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Bringing the Story Home

"There are two things writers are good at: envy and criticism," quips playwright Steven Dietz. "And we can talk forever about that play we're never going to write."

Happily for Dietz, his ongoing relationship with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater has encouraged him to be prolific. And happily for this community, audiences get to witness works by one of the brightest playwrights in American theater today.

Within five seasons, the Rep has produced six plays by Seattle-based Dietz, three of them commissioned and directed by the company's artistic director, Joe Hanreddy. In 1995 Hanreddy directed Dietz's Rep-commissioned adaptation of Shusaku Endo's novel, *The Silence*. Later, on tour in Japan, the play earned a nomination for the esteemed Yomiuri Shinbun Award. Hanreddy also commissioned and directed Dietz's *Force of Nature*, an adaptation of a Goethe novel, produced here in 1999. In addition, the Rep has mounted Dietz's *Private Eyes*, *Rocket Man* and *Dracula*.

For the Rep's upcoming production, Hanreddy asked Dietz to adapt the great Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE; Dietz complied with PARAGON SPRINGS, his interpretation of the 1882 classic. Directed by Hanreddy, PARAGON SPRINGS will be updated to the 1920s and set in a water-rich community in Wisconsin. Ibsen's story is intact, Dietz says, just "moved to Middle America. The audience will be familiar with the material and characters. It will be a comedy that openly hurts."

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE tells the story of a provincial community in economic and moral turmoil. The water supply for its recently developed Baths - the town's single economic hope - is discovered by a local doctor to be horribly polluted by a tannery. The doctor alerts the community to the health hazards for visitors and finds, to his shock, that no one is interested in listening; instead, he is silenced and ostracized for his truth-telling. The community decides to keep the Baths open.

A dark paradigm for the now-familiar tale of corporate greed and corruption, Ibsen's play also attacks the old truth that the majority is always right. The "moral scurvy," Ibsen writes, is the "worst enemy of truth and freedom." The Norwegian press's condemnation of his plays may have contributed toward Ibsen's animosity toward public opinion.

Dietz chose to place his adaptation in the Midwest to "bring the story home," but in a 1920s setting instead of the present. "It's good to keep it somewhat in the past," Dietz says. "We can see similar issues in the story, without saying that it's our world. Basically, it's the original story of a town dependent upon tourism. Something is found in the water, the hot springs of this fictional town, and it creates a one-man-against-the community stand." Ibsen's characters are "reconceived, renamed," however, and some are added.

Because of his history of developing new plays with the Rep, Dietz knows the actors he writes for. "I knew the whole cast before I started. Some playwrights would not like that. I find the opposite true. I write for specific actors and their contributions to characters. If I know the actor, I know all sides, and that makes for interesting characters," Dietz

explains. "Because characters have to be contradictory to be interesting."

Over the years, he has tailored many creations to Rep company members. For SILENCE, Dietz wrote parts for Lee Ernst and Torrey Hanson. He calls the roles in FORCE OF NATURE a "valentine" for company actors; knowing them helped him "navigate through Goethe." PARAGON SPRINGS will feature Jim Pickering and Ron Frazier, among others, and will offer roles suited to their strengths.

Few theater companies today have the resident acting ensembles that prove so helpful in the fostering of new plays. "I could probably count on one hand the number of LORT theaters [League of Regional Theaters] that have a resident company of actors," Dietz says. Instead, producers hire on a show-by-show basis and often bring in celebrities to attract audiences and boost budgets. Dietz calls the Rep situation a "rarity."

Between financial pressure and "complacency," Dietz asserts, "theaters are not generating their own work." Instead, "They're content with recycling New York stuff, London stuff. It's incredibly rare for theaters to make a commitment to generate new work. And without that, there are no new plays."

Dietz is one of America's most widely produced and esteemed contemporary playwrights. Since 1980, his more than 20 plays have been produced in regional theaters, Off-Broadway and around the world.

Without the support of theaters such as the Rep, Dietz's career would certainly be less developed. The relationship "forces me to be prolific, removes my ability to complain. Out comes that season announcement and I've found that the play I was never going to write, I can!

"Joe and I try to challenge and push each other into places where we would not ordinarily go - he as director and I as writer. We play tennis with each other's challenges. Joe suggested SILENCE to me. I approached him with Goethe. He approached me with AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. We talk on the phone, hang up, and I think, 'What in the world?' Then, I begin, and I think, 'This is exactly what I need to be writing about.'"

Dietz applauds Hanreddy's artistic leadership. "Joe has an unquenchable desire to connect with the audience. He is so well-read and versed and can intellectually debate you, overwhelm you with what he knows," Dietz says. "But his other side, the longshoreman's kid, is determined to tell the story, to build a bridge to his audience."

Part of that bridge-building includes the company's ties with Steven Dietz. And he is grateful. "I've had unbelievable good fortune. It's increasingly rare to find such support in a theater. Many of my peers deserve comparable opportunities and haven't had them. I hope they do. Playwrights need to make a life in the theater."

- Marie Kohler