement and destitution. Stockman lashes back at “hypocrites” like Anderson, with her “cheap, small-town flimflam,” and the townspeople themselves.

Petra has the final word: “This town is fine—it’s no better or worse than anywhere else. OK, there are things you can’t fix—you can’t fix that people with money can buy their way out of problems, and you can’t fix that some people care more about their position than what’s right—maybe you can’t even fix the water.

“I think you’re wrong about people, Mom. You said people get the government they deserve but I think people get the government government can get away with. And the government gets away with a lot, not because people are poor or because people are stupid—but because for years, for decades, we’ve eroded our schools, we’ve failed to educate our youth, we’ve failed to invest in ourselves as people.”

And she mentions that like her counterpart in Ibsen’s play, a work now 130 years old, she will start a school.

Public Enemy: Flint is a highly unusual confluence of a classic play, committed, talented actors and a motivated and engaged audience. It is proof, if proof be needed, that art is not something detached from social life. Important, enduring art *by definition* is work that does not remain indifferent to the crises and convulsions of its time. From that point of view, this modest three-day presentation, staged in a gym, was one of the most significant theatrical efforts in the US in recent years. The participants in the production, which was serious and thoroughly professional throughout, deserve the strongest congratulations and thanks.

The central role of Dr. Stockman was exceptionally performed by Los Angeles-based actress Michole Briana White. She was supported by an outstanding cast that included Charles Shaw Robinson from Berkeley, California as Peter Stockman, Madelyn Porter from Detroit as Stephanie Anderson, Briana Carlson Goodman from New York as Petra, Tilghman from Los Angeles as Horster, Meg Thalken from Chicago as Eleanor and Chris Young from Flint as Billing.

Public Enemy: Flint was the creation of British theater company fieldwork, in collaboration with Detroit Public Theatre, Baltimore Center Stage, the Goodman Theatre (Chicago), Chautauqua Theater Company (New York), Berkeley Repertory Theater, People’s Light (Philadelphia), UM-Flint Department of Theatre and Dance, M.A.D.E. Institute, & the New McCree Theater, Flint.

Morell’s adaptation honored Ibsen’s play while eliminating its more elitist tendencies. The latter had a great deal to do with the situation in Norway in the 1880s, where, as Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov once explained, “a working class, in the present sense of the term, had not yet developed ... and was, therefore, nowhere evident in public life.”

Plekhanov pays strong tribute to Ibsen’s social insight and instincts, in particular the dramatist’s abhorrence of the crude, grasping petty bourgeoisie. The Norwegian writer, observes Plekhanov, despises the “moral rottenness and hypocrisy of small town society and politics” and “the boundless tyranny of petty bourgeois public opinion.” He notes that “Ibsen hates opportunism with all his soul; he describes it brilliantly in his plays. Recall the printer Aslaksen [Anderson, in Morell’s play], with his incessant preaching of ‘moderation,’ which, in his own words, ‘is the greatest virtue in a citizen—at least, I think so.’ Aslaksen is the epitome of the petty bourgeois politician.”

The play’s passion and outrage continue to speak to present-day audiences, not least of all in Flint, whose working-class residents are the victims of corporate predation and government indifference or worse. In fact, when the mayor in *Public Enemy: Flint* proclaims that “the public doesn’t need new ideas; what the public needs is good, strong, time-tested method, not hare-brained theories that turn the world upside down,” one is tempted to shout out that the world, above all, needs to be turned upside down.

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