



M I C H A E L   O M O K E

# MERCURY

— The Ojibwe River —

After Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*

*The care of the poisoned has begun.  
The care of the poisoned river has not.*

SYNOPSIS

[www.michael-omoke.com](http://www.michael-omoke.com) & [www.newnordicvoices.com](http://www.newnordicvoices.com)

MERCURY

# PREAMBLE

For more than sixty years, the Ojibwe communities of Grassy Narrows First Nation, Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek, and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations in northwestern Ontario have lived with one of the world's longest running cases of industrial mercury contamination.

Between the 1960s and early 1970s, approximately ten tonnes of mercury were discharged into the English and Wabigoon River system. The contamination entered the fish that had sustained these communities for generations and continues to affect health, culture and livelihoods today. Many residents continue to experience symptoms associated with mercury exposure, while the river itself remains contaminated.

Mercury is not a documentary. It is a reimagining of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, relocating his poisoned baths to a poisoned Ojibwe river.

*When does caring for the poisoned  
become a substitute for  
cleaning the poison?*

The play is fictional. Its factual foundation is documented separately in Mercury: Background and Research Dossier. The work is intended for further development through meaningful collaboration with Indigenous dramaturgs, artists, researchers and cultural authorities.



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## SETTING

Present day. A First Nation community in northern Ontario. At its centre stands a newly completed Mercury Care Home, a long fought for institution intended to care for people living with the effects of industrial poisoning. The English and Wabigoon River system remains contaminated.

## SYNOPSIS

The play unfolds across one day, the day the care home is to be formally opened. Government representatives, journalists, local officials and community members gather for a ceremony designed to celebrate progress. The building is real, necessary and hard won. Yet the river beside it remains poisoned.

Naomi Stockmann, the youngest of the three Stockmann sisters, is an environmental epidemiologist who left the community as a young woman. In the years since, she has worked on industrial pollution cases across Canada and internationally, studying how contaminated water, sediment and food systems affect human populations across generations. Her work has included mercury exposure, methylmercury formation and the long term consequences of poisoned ecosystems. She returns for the care home ceremony carrying the newest findings on the English and Wabigoon River system, together with a deeper administrative discovery: there is still no approved physical remediation plan for the river, no public cleanup timeline and no machinery entering the water. The care of the poisoned has begun. The care of the poison has not.

Her elder sister, Petra Stockmann, has spent twenty years securing the care home, its staffing agreements and its operating commitments. Petra does not deny the river's condition. She insists on sequence. First the building must open, then the cleanup campaign can continue. If the ceremony collapses, the state may use the disorder to suspend the very institution the community fought to obtain.

*The sisters' disagreement is not truth against falsehood. It is cleanup against care, urgency against sequence, and two different answers to the same question: what can a community afford to lose first?*

Around the sisters, Ibsen's public machinery assembles. Hovstad recognises a national story but edits the community's history into a cleaner narrative. Billing preserves the discarded drafts. Horster quietly protects a mill file the public was never meant to see. Aslaksen, the ministry's scientific adviser, acknowledges the contamination but insists that remediation must proceed through evidence capable of surviving legal challenge.

Rose Stockmann, the eldest sister and the family's keeper of dates, names and documents, repeatedly corrects the sisters when they turn history into argument. Her simplest correction becomes the moral centre of the play: an elder wants to eat fish from her river before she dies.

*We have built a care home for mercury survivors. We still have not begun removing the mercury.*

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## THE CEREMONY

At the opening ceremony, Naomi refuses the carefully prepared language. She interrupts the programme and states that caring for the poisoned cannot be allowed to replace cleaning the poison. Petra tries to stop her. The microphone is cut. Security removes Naomi, and the official event collapses.

The state does not need to lie. It only needs to wait. Within hours, the ministry pauses the staffing transfer and operating agreements. Petra receives a written offer: if she formally distances the care home from her sister's allegations, staffing can resume. The statement is printed and placed before her with a pen.

The ceremony has ended, but the community does not leave. Nobody storms the building. They are already inside as invited guests, residents and families. Petra is ordered to clear and secure the premises because the care home is not yet licensed or staffed for occupation. Some residents insist that they will not leave a building built for them. Others fear that remaining will give the ministry grounds to cancel everything.

Naomi did not organise the refusal to leave, but she sees the moment as leverage. She has scheduled Horster's protected mill file for release to the press. Horster gave it to her for scientific review, not publication. If the file is released, it may force national action, but it may also cost Horster his position, destroy the care home agreements and take control of the evidence away from the community.

## THE STANDOFF

Two pressures now converge on Petra's single choice. Police and ministry officials are on their way to clear the unstaffed building. Naomi's scheduled upload is counting down. Petra can stop the crisis immediately by signing the ministry statement and publicly separating the care home from her sister.

The room divides. One resident says that both sisters have somewhere else to sleep if the building closes. Rose takes control of the phone recording the confrontation. She forces everyone to state, on the record, what they are asking the community to risk. Naomi must name what the leak could cost Horster. Petra must read the ministry's condition aloud. Those who want to leave are not called cowards. Those who stay are not turned into symbols.

When Petra reaches for the protected file, Horster resists. The file tears. Pages scatter across the floor. A child picks one up and quietly reads the date aloud. The archive begins by accident, not as ritual, but as evidence rescued in a room that may be cleared at any moment.

In the confusion, the child takes a fishing rod and walks towards the door. Petra stops her because police are outside. The child says, simply, 'I'm going fishing.' No one answers. The adults are fighting over a building created to care for people poisoned by a river the child still cannot safely use.

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## THE CHOICE

Naomi cancels the upload and returns control of the file to Horster. She gives up control of the truth. Petra tears the ministry statement instead of signing it. She gives up the guaranteed staffing transfer. Neither sister wins. Both surrender the weapon that could have secured her preferred outcome.

Petra unlocks the entrance and tells the people inside that nobody will be forced to remain. Some leave. Some stay. Rose records the decisions: the torn file, the cancelled upload, the unsigned ministry statement, the names of those who stayed and those who left, and the fishing rod. The archive becomes the record of what people were forced to choose.

Police lights begin to fill the room. The children start reading catalogue numbers. Rose holds up Petra's torn statement.

**ROSE:** What is it?

**PETRA:** The price they offered.

*Rose places the fishing rod beside it.*

**ROSE:** And this?

**CHILD:** Tomorrow.

*Blackout before police enter.*

Mercury retains Ibsen's original dramatis personae in their entirety, with no characters added. All figures are fictional. No identifiable minister, chief, company executive or contemporary public official appears as a character. Institutional power is represented through fictional composite figures, correspondence, ceremony programmes, recorded announcements and official language. The play is informed by the documented public record of mercury contamination in northern Ontario and is intended for further development through meaningful collaboration with Indigenous dramaturgs, artists, researchers and cultural authorities.

*The play ends with the same question it began with: When does caring for the poisoned become a substitute for cleaning the poison?*



THE RECORD IS STILL GROWING AT BLACKOUT.