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A Volley of Plays

by Marie Kohler

"Joe and I play tennis with each other's challenges." That's how Steven Dietz describes his relationship with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's artistic director, Joseph Hanreddy. "Joe suggested SILENCE to me. I approached him with Goethe. He approached me with AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. We talk and it sounds great. Then I hang up and think, 'What in the world?' Then I start work, and I think, This is exactly what I need to be writing about."

By the spring of 2000, MRT will have produced six plays by the Seattle-based playwright, three of them—including SILENCE and FORCE OF NATURE, dramatizations of novels by Shusaku Endo and Goethe, respectively—commissioned by the artistic director himself. For this season, Hanreddy asked the playwright to adapt Ibsen's ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. Updated to the 1920s, the new work, PARAGON SPRINGS, is set in a water-rich community in northern Wisconsin. "It will be a comedy that openly hurts," says Dietz, who kept Ibsen's story basically intact.

The continuing relationship between playwright, director and resident acting ensemble makes the whole process of creating a new play, in Hanreddy's view, "more considered, more well thought-out." But with Dietz as author, he notes, thought-out never means lifeless. "No matter how serious the subject, he has to be entertaining," the director says, "And he's the best editor of his own work—absolutely ruthless with anything he's written."

Dietz, who appreciates the chance to write with specific actors in mind, is equally enthusiastic about the partnership, which he calls "unbelievable good fortune." "This kind of relationship forces me to be prolific, removes my ability to complain," he says. And he notes, "Many of my peers deserve comparable opportunities and haven't had them. I hope they do. Playwrights need to make a life in the theatre."

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