

# Synopsis of *An Enemy of the People*

It is evening in a small Norwegian town. Mrs. Stockmann is hosting Mr. Billing and Mr. Hovstad, two reporters from the town's liberal newspaper. Dr. Stockmann has taken his two young sons, Morten and Eilif, out for a walk. Peter Stockmann, the mayor of the town and Dr. Stockmann's brother, arrives unexpectedly at the house. He speaks grandly about the recent economic boom of the town since it opened the baths, a health resort for the taking of waters. Peter is the Chairman of the Board of the baths, and Dr. Stockmann is the Medical Officer.

Dr. Stockmann bounds in and his generous energy fills the room. He is somewhat restless, however, in anticipation of a letter he is expecting at any moment. The letter arrives after the mayor leaves. It contains the results of laboratory tests of water samples Stockmann has taken from the town baths. He has long suspected that the spa waters are infested with bacteria that could prove fatal to the tourists who flock there, and this letter confirms it. The pollution comes from the run-off from a tannery further up the mountain. Stockmann is eager to reveal the truth, excited that he has discovered the danger before anyone can be hurt. He believes that the town will be grateful to him for his discovery, and the newspapermen instantly back him and prepare to publish his findings. A servant is sent to the mayor with Dr. Stockmann's report.

The next day Peter visits Dr. Stockmann, having read his report. The stiff, humorless and officious Peter declares his skepticism about Stockmann's findings. He points out that the expense of fixing the baths would have to be shouldered by the townspeople. Peter demands that Stockmann publicly refute his findings, and Stockmann refuses. The two brothers almost come to blows, but are interrupted by Petra and Mrs. Stockmann. Petra champions her father's cause, but Mrs. Stockmann is more cautious, considering the effects on their family and income.

In the publishing office, Peter arrives and tells Hovstad that the money to repair the baths will have to come from the taxpayers. Seeing the impact this would have on their readership, the editors back off and decide not to publish the report. Just then they see Dr. Stockmann bursting through the door, so Peter hastily hides in the next room. Dr. Stockmann has come to check on the printing of his article, and his wife shows up unexpectedly, begging him not to print it. Stockmann finds Peter in the next room and confronts him. The two editors then reveal to Stockmann that they are backing down and have decided not to publish the article because they believe it to be false. In shock and disbelief, Stockmann declares that he will read the report out at a public meeting. Mrs. Stockmann, seeing her husband backed against a wall, declares that she is behind his cause for truth.

A public meeting is about to take place in a room in Captain Horster's house. The room is packed with a hostile crowd. A negative report about Dr. Stockmann has been published in Hovstad's newspaper. Stockmann attempts to speak about his findings, but the crowd prevents him. Faced with a mob, he speaks in outrage about the pollution of society and declares that the majority can never be in the right. The people vote unanimously to brand Stockmann an enemy of



Photo by Richard Feldman.

Mandy Patinkin and Annalee Jefferies in the Williamstown Theatre Festival's 2003 production of *An Enemy of the People*.

the people for getting the baths shut down and thus jeopardizing the economic future of the town. As the townspeople plan to vandalize his house, Stockmann leaves the meeting intending to depart for America with his family on Captain Horster's ship.

The next morning, the windows of the Stockmann house have been shattered by rocks. They have been evicted from their house, Petra has lost her teaching job, the two boys have been thrown out of school and Captain Horster has been fired for attempting to help them. Peter arrives and tells Stockmann that he has been relieved of his position as Medical Officer to the Baths. Peter accuses Stockmann of inventing the story about the baths to please his wealthy father-in-law, Morten Kiil, who hates the town's leaders, so that Kiil will leave all his money to the Stockmanns. No sooner has Peter gone than Morten Kiil arrives to tell Stockmann that he has bought all the shares in the baths with the money he was going to leave the Stockmanns. If Stockmann does not renounce his findings the baths will close, the shares will be worthless, and the family will get no money. To make matters worse, Hovstad and Aslaksen arrive, insinuating that Stockmann and Kiil have been planning all along to defraud the town, and they now want to blackmail Stockmann.

Stockmann resolves to remain where he is and not leave "the field of battle." Captain Horster offers his house to the family, and Stockmann decides to open a school for the homeless children of the town to teach them to be free-thinkers. Petra will be his assistant, thus regaining her career as a teacher, and his two sons will be among his pupils. As he talks through his plans, he gathers his family about him.

