



‘PILLARS’ IS A TOWERING PRODUCTION IN ORLEANS

By Ellen Petry Whalen, *Cape Codder*

With the country just coming out of a heated election period, Elements Theatre Company’s choice of Ibsen’s thought-provoking “Pillars of the Community” is very apropos, as it examines individual and societal political motivations. Specifically, the superbly executed and weighty drama takes a frank look at a man who craves “power” and “influence” above all else, all the while wrapped in a convincing “sham of responsibility,” that his community is more than willing to believe.

Norwegian Playwright Henrik Ibsen is considered the father of modern theater. He believed the idealized approach to drama, common in the 1800s, did not mirror the true messiness of life, where morals are sometimes compromised, if not far worse.

Set in a small, isolated Norwegian seaport in the 1870s, the short-tempered industrialist Karsten Bernick (Chris Kanaga) believes he has it all: the respect of his town and all of its trappings, a doting and submissive wife (Rachel McKendree), a loving and high-spirited son (Lily Schuman), a magnificent home and the appearance of high moral standards. He and his community are “standing on a threshold of a new age,” and are caught between the old ways of “convention and tradition” and the industrial revolution, where principles and people are sometimes disposable. Karsten’s well-orchestrated life, built on lies, is shaken when his past returns to confront him. During a “youthful indiscretion,” Karsten had an affair with a married actress; having nothing to lose, his friend and future wife’s brother, Johan (Peter Haig), took the fall from grace for him and fled to America, with his outspoken, half-sister Lona (Sister Danielle Dwyer). After fifteen quiet years, Johan and Lona come for a surprise visit and Karsten is convinced they want revenge. Even with all of the gossip and the town’s scorn, Johan is fine with the sacrifice he made for Karsten, until he falls in love with the dishonored

actress' daughter Dina (Stephanie Haig) and demands Karsten tell the truth to restore his honor. As a pillar of the community, how can Karsten tell the truth and let the town down, just for the sake of one man's reputation?

Sr. Dwyer directs this impeccable and challenging production. The tight theater troupe spent a month in Chicago preparing for the play; in turn, the acting is engaging and meticulous with subtle nuances and powerful emotions, drawing the audience into the intimate scandal. The authentic costume designs by Gail Gibson and Sharon Tingley are abundant and eye-catching, with each scene change. Known for their impressive sets, Elements has gone above and beyond this time. Reaching over 30 feet high, just right of center stage, a lone wooden pillar, supports the breath-taking set that has elegant, long, curving hallways symbolically hiding secrets, just out of the audience's view, along with an impressive curved staircase leading to a wrought-iron balcony, worthy of the stately home.



CAPE COD TIMES

ELEMENTS COMPANY STRIVES FOR AUTHENTICITY IN ‘PILLARS’

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll, *Cape Cod Times Pre-production Interview*

When publicist Kate Shannon walked onto the set for “Pillars of the Community” last week, she felt like a few more steps down one of the “hallways” would actually lead her into bedrooms in another part of the house.

The set seemed that real, and it is a sense of reality that is driving much of this first production of a Henrik Ibsen play by Elements Theatre Company in Orleans. Realism was a genre that the company — which has previously produced Shakespeare, Chekhov and other work in its 20 years — hadn’t yet explored. Members went through a month of training with teachers in Chicago this summer, then here this fall, on Ibsen and his work, as well as stage combat and various aspects of acting.

The cast and crew want to make audiences feel that they’re almost a part of what is happening in a small Norway seafaring community in the late 19th century.

“The language has so much poetry and metaphor, but it’s people in a real-life setting having real-life conversations,” says actress Rachel McKendree. “You’re not watching a lesson but being invited into the lives of these characters.”

Of the Ibsen canon, Elements chose this lesser-known work, says Shannon, in part because the universal issues of the play — including keeping secrets, what is expected of a leader, and exploration of a man’s character — seemed so relevant to today’s audiences. This particular translation by Samuel Adamson, which premiered in 2005 at the National Theatre in London, also seemed less dry than some Ibsen adaptations, Shannon says, and better “able to communicate to today’s audiences what Ibsen is saying.”

McKendree plays Betty Bernick, wife of a man who has built his life and business on lies and misdeeds yet has hidden the reasons behind his success well and is an important man in the community. His world threatens to crumble, and he is tested when people who know the truth return to the area.

“Rippling through Ibsen’s text is the theme from Apollo’s Temple at Delphi — ‘Know Thyself,’” director Sister Danielle Dwyer says in a director’s note for the program. “It is with this perspective Ibsen pleads in his writing for honesty and equality in all relationships — providing a hope for a future without secrets or lies, no matter who you are in the community.”

McKendree has been particularly struck by this version’s rich exploration of not only Bernick, but all of the characters in the story. “You get a full picture of who everyone is,” she says. The translation “doesn’t sound so academic. It sounds like today.”

That authenticity has been continued, through research, into the floor-to-ceiling set of the Bernick home and to the period costumes (all handmade by six seamstresses), the women say. Those also help to tell the story, as the set has many corners and doorways, Shannon notes, to give the feel of many secrets. (If you want to see the set and how a team of 30 volunteers put it together, check out a time-lapse video on the company’s website at www.elementstheatre.org/now-playing.html.)

With the seaside community setting, Shannon believes Cape audiences in particular will relate to what happens in this small Norway town. And to give them even more insight, the company is putting background on Ibsen and the play on its website and will set up various informational displays in its Paraclete House lobby.



CAPE COD TIMES

HOMECOMING NOT ALWAYS JOYFUL IN 'PILLARS'

By Kate Shea Kennon, *Cape Cod Times*

'Tis the season for complicated family relationships on display, and Henrik Ibsen's Bernick family in the "Pillars of the Community" is no different from yours or mine, except perhaps that the patriarch is a prototypical capitalist monster.

The Bernicks consist of difficult stepsisters and black sheep brothers, cousins and ex-beaus, nosy neighbors and judgmental in-laws, all with secrets that threaten to disrupt celebrations. Sound familiar?

In the Elements Theatre Company's ambitious take on Ibsen's sweeping play, Karsten Bernick, head of house and town, faces a test of character, providing 19th century dramatic narrative and at the same time managing to be applicable to contemporary headlines.

"Pillars" does not have the impact of Ibsen's later masterpieces (the plot is too neatly tied up) but the timeless relevancy of Ibsen's themes – do current good works alleviate past sins, for example – make the play worthy of dusting off and can be used as ammunition for anyone who has a strong opinion on the Lance Armstrong situation.

Keeping the many characters in "Pillars of the Community" straight can be a challenge to an audience member who isn't familiar with this rarely produced play.

Many characters serve little more than to personify the rigid moral fiber of the Bernicks' Norway town, but the production does a great job of highlighting the humor in a mob mentality, and there are some standouts in the diligent cast.

Chris Kanaga as Karsten Bernick navigates convincingly between hubris and vulnerability: "One anxious moment, one stray word," and he may lose everything.

At his side, his wife Betty, played by Rachel McKendree in a rather thankless role, is consigned to little more than reacting to blasts from the past by the return of her brother (Peter Haig).

Also returning to “lift the veil” from a murky past is Karsten’s past love, Lona Hessel, played by director Danielle Dwyer. Dwyer presents Lona as one of Ibsen’s paradigmatic feminists and rightly so: She easily handles the snappy dialogue and delivers the “fresh air” as promised, however the character verges on the self aware and congratulatory to the extent that she seems to have arrived not from America but from another play.

Other distinctive performances include Kate Shannon as Marta Bernick, Karsten’s sister who somehow manages to stand on “terra firma” in her independence from her family, and Brad Lussier who is both the repressed schoolmaster, Mr. Rorlund, and Aune the shipyard foreman and pre-union organizer.

Finally, another star of the show is the set. With a design that wouldn’t be out of place on Broadway, Hans Spatzeck-Olsen, Karlene Albro and Jennifer Lynch have created the Huset Bernick, a wonder, complete with balcony for Karsten to look down on his family and friends both literally and figuratively until he is forced to come back to Earth.

The Barnstable Patriot

ELEMENTS' PRODUCTION OF PILLARS STANDS TALL

Written by John Watters, *Barnstable Patriot*

Stories of evil family machinations are as old as Cain and Abel, and the return of the Prodigal Son has been told for many millenniums, so Henrik Ibsen wasn't breaking any new ground when he wrote *Pillars of the Community* in 1877. But if you think a 19th century play might be a stodgy piece of antiquity, go see Elements Theatre Company's production of *Pillars* to realize that today's scriptwriters are really just reworking the storylines of the masters.

Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, is considered the originator of modern theater. Often he wrote stories heavy with pathos and darkness, yet remarkably many of his plays retain a freshness and remarkable poignancy.

Ibsen's *Pillars of the Community* is not done as much as some of his other famous pieces like *Hedda Gabler*, *Peer Gynt* or *A Doll's House*. The play has always had an air of controversy over how it resolves the fate of its main character, a prosperous and ruthless businessman named Karsten Bernick who is ready to kill members of his own family to retain his prominent position in society.

Bernick is a powerful industrialist who offers his remote Norwegian coastal town a bright future by connecting it with a railway to the outside world. He's not letting on that, in what would today be called "insider trading," he has already bought up all of the fertile valley land along the railway's path. He has hidden his shadowy past by besmirching the reputation of his family to serve his own greed and personal gain.

Once again the masterful cast of the Community of Jesus's Elements Theatre present an impeccable product. Director Sr. Danielle Dwyer, along with her repertory troupe of regulars, grab hold of Ibsen's heavy plot twists and never lose their grip. The acting is scalpel sharp, the timing exact; the show's beautiful period costumes and striking set make for a show that could easily compete with any professional production.

Chris Kanaga plays Karsten Bernick with an evil undercurrent that is downright scary at times. Portraying his wife Betty, Rachel McKendree is superb as the woman who has always done her husband favors no matter how distasteful she finds them. In dual roles of a teacher and a shipyard foreman, Brad Lussier captures each character's distinct differences, a mark of a

very adept actor. The part of the exiled brother-in-law Johan Tonnesen, who has come back from America to reunite with his family, is played wonderfully by Peter Haig. Dwyer plays Lona a half-sister of Betty's who has ventured to the American frontier with Johan. She is the catalyst in the effort to make Karsten repent his oily past.

The real star of the show is Stephanie Haig as Dina Dorf, a young girl living as a charity case of the Bernick family. She delivers a remarkable performance as she tries to decide whether to be true to her own feelings and escape her situation for an adventurous life in America or maintain her muted existence in Norway.

The set designed by Hans Spatzeck-Olsen, Karlene Albro, and Jennifer Lynch is perfectly appointed in a grand way. It could be the greatest acting canvas the company has enjoyed.

This is a splendid evening of entertainment that captures every element of theater.