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After ITC fire, a high school play comes to life

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Goose Creek Memorial High School students Kaleb Martin, Fred Pena run through a dress rehearsal of the play: "An Enemy of the People" on Tuesday, April 9, 2019 in Baytown.

Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

A couple dozen high school students rolled their shoulders in circles Tuesday night on an auditorium stage, preparing to rehearse a play that had recently grown personal. "Breathe in your character," director Nina Saunders instructed. "Breathe out yourself."

And so they transformed from Baytown-area teenagers, living near refineries, into fictional inhabitants of a 1950s town struggling with another environmental dilemma: The waters of the local springs were toxic, but local leaders planned to use them to attract visitors — a boost to their economy.

The one-act play, titled "An Enemy of the People," adapted by Arthur Miller and shortened, was cast in December at Goose Creek Memorial High School. Students rehearsed several days a week, thinking about themes like perspective, pollution and honesty.

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Then, in March, those subjects hit home. The Exxon Mobil refinery in Baytown caught fire. The next day, Intercontinental Terminals Co. in Deer Park erupted into flames and burned several days more. Two weeks later, a chemical facility in Crosby was burning.

These students had immersed themselves in the psychologies of their characters, each with a different stake in the fight. They saw their imagined struggles unfold in real life, as residents, advocates and company officials argued over who was to blame and what needed to be done.

Carli Lawley, 15, talked with her mom about what to do if the plant where she works were to catch fire. Christian Lewis, 18, had an asthma attack. “And then I had to come and do this play,” Lewis said.

They could see the ITC plume from school. Their one-act play competition was rescheduled. They drew connections between life and their show, thinking about how two sides could believe in opposing viewpoints and both — to some degree — be right.

They added a copy of the Baytown Sun, depicting the plume, to the set.

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That Tuesday night was the last run-through before they planned — at 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday — to perform their 40-minute show for the public. (Tickets can be purchased for \$5 at the door.) They wanted to share it because, as technical director Alicia Green put it, “This needs to be heard.”

Green lives in Deer Park and struggled during the ITC fire to decide how to keep her family safe. They spent a night with a family in Baytown and another in a hotel.

Some in town figured the blaze was part of life there. Green was used to the smells and test alarms, but she felt that she, like the characters in the play, might not know the whole truth.

Parallels, indeed, are easy to see, from the moment 17-year-old Fred Pena, in the role of Dr. Tom Stockmann, excitedly declares: “There is going to be news in this town!”

Stockmann has discovered that a tannery is polluting the springs. He believes a new water system needs to be built, and shares his findings with the newspaper.

The journalists, at first, are eager to tell the story, believing the doctor is a hero. But they are soon persuaded otherwise by Stockmann's brother, who is the mayor.

As the mayor sees it, fixing the springs will be expensive and take a long time. He convinces the paper's publisher: It would ruin the town. The public doesn't need to know.

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Their play isn't designed to take a side, said Saunders, the director — but it does ask the audience: How do you decide what you stand for? And how do you treat those with whom you disagree?

Saunders' father worked in a plant. She and her students know as well as anyone that the petrochemical industry provides a livelihood for families and an economic base for the region.

Thinking about the dangers that come with that is harder. What happens if the plant next door blows up? Or is attacked? People fish next to signs that warn against doing so. There is a desire to trust that things will be OK.

And then an accident like the one at ITC happens, forcing communities to shelter in place, or, as in Crosby, killing or injuring people.

It was terrifying for Lawley, whose mom works at a plant, to hear that a facility was on fire. And for Isabel Badall, 16, whose mom works at a plant, too. The girls knew another fire could break out. "Even today, I'm still scared," Badall said.

The doctor in the play, then, perhaps was right to warn of the danger in the water. But the mayor may also have been right to worry about the economy of his home. Dominic Villarreal, 17, who plays him, thinks the mayor believed what he said.

"It's really all about perspective," Raven Farmer, 18, said.

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What the students saw in the play – and in real-life –was people attacking each other when they disagreed, rather than listening to each other and trying to solve problems. It was easier to point fingers than to come together.

At a town hall meeting in the show, the people don't want the doctor to speak. "If a man doesn't like it here, let him go where it suits him better!" a heckler calls. They throw rocks through his house windows.

In real life, Dillan Hawkins, 15, figures, "There's a Dr. Stockmann somewhere."

Another version of this play, the director imagined, might have ended with harmony between the brothers and a better outcome for the town. But the work closes instead on the doctor and his family, huddled together, fearful of all who turned on them.

A recording of a Deer Park alarm sounds.

They gasp.

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