



Paragon Springs

Interview of Steven Deitz and William Brown

TimeLine's Artistic Director PJ Powers [PP] chatted recently with playwright Steven Dietz [SD] and director William Brown [WB] about TimeLine's production of PARAGON SPRINGS.

[PP] Steven, what inspired you to do an adaptation of Ibsen's AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE?

[SD] I was approached by the Milwaukee Rep. about the adaptation. [Milwaukee Rep Artistic Director] Joe Hanreddy felt it was a timely play and could be given a new, American slant. I agreed and jumped in.

[PP] Bill, what first interested you about this play, and why is it a relevant story to be telling now?

[WB] AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE is about tough moral decisions a community has to make – the way a crowd is influenced, the way democracy is shanghaied, the way the media can manipulate a story for popular reasons, the fact that hard choices that a community has to make necessitates sacrifice and you can't pretend otherwise...and how comfortable it is to go along...how satisfying that is. These are all issues that have currency today. Steven's play is rooted in Ibsen's story and with his style of storytelling, yet this adaptation has a distinct American tone.

[PP] Tell me about the choice of setting the play in the Midwest in the 1920s.

[SD]It's just such a rich and vibrant time – in terms of politics, business, music, exploration. A time when the modern America was being born, and thus a time of great and startling conflict. Plus, even though I spent a great deal of my early career in the Midwest, I had not written about that part of the world as much as I'd like. PARAGON SPRINGS was a chance to do that.

[PP] Bill?

[WB] First of all, I had yet to find a truly satisfying adaptation of AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. It seems to me that one of the things that comes up with Ibsen all the time is that it's really easy for an audience to sit back and say, "Oh that's the way things were in the 19th century in Scandinavia. It's easy to distance yourself and not see yourself in the play. I always think, "What's the point? That doesn't really affect us." This play is a disturbing play and a dangerous play. It articulates ideas that are messy and not easy to come to terms with. What I love about

this version is that the town is very familiar to us. It's Wisconsin – our own backyard. Instead of it happening in some foreign venue, it's something we know – our friends and neighbors.

It makes me laugh that I'm doing this right after directing OUR TOWN [at Writers' Theatre]. It introduces us to some really terrific people, in a really chummy community, but it goes to the underbelly of it. The 1920s were something of a boom time. It's certainly the beginning of modern America right after WWI. It's got one foot in OUR TOWN and one foot in a more modern small town.

[PP] The play deals with a changing era of media with the invention of radio. How does the power of the media affect the story?

[SD] There is no longer such a thing as “one man's voice.” Technology – radio, in this case – enables the voice of one man to resonate and, frankly, impersonate the voices of many. The infamous phrase “The American People” surely comes out of this time most profoundly – because technology suddenly began to give the illusion that one man could reach, and therefore, speak for everyone.

[PP] Steven, how did you first meet Bill, and what do you think he can bring to this play?

[SD] I directed Bill in the premiere of my play LONELY PLANET at Northlight back when we were both young. I'm loathe to say nice things about him in print – but, okay, since you've asked: he's smart, funny, passionate and has, I think, an innate sense that storytelling and performance go hand in hand. That sounds simple, but believe me: It's rare. I like that about him, even though he's tall. Just don't send him a copy of this, okay?

[PP] Bill, in addition to working with Steven on LONELY PLANET, you also directed TimeLine's HALCYON DAYS. What draws you to his work so much?

[WB] Well Steven's got a devilish wit. I guarantee this is the funniest Ibsen anyone's ever seen. That's no small thing. And at the same time there's always a conscience at work. He's not interested in an amoral universe.

[PP] Steven, you're one of the most prolific playwrights in America. What influences the work you choose?

[SD] I just write the play in front of me – whatever that may be. I've never been very good at waiting to write my, quote, masterpiece; my, quote, definitive work. I like a lot of stories – and therefore I try to capture as many of them as I can. The chance to write about a lot of corners of the world has broadened my life immeasurably. I'm fortunate that for twenty-plus years I've had the chance to do this.

[PP] Bill, let's talk about the plays you choose. You've built a reputation for staging classics, including Shakespeare, Williams, Odets, Wilder and Miller, among others. But, while having an extensive body of work with classics, you are also quite interested in new plays and playwrights. How do you find the balance and what are the factors for selecting pieces to work on?

[WB] Whether it's an old play or a new play, if it excites me...if I feel that I have something to say about this piece, that's the criteria. I think that needs to apply whether it's Shakespeare or a world premiere. I'm not interested in making a concession to some piece just because it's a new play. I don't see the point.

[PP] Many Chicagoans also know you for your work onstage as an actor. How does this work serve you when you're on the other side of the footlights as a director?

[WB] I understand what an actor goes through. I never for a minute forget that walking on a stage is one of the scariest things you can do. I've learned to not impose my process on someone else but to try to honor what they need to get there.

[PP] Have you encountered any surprises working on PARAGON SPRINGS?

[WB] When I started working on this, I thought I was doing a Dietz play. Now I realize that I'm working with two playwrights. It's very much a Dietz play, but it's also an Ibsen. That's exciting.