

Theatre Review: An Inspector Calls

[Oscar Bentley](#) checks out the latest revival of director Stephen Daldry's classic

Thursday 20 September 2018



Image: Mark Douet

J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is one of the British 20th century classics, as is Stephen Daldry's staging of it, replicated this time around by associate director Julian Webber. Studied by school children country wide (although I happened to pass over it due to my teacher's favour of *Educating Rita* – another classic), the beauty of Priestley's text is that it's still entirely relevant in 2018 – just as it was in 1989 at Daldry's first staging, right here at the York Theatre Royal before its transfer in 1992 to the National Theatre, in 1945 when it was published, and in 1912 when it is set.

The first thing that this review needs prefacing with is that the set is magnificent. The play opens with child street urchins playing outside an old, velvet red curtain, which lifts to reveal what may be quite possibly one of the most awe-inspiring images I may have ever seen in the theatre, like a canvas painting or a frame from a film. A grand house stands on stilts in the distance, with the majority of the stage being taken up by the surrounding street, with rain pouring down and mist illuminated by the iconic lamppost. It is imagery where description doesn't quite do it justice, it needs to be seen, with massive congratulations to designer Ian MacNeil (a quick Google reveals that he won the 1994 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Set Design for this production. Good). Couple this with Stephen Warbeck's booming, foreboding score, and this is really an opening to take your breath away.

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The characters of the Birling family sit inside the rickety house that stands in stilts. It's very reminiscent of expressionism, with the human actors standing about three quarters the size of the house. After a few minutes of only seeing the Birling family talking through the slim windows of the house, I was slightly afraid the entire play would be like this, although luckily the sides of the house opened up like a dollhouse not long after.



Image: Mark Douet

The plot – for anyone who doesn't know – kicks off when the Birling family are visited by Inspector Goole (Liam Brennan, here reprising the role from the 2016 West end revival), questioning each Birling, revealing how actions from each of them drove a young woman, Eva Smith, to take her own life. What ensues for the next hour and a half is Birling, and eventually the entire family being broken apart (visually realised by the house tipping to the side and all the fine crockery inside harshly smashing onto the street below) as Goole's questioning makes them each reveal what they each did to Eva Smith, with Daldry's decision to let the performance play right through for an hour and 45 minutes, rather than splitting it up into the text's acts, working fantastically in building to a crescendo.

The exciting bit – and the bit that truly cements Priestley's socialist politics – is the denouement after Goole has gone, when the Birlings question whether their experiences were actually each with different girls, and begin to rationalise what they did in their heads (although the adult Birling children Sheila and Eric remain horrified). For some it may have the subtlety of a sledgehammer (especially when the soldiers and refugees appear at the side at the crescendo), but Priestley's point that your actions matter, and that whether or not it was the same girl or not, with the ending unfortunately slightly ruining it by hinting that it is indeed the same girl, the Birlings still did all these horrific things. The societal responsibility message is surely why it became so popular in the aftermath of the Thatcher administration, and which it reminisces in present day in a time of austerity and rising right-wing populism. And, for the record, the whole debate around Goole at the end also lacks any form of subtlety.



Image: Mark Douet

The company put on a foreboding show, although there was a bit too much shouting, and while Lianne Harvey's Sheila did spend the play transitioning from ignorance and innocence to the weight of what she'd done, she still felt a little false. The staging again links perfectly to the play's message, with the expressionistic house set meaning most of the action takes place on the street outside – is it supposed to be set on the street outside, or is it simply a consequence of the tiny house meaning the action has to take place downstage? This forces the company to almost monologue, facing their passages out at the audience, rather than at each other, particularly in Goole's place; almost directly addressing the audience with his imploring of responsibility for others.

An Inspector Calls isn't just a tense twist on the whodunnit – it's a manifesto. A manifesto that, while it may take a little time to get used to, Daldry's innovative staging and set adds heaps to. The production may be almost 30 years old (and the text 70), but it's still as impactful as ever.

(Aside: this showing reminded me just how irritating some theatre audiences are.)

8/10

An Inspector Calls runs at York Theatre Royal until 22 September, before going on tour to Cambridge, Wimbledon, Cheltenham, Washington DC, LA, Chicago, and Boston until March 2019. To purchase tickets, visit <https://www.aninspectorcalls.com/tour-dates>



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