

An Inspector Calls



'Did any stage-revival in the Nineties take more risks, cause more jaws to drop or do more to shake people awake to the transformative power of theatre than Stephen Daldry's radical re-visioning of J B Priestley's An Inspector Calls? Yet here it is again, after all the awards and transfers and tours, back in town for an eight-week run, and it has pulled off another knock-out surprise'

Daily Telegraph 2009



'Ever-green fresh. No other revival in this dying decade has come close to matching its breath-taking daring and faultless execution'

Daily Telegraph 2009



'This Inspector has triumphed over time'

Daily Telegraph 2009



'Hats off to Nicholas Woodeson, superbly tense, tough and watchful as Goole and powering the evening towards a conclusion that is as shattering as it is artistically satisfying'

Daily Telegraph 2009



'Visually astonishing'

Daily Express 2009



'Seeing it again on its return to London re-enforces what an amazing, expressionist vision Daldry had but also what fantastic material he had to work with'

Daily Express 2009



'The cast are all first rate. Daldry's production, so experimental and yet so close to the spirit of Priestley, is still the star of the show.'

Daily Express 2009



'With an incredible set like a giant doll's house on stilts that unfolds to reveal the family drawing room, the epic and the intimate are finely tuned to magnify our attention on their shifting guilt and Daldry's production is a riveting examination of conscience and class.'

Sunday Express 2009



'Still brilliantly accusatory, bracing and strange'

The Guardian 2009



'Stephen Daldry's extraordinary reinvention of J. B. Priestley's classic has lost none of its fierce pertinence. More than 15 years after its first appearance at the National Theatre in 1992, it's still heart-thumpingly thrilling'

The Times 2009



'The production grips and dazzles. Rain teems down; Stephen Warbeck's music, thunderous with foreboding, is as nerve-shreddingly exciting as a Bernard Hermann score for a Hitchcock movie'

The Times 2009



'Ian MacNeil's design is as impressive as ever, the cacophonous collapse of the Birling home as the family's shameful secrets are exposed is a stunning coup de théâtre'

The Times 2009



'Any fears that this revival will not live up to memories of that first triumphant production at the National Theatre are quickly despatched'

Sunday Times 2009



'As fresh and mesmerising as it was 17 years ago. For first timers it's a three-act feast of the unexpected'

Whatsonstage.com 2009



'The star of the show has always been Ian MacNeil's extraordinary set, an unfolding doll's house on stilts amid the post-apocalyptic ruins. Its cramped scale mocks the Birlings' social values, while its shock transformation in the third act remains a landmark coup de theatre: once seen, never forgotten'

Whatsonstage.com 2009



'As the all-knowing Inspector Goole, Nicholas Woodeson leads a first-rate cast'

Whatsonstage.com 2009



'Nearly 20 years on, Daldry's grotesquely original take on Priestley's socially crusading drama is still vivid.'

Time Out (Critics' Choice) 2009

'If you're looking for a visually compelling evening with a stunning script, wonderful acting, and above all, something that'll make you think, see this'

The Londonist 2009

'An intriguing, clever piece of theatre that leaves you thinking about it long after the curtain call'

Official London Theatre 2009



'THRILLING. DON'T DARE MISS IT!'

DAILY MAIL

'OUTSTANDING. A genuinely great production, enthralling and visually stunning'

DAILY TELEGRAPH

'STUNNING. BLAZINGLY ORIGINAL STAGE IMAGERY. Dark and gleaming and elegant'

NEW YORK TIMES

'As concentrated a piece of theatrical perfection as you will find anywhere'

DAILY TELEGRAPH

'I simply cannot speak too highly of Stephen Daldry's monumental expressionist reworking. I simply want to rush back.'

DAILY MAIL

'THIS IS FIRST RATE PRIESTLEY played with atmosphere, purpose, style and wit'

FINANCIAL TIMES

'One of the most INTOXICATING, THEATRICALY IMAGINATIVE experiences of the 1990's'

EVENING STANDARD

‘SPELL-BINDING. GRABS YOU BY THE THROAT and won’t let you go. Long may it do so’

THE GUARDIAN

‘STEPHEN DALDRY’S ASTONISHING PRODUCTION. Two hours of enthralling visually stunning drama’

DAILY TELEGRAPH

‘THRILLING, MAGISTERIAL PRODUCTION’

SUNDAY TIMES

‘AWE-INSPIRING’

THE TIMES

‘A WAKE UP CALL FOR THE PLANET’

USA TODAY

‘WILDLY IMAGINATIVE, URGENT AND THRILLING’

THE GUARDIAN

‘Ian MacNeil’s set, with its centrepiece of a crazy Wendy house mansion which lurches and crumples as the family’s cosy lives disintegrate, is a wonder.’

TODAY

‘Stephen Daldry’s EPOCH MAKING re-working of J.B. Priestley’s resounding morality play is a THRILLING PIECE OF THEATRE which MUST BE SEEN’

DAILY MAIL

‘WITHOUT QUESTION THE PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR’

THE GUARDIAN

‘Stephen Daldry’s THRILLING AWARD-LADEN production has returned. The defining production of the 1990s, a work of

GREAT DIRECTORIAL DARING, BREATHTAKING VISUAL
INVENTION and PASSIONATE MORAL URGENCY.'

DAILY TELEGRAPH

The Daily Telegraph: 2 October 2001

Priestley's Inspector calls again, with a timely message

By Charles Spencer

Nine years after it opened at the National Theatre, Stephen Daldry's thrilling, award-laden production of *An Inspector Calls* has returned to the West End. Seeing it again, it is clear that this was the defining production of the 1990s, a work of great directorial daring, breathtaking visual invention and passionate moral urgency.

In 1992, Priestley's play, until then regarded as a worthy, wordy rep warhorse, came across as an explicit condemnation of the Thatcher years and her notorious remark that "There is no such thing as society". This time around it seems like a call for solidarity and responsibility at a time of grave international danger, and a reminder, surely relevant to the Blair premiership, that actions matter more than fine words.

The great imaginative leap that Daldry makes in his enthralling, rigorously intelligent expressionistic production is to stage the action simultaneously in two different time zones - the complacent Edwardian era, in which Priestley set the play, and wartime England in the 1940s, when he actually wrote it.

Thus the Birling family occupy a cramped doll's house of an Edwardian home, crammed together in a tiny sitting room through which we initially only glimpse the baying, immaculately dressed figures. But the house, perched on girders, is surrounded by the devastation of a 1940s bombsite, and the desire for a better future.

Ragamuffin children play among the rubble, and there is a crazily tilted red phone box in one of the stalls boxes. We are in the realm of a liberating theatrical imagination, of the kind Priestley himself pursued in experimental works such as *Johnson Over Jordan*. What's remarkable is that Daldry's re-imagining of the piece, greatly helped by Ian MacNeil's stunning design, in no way undermines the play's sturdy traditional strengths.

The story of the mysterious Inspector Goole (played as a representative of the socialist idealism of 1945), who remorselessly wrings confessions from the Edwardians about the burden of responsibility they bear for the suicide of a desperate young woman, grips as only first-class thrillers can.

The apocalyptic design, with rain falling onto the cratered stage, a silent chorus of 1940s figures who seem like a jury weighing the Birling family's guilt, and the dramatic and disturbing score by Stephen Warbeck all add to the epic atmosphere of a play that was originally confined to a dining room.

And when Goole delivers his key speech directly to the audience - "We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other . . . and if men will not learn

that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish" - there is a frisson of recognition as the audience realises just how applicable Priestley's words are today.

The acting is outstanding, at once stylish and full-blooded. The great Niall Buggy is especially fine as the Inspector, his misleadingly bland face contradicted by penetrating blue eyes. He captures the compassion, the contempt, the moral urgency and above all the other-worldly nature of this inspector of souls.

Diane Fletcher's high-definition performance of an Edwardian matriarch unforgettably puts one in mind of Danny La Rue playing Lady Bracknell, while Emma Gregory and Andrew Leonard electrifyingly capture the stirring consciences of the troubled Birling children.

It's a devastatingly fine production which makes one hope that Daldry's budding film career will not draw him permanently away from the stage.

The Independent: 2 October 2001

Still as fresh and thrilling

By Paul Taylor

You'd think we'd be calling it *An Inspector Calls* by now. Stephen Daldry's Expressionist, Fall-of-the-House-of-Birling version of the JB Priestley war-horse seems to have been running forever. But seeing the first night of its transfer, after a short break, to the Playhouse, I was delighted to discover that the production is just as fresh and thrilling as it was at its National Theatre premiere nearly a decade ago. The brilliant staging concept clearly has an inexhaustible vitality, being a rare combination of the visually spectacular and the thematically penetrating.

Set in 1912 on the eve of the First World War, the piece was written towards the end of the Second. In exposing the callous selfishness of an Edwardian industrialist's family, Priestley's drama was sending a message to the people of his own time. At once a thriller and, in effect, a fervent party political broadcast on behalf of the Labour Party which was elected in 1945, the play is a call for collective conscience and mutual responsibility. The Birlings of this world must not be allowed to get away with it ever again.

Daldry and his designer Ian MacNeil, in a stroke of genius, decided to make the dialogue between those two periods vividly explicit and an open challenge to our own values. So here the Birlings' celebration party for their daughter's engagement does not take place in the usual picture-frame dining room set, but in an oversized doll's house, precariously perched on stilts in a blitzed landscape of louring skies, bomb craters and wet cobblestones. Inside it's 1912; outside it's 1945, and it's into this arena that the Inspector summons each member of the Birling clan as he uncovers their various roles in the suicide of a young woman. In his demob suit, this eerily omniscient moral policeman is also a social evangelist,

delivering his speech about the need for compassion directly to the audience. A silent crowd of onlookers – ex-servicemen, refugees and urchins who represent the post-war generation – eloquently reinforce his indictment of the Birling ethos.

Never can a radical make-over have been truer to the spirit of the author's intentions, nor a civics lesson have felt so continually exciting. The tension never slackens, from the moment at the start when the all-clear siren sounds and a small boy clambers out an air raid shelter, kicks a bakelite radio to life and struggles to lift the heavy red curtains which will eventually rise to reveal MacNeil's breathtaking, rain-swept vision of juxtaposed worlds.

The twists of Priestley's well-made plot can seem a mite predictable but, as directed here, there's an arresting urgency to each development. In a coup de théâtre that would induce shivers down the spine however many times you saw the piece, the doll's house topples forward, at the moment when the family's collective guilt is established, sending the Birling crockery and glasses smashing onto the cobbles. And then, marvellously, it rears upright again during the period of false security near the end, when it seems that the clan has been left off the hook and can resume their complacent ways.

The current cast is excellent. Edward Peel is wonderfully aggressive and roaringly Yorkshire as the bullying blustering patriarch and Diane Fletcher offers a terrifying study in moneyed disdain and denial as his imperious wife. My only problem with Niall Buggy's quizzical, passionate Inspector is that, being Irish, he would surely have been neutral during the Second World War. I reckon that innumerable warehouses of crockery and glassware will be shattered before this production closes.

The Guardian: 29 September 2001

A West End warhorse battles on

By Lyn Gardner

Most of theatreland's long runners have a dismal air about them, as if nobody can quite remember why the production merited being in the West End in the first place. Take a hit from elsewhere and plonk it in the commercial sector and all too often all the energy leaches out of it.

The exception is Stephen Daldry's production of JB Priestley's classic 1945 thriller, which pitches the Edwardian mindset of the comfortable Birling family against the brave new post-world war vision of Inspector Goole.

First seen at the National in 1992, and since then an almost permanent fixture in the West End, Daldry's production returns after a six-month absence in spine-tinglingly good shape.

Daldry's vision here owes a great deal to designer Ian MacNeil, whose large Edwardian doll's house, precariously perched amid the smoking rubble of post-Blitz Britain, provides the visual centrepiece of a production that probes insistently at the questions: what do we mean by society? What are our individual responsibilities within society?

Back in 1992 the Birlings' callous look-after-yourself mentality, their casual indifference and cruelties that lead to the death of a young woman, seemed like an indictment of the previous 13 years of Tory rule. Now, when the lights are raised and Niall Buggy's Inspector Goole points the finger at the audience, we have nobody but ourselves to blame. This is not a comfortable evening.

Buggy's Goole is an intricate study of a man whose strong passion comes cloaked in the rational and cool. Diane Fletcher's Mrs Birling, for whom the word "impertinence" is an essential piece of vocabulary, is his perfect foil, and Emma Gregory is superb as the daughter who suddenly sees the dirt that lurks beneath her white petticoats. But it is the production - lushly operatic, yet hard as steel - that grabs you by the throat and won't let you go. Long may it do so.

Evening Standard: 28 September 2001

Family saga still packs punch

By Nicholas de Jongh

Nine years after it first took the stage and all available awards, Stephen Daldry's thrilling, expressionistic revaluation of JB Priestley's repertory war-horse still packs a real, theatrical punch. And the play's envisioning of the "fire, blood and anguish" that might be inflicted upon post-Second World-War society acquires ghastly, prophetic resonance in the light of the terrorist atrocities on 11 September. Daldry envisages *An Inspector Calls* as a Ghost, Time and Morality play, with a cue or two from Pirandello. His production, after years at the Garrick, fits neatly into the smaller Playhouse, even though the third act spectacle, when the collapse of a house mirrors that of its inhabitants, is now slightly less dramatic.

Ian MacNeil's remarkable stage design serves as an eloquent framework for Daldry's inventions. It converts the nouveau riche, Birling family's Yorkshire drawing room into a giant dolls' house, from whose insulating protection smart-dressed Edwardians reluctantly emerge.

Nervily, they descend by spiral staircase to the mean, cobbled streets of the world below. Down there, Niall Buggy's eerily enthralling Inspector waits to question the Birlings about the recent suicide of a girl, for whose death each family member proves to bear some responsibility.

Daldry aptly transforms the Inspector into a magical Prospero figure, who masterminds this Priestley play about selfishly Edwardian capitalists for hopeful, post-1945 Labour voters. There's a thrilling sense of strangeness as the Birlings are stripped of their pomp and circumstance, and, with all the trappings of realism gone, collapse in the street. Stephen Warbeck's musical score, although overloud, intensifies the ominous mood. The production's bracing, poignant impact is, unfortunately, diminished as a result of some wildly over-pitched acting, particularly from Edward Peel's blustering paterfamilias. But Diane Fletcher's haughty mamma is a fine period piece.

Time Out: 3 October 2001

'An Inspector Calls'

By Mark Cook

The real benchmark for any play is whether it stands the test of time, whether it can be reinvented for new ages. JB Priestley's old warhorse – previously the preserve of old-fashioned rep and amateur dramatics – certainly got a radical makeover when Stephen Daldry exploded it (literally) with his highly visual (designer Ian MacNeil), expressionistic take on this moralistic tale of Edwardian greed and hypocrisy viewed from the 1940s. Originally staged at the National Theatre in 1992, it's been running in the West End almost continually since it left the South Bank – providing pocket money for Mr. Daldry – and is now relaunched, and slightly squished into the smaller Playhouse Theatre, after a short break.

If there were any doubts about the piece's message being minted anew, the lines predicting post-war 'fire, blood and anguish' and talk of taking responsibility for each other are strikingly prescient in the light of current world tensions.

As for Daldry's production itself, it seems to have lost some of its impact – notably the climactic crashing down of the extraordinary doll's house-like Edwardian edifice on stilts as the rich Birling family's corrupt foundation is blown apart – in this smaller space, and some performances are a touch over-emphatic close up. While Niall Buggy's inspector, who exposes each family member's role in a young girl's suicide, doesn't quite achieve the avenging ferocity of Kenneth Cranham's portrayal, it has an unusual mystical quality, and Diane Fletcher's Mrs. Birling, with her glacial hauteur, perfectly evokes Priestley's notion of privilege without responsibility. There's still mileage in the old warhorse yet.

The New York Times: 8 July 1993

'An Inspector Calls'

By Frank Rich

At the National, a 1945 play by a Rattigan contemporary, JB Priestley [1894-1984] is a match in hair-raising theatrical thrills for the other 1945 revival, of Rogers and Hammerstein's "Carousel" staged by the company last winter. The play is "An Inspector Calls" a well made, sometimes didactic old warhorse, which has been transformed by its director, Stephen Daldry, into a non stop, 110 minute bolt of nightmarish hallucination with a guillotine-sharp political edge.

Priestley set his play in 1912 but conceived it as a call to arms for the end of World War II as English voters had to choose between the Conservative status quo and Labor's promise of egalitarian reform. The villains of the tightly told piece are the members of a selfish ruling-class family in industrial Yorkshire whose dinner party is interrupted by the mysterious arrival of an inspector investigating the suicide of a poor young local woman. As Inspector Goole asks insinuating questions of the complacent, bourgeois revellers, it becomes clear that they all bear guilt for the destruction of a woman they have variously exploited for cheap labor, cheap sex or worse. And then the plot thickens.

Like the neighbouring "arcadia" this production exists in two periods at once, pre World War I and post World War II, and to chilling effect. Although the family parlor is aglow in Edwardian finery, it is reduced to almost doll-house proportions, placed on stilts and surrounded by an ominously gray, crater-pocked, post-war landscape that overwhelms it.

The well-to-do characters in evening dress must step down into the proletarian gloom to play their scenes, and they are frequently shadowed by a silent, scurrying chorus of shell-shocked and starving refugees, many of them hollow-eyed children, who could be blitz victims or dispossessed miners' families or both.

It's only a matter of time before the privileged doll's house perched above the mass of humanity literally comes crashing down, but Mr. Daldry does not stop there. The entire staging is framed by an old fashioned gilt proscenium, complete with red plush curtain, which proves a source of still other coups de theatre. As Priestley makes his startlingly timeless statement about social responsibility in a world driven by greed for power and capital, so this 32-year old director makes his own revisionist statement, deconstructing and reinventing Priestley's stodgy theatre before our astonished eyes even as he leaves the playwright's moral credos untouched.

Like its young director, who will succeed Max Stafford-Clark as artistic director of the Royal Court in October, "An Inspector Calls" is on the move. It will transfer from the National's Olivier stage to the Aldwych Theater on Aug. 21, a few weeks before "Carousel" also reopens, at the Shaftesbury Theater, for its extended commercial run. But unlike "Carousel," which will reach Lincoln Center Theater next spring, "An Inspector Calls" has no plans to travel further west.

Midweek: 8 October 2001

'An Inspector Calls'

By Martin Spence

Stephen Daldry's blindingly original AN INSPECTOR CALLS still hits the 'me' generation where it hurts. There's no such thing as society, Lady Thatcher told us. Priestley's great moral thriller – a devastating mix of Victorian melodrama, socialism and Christian ethics – says there bloody well is.

Insulated by money, power and class, a self-made Thatcherite family live in a doll's house on stilts, ignoring the wasteland of poverty and hopelessness which supports them down below. God, in the unlikely shape of a cop, drops by to solve a suicide. Who's innocent, who's guilty? One person, or the lot?

One by one, each character steps down the slipper staircase into the moral quicksand to reveal their darker side. Dogs bark. Holes open up in the ground to trap them. Subterranean lights flash.

Storm warnings sound. Deep in the heart of the criminal competitiveness of the free market economy, the truth will out; there is no them and us. We must all look after each other or else there is no future.

No other production has ever shown the twin horrors of human isolation and retail therapy so powerfully. In Stephen Daldry's fiercely creative hands, Priestley's plain Yorkshire tale of irresponsibility and thoughtlessness acquires the depth and simplicity of ancient tragedy.

So here we are again. The money's running out. The world's at war. We say we care. And here's New Labour carrying on in the same old divisive, destructive way. Take your head out of the sand and see it.