

Truth in the Time of Covid: *A Lie Agreed Upon* at the Gamm

One walks into *A Lie Agreed Upon* with a premise - reactions to devastating news - and walks out with unanswered questions, both moral and humane, muddled in your brain.



Jonathan Higginbotham (Peter Stockman), Sean McConaghy (Dr. Thomas Stockman). Photo by Peter Goldberg

The play, on stage now at The Gamm Theatre, is Gamm Artistic Director Tony Estrella's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's 19th-century play, *An Enemy of the People*. The title borrows from a Friedrich Nietzsche quote "What is the truth but a lie agreed upon?" and centers on a doctor who uncovers poison in the waters of a new spa billed as an economic boon for his small town. Estrella overlays the fear, divisiveness and meanness marking the pandemic for a provocative show that feels far briefer than its two and a half hours.

When Dr. Thomas Stockman receives water testing results, he wants to warn the town and demand new conduit be installed to funnel clean water to the spa. Stockman, played by Sean McConaghy, meets with opposition from almost everyone - his brother the mayor and town businessmen who see lost revenue and staggering infrastructure repair bills, former allies at the newspaper threatened with lost ad revenue and even a wife concerned about the family's safety and income.

Like Ibsen, Estrella stokes flames of righteousness to the point of conflagration before easing up to allow seeds of doubt and counter-arguments to embed in the audience's collective mind.

The characters debate everything from whether spa patrons are consumers saving the town or citizens needing protection, whether the press should interpret news because "very few facts can tell their own story," and how telling the truth brands one an agitator. The phrase "We had no other choice" keeps surfacing.

While quips like "if people want lies, then the truth is their enemy" and "the only consistency is inconsistency" are dangerously close to preaching, "A Lie Agreed Upon" is more than that. It's easy to imagine wanting to protect people, but the angst of a bedraggled town facing economic uncertainty is equally distressing. What does one do?

That question, of course, is never answered. Gamm likes to scratch the social conscience and send audiences off to ponder potential actions and reactions. But the telling of this story, with the cast Estrella, as director, assembled, leaves deep, even lasting, indentations on the soul.

McConaghy is an explosion of emotion, playing Stockman with unbelievable range - playful with his daughter at the beginning, passionate about righting a wrong and teetering toward mental breakdown after unsuccessfully battling the town. When his wife says, "somebody has to think about us," he visibly unravels, his wild hair on end and face lined with grief for a gripping transformation.

Other bright spots in the ensemble cast include Jonathan Higginbotham who, as mayor, demonstrates the prowess to appear both evil and innocent simultaneously, Fred Sullivan Jr. as business association leader who paints the character with quirky charm early, then summons rage fueled by fear and ignorance and Nora Eschenheimer as the fresh-faced reporter who breaks the first rule of journalism by taking a side.

A Lie Agreed Upon, on stage through October 24, is topical and touchy, poignant and pointed. It wraps you up in a message, but leaves you to write your own ending. That is the mark of great theatre. *For tickets, go to www.gammtheatre.org.*