

## **AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE**

With their performance of Henrik Ibsen's "Enemy of the People", the Alton Fringe Theatre transported their audience not only to a coastal town in southern Norway but back in time to the end of the nineteenth century. But this was no dull encounter with either history or with Scandinavian peculiarities because the Alton Fringe convincingly demonstrated the contemporary relevance of this play and in particular, the enduring timelessness of political themes. While some may think watching a play about politics would be enjoyed only by political aficionados, this performance by the Alton Fringe collective succeeded in showing that when brought onto the stage, politics can be accessible, entertaining and thought-provoking for everyone.

By combining these three elements in perfect doses, the Alton Fringe Theatre made its audience contemplate – amidst much laughter and enjoyment – important issues such as the freedom of the press, the abuse of power, the role of citizens in political life, the importance of public opinion and the extent by which politics ought to be guided by moral principles. At the end of this performance, one is inevitably left to ponder about who really is the "enemy of the people": those who seek to challenge power on the basis of principled ideas or those who hold and exercise political power on behalf of the people?

A lot of thought and hard work has been put into this performance and this becomes increasingly evident as the play unfolds and progresses. The stage was put to good use and it was particularly impressive to see just how much atmosphere and ambience was created with only a few props. The antique furniture that was used throughout the play did a lot to re-create nineteenth-century Norway for the audience and along with the slick and elegant costumes used by the cast, these two aspects of the performance continually reminded the audience of the play's original setting and historical period. The set and the costumes really came alive, however, because of the solid acting of the cast. Each and every member of the cast delivered their roles very strongly and with much dedication; it was clear that they were all very committed to their roles.

Characters were extremely believable and very quickly into the performance, it was clear from the acting what were each of the characters' defining qualities and characteristics. Steve Rowland, who played the lead role of Dr Thomas Stockmann, portrayed the gentle but principled doctor with revolutionary ambitions and he was supported by Christine Holloway, who very adeptly played the role of the doctor's loyal, supportive and pragmatic wife. James Willis, who took on the role of the mayor of the town, cleverly straddled between depicting a respected, influential mayor and a shrewd and politically-astute politician. Equally powerful were the roles played by Simon Applegarth and David Rae, respectively the editor and the master-printer of the local press, both of whom injected humour and wit into the performance with the way they brought out the quirks and mannerisms of their characters.

Even the supporting roles demonstrated great skill and talent. Joanna Foulkes, Lesley Willis, Anita Applegarth and Catherine Gerlach each portrayed different women with different societal roles and this was done with keenness and deep involvement. What was most impressive, though, was the chemistry between the members of the cast and overall, this made for a well-executed performance. The actors seemed perfectly comfortable and at ease with each other and this dynamic between the actors revealed just how close and tightly-knit the Alton Fringe are as a drama collective.

Taking on Ibsen, who is often ranked as one of the greatest playwrights in European theatre, is a tall order and this bold production by the Alton Fringe Theatre ticks all the right boxes: a well-designed set, effective costumes, a strong cast whose acting, both individually and collectively, forces one to reflect on your own role in local society and politics. Watch out for their next production!

**Suwita Hani Randhawa**