

*An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen translated by Farquhason Sharp and modernised by Chris Fisher and Kim Smith. Directed by Chris Fisher  
Drama Christie, Drama Christie Studio, 75 Taranaki Street, Wellington till 12 September 2009

Reviewed by Ewen Coleman 6 September 2009

Updating and modernising a play can be a risky exercise, especially when the play is by someone as well known as Henrik Ibsen. But the themes of his play *An Enemy of the People* – social intolerance, hypocrisy and the environment – are so universal that they would stand up in any setting. In this Drama Christie production modernised by Chris Fisher and Kim Smith, the setting is as close to home as possible: modern day New Zealand, which gives the play an extra dimension of relevance. The updating successfully draws out Ibsen's themes, which could, and are, occurring in any, and many small towns around NZ.

In this instance it is the town's latest community development – new baths and the medicinal properties that they supposedly have from the waters flowing into them - and that they have become the economic life blood of the town. But when the protagonist of the play, Dr Stockman (Keith Powell), discovers that effluent from farms upstream is polluting the baths the reaction he receives is not what he expects. With the support of his wife Katherine (Daphne Pilaar) and daughter Petra (Michelle McIntosh), he convinces the editor of the local newspaper Carol Hovsta (Helen Viggers) and other townsfolk of the seriousness of the situation and sends a report to the Mayor (Geoff Osborne), who happens to be his brother. In the report Dr Stockman proposes a possible solution to the problem but which could be of considerable cost to the town. The Mayor however senses economic disaster and as such rallies the townsfolk against Dr Stockman's proposal, thus setting up one man against the people and so becomes "an enemy of the people".

The modern setting works well in this production and under Chris Fisher's direction the cast bring a realism and honesty to their roles and the arguments as they oscillate between the Mayor – representing authority and political expediency – and Dr Stockman – representing the voice of reason and truth. There was an obvious air of confidence that the play had been well rehearsed with plenty of pace through the dialogue, good vocal exchanges and interactions between the main characters. At times however the pace was a little too even and the actors needed to think through their lines in order to give more meaning to the dialogue thus creating better vocal variation and light and shade. This would have also aided the development of the more dramatic moments in the play helping to heightening the tension and conflict between the two sides. Nevertheless there are many moments when Ibsen's ideas were clearly conveyed, making this a thought provoking and yet entertaining production of one of his lesser-known plays.