

Originally produced by the National Theatre

**AN** **JB PRIESTLEY'S**  
**CLASSIC THRILLER**  
**INSPECTOR**  
**CALLS**

**A Resource  
Pack for  
Teachers**

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# AN JB PRIESTLEY'S CLASSIC THRILLER INSPECTOR CALLS

A RESOURCE PACK FOR TEACHERS

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# A USERS GUIDE

This teachers' pack is intended to offer a variety of ideas for work to supplement your theatre visit. The pack can be used both with GCSE English classes who are studying *An Inspector Calls* as a set text, and with GCSE, AS and A Level Drama or Theatre Studies groups, who may be seeing the play as part of a more general course of theatrical studies. Most of the material is easily adapted for students of different ages and levels of ability.

*There are five main sections:*

## SECTION ONE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

places *An Inspector Calls* in a political and historical context. It aims to provoke debate about the issues tackled in the play and their relevance to contemporary audiences.

## SECTION TWO: PRODUCING PRIESTLEY'S PLAY

focuses upon the artistic decisions which have gone into the creation of this production. It encourages students to approach the play as actors and directors.

## SECTION THREE: BEHIND THE SCENES

offers insights into a range of theatrical techniques. It is intended to develop students' understanding of the play in performance and to stimulate more detailed analysis of the production.

## SECTION FOUR: PRACTICAL APPROACHES

suggests practical drama activities to help your class to explore Priestley's play as a text for performance.

## SECTION FIVE: SELECTED FURTHER READING

gives a full bibliography as well as suggesting materials for further study.

Throughout the pack you will also find suggestions for activities which can be used to help your students explore the play more deeply. Many of the suggested activities could, if you wish, be used as the basis for later written work. The **pre-show activities** are primarily for students who are studying the play and will have some knowledge of the text. Some of these activities can also be undertaken after seeing the production. The **post-show activities** are usually suitable for students who have seen the production, whether or not they are studying the play.

**Please note that all page numbers refer to the Heinemann edition of *An Inspector Calls* (1992). The page numbers in this edition are, however, identical to those in the earlier Hereford edition of the play.**

Above all, the aim of this pack is to inform, stimulate and inspire. You will find your own ways of incorporating the materials and exercises into your students' work. Good luck.

Kim Greengrass



# SECTION ONE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

## i. TIME AND THE BIRLINGS

**An awareness of time is central to the study of any play. As designer, Ian MacNeil points out: "I think that any play does in fact exist in many time zones - any piece of work does. The chances are it exists in three time zones. There is the time in which it was written; there is the time which it refers to consciously; and there is the time in which it is being read or watched."**

An example would be Shakespeare's *Henry V* which was written in 1599, is set around 1415 and is still being performed today. A student or a director approaching the play **today** will have to ask why, at the end of the sixteenth century, Shakespeare was engaging with events from the beginning of the fifteenth century. The director will also have to examine what the play means to audiences watching it in **the twenty-first century**.

The same is true for *An Inspector Calls*. When first staging the play for the Royal National Theatre in 1992, director, Stephen Daldry, and his creative team had to ask themselves the same questions. Why was the play written when it was - in a single week during the winter of 1944/45? Why did Priestley set it in the Edwardian past, around thirty years previously but well within living memory? And, above all, why should the play still engage and entertain audiences at the end of the millennium?

J.B. Priestley himself was fascinated by theories of time. Through his reading of the works of the mathematician J.W. Dunne and the Russian mystic Peter Ouspensky, he arrived at his own theory of how we experience time. Priestley, as Ian MacNeil explains, "believed that time is not experienced by linear means; that we experience things *simultaneously* in our present, our past and, in some senses, our future. At any given moment we can develop a sensitivity to these simultaneous times". This theme emerges in several of Priestley's plays, including *I Have Been Here Before* (1937) and *Time and the Conways* (1937). Priestley's fascination with time, together with his interest in Jung's idea of the collective unconscious, was to be a key influence upon Stephen Daldry's production of *An Inspector Calls*.



Read the outlines of three of J.B.Priestley's other dramatic works before considering the following questions.

- ☑ Can you find any important similarities between the summaries of Priestley's other plays and *An Inspector Calls*?
- ☑ How do the theories of time presented in these plays influence your understanding of *An Inspector Calls*?
- ☑ Use Sheila's remark that "If it didn't end tragically, then that's lucky for us. But it might have done." (*An Inspector Calls* p. 70) as the starting point for a collection of quotations from the play about alternative realities or what might have been.
- ☑ Can you think of other stage plays, films or books which explore concepts of time? (eg. the films *Sliding Doors*, *Back to the Future* etc) Do these present a similar view of time to that in Priestley's work?

### 1. Dangerous Corner (1932)

STANTON: I think telling the truth is about as healthy as skidding at sixty round a corner.

FREDA: And life's got a lot of dangerous corners, hasn't it Charles?

STANTON: It can have if you don't choose your route well.

*Dangerous Corner*, Act III

In his 1948 introduction to the play, Priestley explained that in *Dangerous Corner* he had wanted "to make use of the device of splitting time into two, thus showing what *might* have happened, an idea that has always fascinated me". As a group of friends gather in the drawing room after dinner, a small incident - the playing of a musical box - sparks off two alternative sequences of events. At the beginning of the play, the playing of the musical box leads to a series of bitter arguments, resulting in revelations of robbery, attempted rape, drug taking and manslaughter. At the end of the play, the same scene with the musical box is repeated, but this time the conversation takes a completely different turn: the dangerous corner is avoided and the evening ends with cheerful conversation and a blissful oblivion to the dark secrets which each of the characters has hidden within.



## 2. Time and the Conways (1937)

The three acts of this play take place in the same sitting room in Mrs Conway's house, on the same night of the year - the night of her daughter Kay's birthday. Where the structure is unusual is that Acts One and Three follow events on the night of Kay's twenty-first birthday in 1919, while Act Two leaps into the future and allows Kay a glimpse of what will happen on her birthday in 1937. The 1919 scenes depict a family party, the joyful return of Kay's brother from the war and flirtations between the young people attending the party. This is in sharp contrast to Act Two which shows that the Conway family are all enduring lives of quiet desperation: Mrs Conway has lost all her money; Carol, the most beautiful of all her daughters, has died; her son Robin, who was greeted as a war hero in Act One, has left his wife and child; and the poised and confident Hazel is trapped in a terrifying marriage to the man she met at Kay's party in 1919.

In Act Three Kay is disturbed by her troubling vision of the future, but her older brother, Alan offers some words of comfort:

ALAN: Time doesn't destroy anything. It merely moves us on - in this life - from one peep-hole to the next... But the point is, now, at this moment, or any moment, we're only a cross-section of our real selves. What we really are is the whole stretch of ourselves, all our time, and when we come to the end of this life, all those selves, all our time, will be us - the real you, the real me. And then perhaps we'll find ourselves in another time, which is only another kind of dream.

KAY: I'll try to understand... so long as you really believe - and think it's possible for me to believe - that Time's not ticking our lives away... wrecking... and ruining everything... for ever...

ALAN: No, it's all right, Kay. I'll get you that book. You know, I believe half our trouble now is because we think Time's ticking our lives away. That's why we snatch and grab and hurt each other.

KAY: As if we were all in a panic on a sinking ship.

*Time and the Conways, Act II*

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### 3. I Have Been Here Before (1937)

This play, set in the drawing room of an isolated inn on the North Yorkshire moors, is closely based on Ouspensky's theory of recurrence, which Priestley studied extensively.

Several of the characters gradually discover that they have links with one another - one guest, for example, teaches at a boarding school attended by the inn keeper's grandson, while another guest, a prominent industrialist, sits on the school's board of governors. Several of the inn's guests experience a feeling of déjà vu, as if they have been there before and as if they have met one another before, in spite of the fact that they are complete strangers. The school teacher and the wife of the industrialist even find themselves drawn to one another - inexplicably attracted even though they hardly know one another. It is only when the strange German guest, Dr Görtler explains his theories of time that they begin to understand that they are re-living experiences which have already taken place. However, Görtler insists that, in spite of this, they do still have some control over the direction their lives will take.

Dr GÖRTLER: We move along a spiral track. It is not quite the same journey from the cradle to the grave each time. Sometimes the differences are small, sometimes they are very important. We must set out each time on the same road but along that road we have a choice of adventures... You can return to the old dark circle of existence, dying endless deaths, or you can break the spell and swing out into new life.

*I Have Been Here Before, Act III*

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**Using your reading about Priestley's theories of time and your recollection of the production, think about the following questions.**

- ❑ Does an awareness of Priestley's thoughts about time help you to understand some of the directorial decisions in Stephen Daldry's production of the play?
- ❑ What details of the production are used to differentiate between the different time zones? (eg. the air-raid siren, the Inspector's 1940s-style demob suit, his wristwatch, the orange which he presents to the small boy).
- ❑ What theatrical techniques does the production use to make sure the audience realises that the play's message is as important today as it was in 1945?

## ii. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: 1912 AND 1945

*An Inspector Calls* is set in 1912, before the beginning of the First World War, but was written during the winter of 1944/45, first reaching the stage in 1945, the year in which the Second World War ended. For director Stephen Daldry the play's campaigning passion is inextricably linked to the new spirit of post-war optimism. He believes that 1945 is "probably the most crucial period in domestic British politics this century" - a time when people were asking, "Do we want to go back to the Edwardian period or to create something vital and new, a romantic vision of the future?".

Priestley's choice of a pre-war Edwardian setting was therefore a calculated attempt to draw a parallel between the experiences of the two world wars. As designer Ian MacNeil explains:

"Priestley lived with the First World War, the war to end all wars, survived it against the odds and then found himself in another horrific war. And so he believed he had the right to ask, 'If I lived through the war to end all wars, why am I now living through another one? What got us into this situation? What is the failure of leadership and belief? What brought us to this folly?' You can't have this view of the Edwardians unless you are looking at it from the point of view of people who have just fought a war.

"Priestley felt strongly that there's no point in fighting another war simply to maintain the status quo: the point of this social upheaval is that some good must come of this. We should fight for a better society, not simply demonise the Germans as though badness and selfishness is something that only exists in Germany."

The 1945 play may have been set in the past but its purpose was to look to the future, arguing strongly for a more positive society. Tony Benn MP believes that Priestley "consciously intended to make [*An Inspector Calls*] a contribution to public understanding which, in its turn, he hoped might lead to a Labour victory after the war was over".



J.B.Priestley joined up in September 1914, at the very start of the First World War. He fought on the front line in France for most of the war, his time in combat only interrupted by a six month spell in hospital in 1917 after he was buried under a collapsed trench. Twenty-four year old Lieutenant Priestley was demobbed in late 1919 after five years in the army.

Read the following extract from J.B.Priestley's *Literature and Western Man* (1960) which bitterly recounts the experiences of his generation during the horrors of the First World War. After reading the extract, look again at the opening pages of *An Inspector Calls*, (particularly Birling's speech, from p.4 "No, we won't..." to p.7 "...we've had experience - and we know."). Compare the two extracts and use the questions which follow to help your discussion.

*"In the very middle of this age the First World War rises like a wall of blood-red mountains. Its frenzied butchery, indefensible even on a military basis, killed at least ten million Europeans, mostly young and free from obvious physical defects. After being dressed in uniform, fed and drilled, cheered and cried over before they were packed into their cattle-trucks, these ten million were then filled with hot lead, ripped apart by shell splinters, blown to bits, bayoneted in the belly, choked with poison gas, suffocated in mud, trampled to death or drowned, buried in collapsing dugouts, dropped out of burning aeroplanes, or allowed to die of diseases, after rotting too long in trenches that they shared with syphilitic rats and typhus-infected lice. Death, having come into his empire, demanded the best, and got it. This was no ordinary generation; it was the flower and fruit of an exceptionally long summer of European peace and prosperity, so much vintage blood; and the men among us who fought with it and saw it being destroyed, and the women still alive who cannot forget its wonderful bright promise, we believe to this day that the best companions of our youth, the liveliest minds and bravest hearts, all the golden lads... went to that war and never came back from it. This is something that nobody born after about 1904 can ever fully appreciate."*

J.B.Priestley, *Literature and Western Man* (1960)

- ❑ How does the tone of the two pieces differ?
- ❑ Are they recognisably the work of the same writer? If so, why?
- ❑ Many of the play's first audiences watching in 1945 would, like Priestley himself, have lived through both World Wars. What special resonances would the opening scene have for these audience members?
- ❑ Both Gerald Croft and Eric Birling will probably be among those to fight in the forthcoming First World War. What do you imagine the fates of the other characters might be during the war?
- ❑ The opening scene of the play evokes the atmosphere of the society which is soon to be shattered by the outbreak of war. What aspects of that society do you think Priestley might have condemned?
- ❑ Why do you think some of Mr Birling's long speech (including the reference to the Titanic) was cut in Stephen Daldry's production of the play?

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## iii. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: THE PLAY TODAY

**“There is no such thing as society.  
There are individual men and  
women, and there are families.”**

Margaret Thatcher, *Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987

*An Inspector Calls* may have been written with an immediate political purpose - to encourage a Labour victory in the 1945 general election - but does it still have a political impact for audiences at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

The political argument of *An Inspector Calls* was certainly a strong inspiration for the creative team of the current production. This Royal National Theatre production was first staged at the Lyttleton Theatre in London in 1992, at a time when the Conservative government had already been in power for more than a decade. Ian MacNeil (designer) explains how this influenced their work: “We created it in Thatcherite circumstances and we created it as people who had only been adults under Thatcher. And so from that point of view, we could romanticise the Labour landslide of 1945 and the creation of the welfare state.”

The contemporary nature of the play's political message was reinforced for Ian by the “very clear echo of the Inspector's famous speech, ‘We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other,’ in Margaret Thatcher's infamous comment that ‘there is no such thing as society’. It felt really important to make it clear that we felt that [Thatcher's] remark was unacceptable.”

Stephen Warbeck (composer) was also attracted by the play's vision of an alternative society: “In an era when the received orthodoxy of the party in government is that we all look after ourselves, my feeling is that most people do not actually believe that. Most people want to feel that they would be looked after and cared about by other people. And people do care about other people. I think that the Inspector's final speech will probably have the hair standing up on the back of a lot of people's necks just to hear somebody stand up in front of you and say that we have a responsibility for other people. It is exciting and reassuring at the same time.”

Since the production was first created in 1992, there has been a change in government, but director Stephen Daldry feels that the contemporary relevance of the play remains as strong as ever because “Margaret Thatcher changed the political consensus in this country quite profoundly, perhaps in the most extreme way since the 1945 Labour government. I think we are still living in the shadow of that. It is not as if we have got a radical Labour Party in power. When we talk about the responsibilities of an unmarried mother and who should pay for her child, the line which is taken by the Birling family - that it is the responsibility of the father - is the line currently pursued by the Labour Party much as it was by Thatcher's Conservative Party.” Ian MacNeil agrees that the play is still entirely relevant: “We romanticised a Labour



landslide and then there was one in 1997, but sadly things do feel the same. I would love to say that the play is irrelevant in our time but sadly it is not.”

While British audiences may be spurred to debate by the political slant of the play, associate director Julian Webber has found that American audiences respond in even more extreme ways. Julian describes how, when accompanying the American tour of *An Inspector Calls*, “I got into a fist fight in a theatre lobby in Dallas! You realise then how political the production is. The American audience is confronted with what is, for them, an entirely radical experience which is utterly shocking. The play is essentially Communist. People would come out and be enraged by the idea that we should be responsible for each other. It was seen as revoltingly liberal!”

Use the following questions as the basis for a class discussion before moving onto the activity which follows.

- Do you think that *An Inspector Calls* still has a message for us today?
- See if you can think of any ways in which the play’s social message can be applied to issues of today?
- Stephen Daldry mentions the example of government policy towards absentee fathers - how far do you believe the idea that “we are all responsible for each other” should extend when considering issues such as this?

Collect and photocopy some relevant newspaper articles. Examples might include articles on asylum seekers, teenage pregnancies, charitable giving, care in the community policies, overseas aid. Distribute one to each class member. Choose a character from the play and, as that character, write a letter to the newspaper editor in response to the article. Remember to think about the written style which the character might adopt (Mrs Birling and Eric, for example, would write very different letters) as well as about the argument they might put forward. The completed letters can be read out ‘in rôle’ to the rest of the class.



#### iv. POLITICAL PLAY OR PROPAGANDA?

***“What makes it a very fine play is that the emotional journey which the characters go through is paralleled by a series of socially aware realisations. Those things are linked and that is what makes it good drama.”***

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

“The message of *An Inspector Calls* is simple: We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. It is so simple that only a great writer would have the courage to make it his central theme. And it offers a very easy - in fact, cheap - explanation for its success behind the Iron Curtain. Being all responsible for each other is what communism's supposed to be all about.”

*John Braine (1978)*

***“It is a lesson in civics invested with tension and cleverly manipulated into the form, not merely of a well-made play, but a play so well made that each of its theatrical surprises extends and deepens the lesson. Alternatively, or additionally, it may be seen as an updated morality play, with Birling perhaps representing avarice, Mrs Birling pride, Sheila envy and anger, Croft lust, and Eric lust, gluttony and sloth. It is emblematic and didactic and unashamed of being either... Try and see it in the theatre, because it proves that, in Priestley's hands, a sense of responsibility can generate gripping drama.”***

*Benedict Nightingale (1982)*

“To assert that ‘If there's nothing else, we'll have to share our guilt’ may not be a radical principle in Brechtian terms; but in drastically individualist times such as ours, the insistence that we have to share *anything* with people we don't know is itself a communitarian move.”

*Wendy Lesser (1997)*

***“I am possibly slightly cynical but I suspect that 90% of the audience do not engage politically when they are watching An Inspector Calls. I think what they are engaging with is the story, and the relationships and the spectacle and just for a moment, during the Inspector's final speech, they will engage with the politics.”***

*Julian Webber (associate director)*



“The Inspector’s final speech is more than a statement. It is also a question which is asked of each member of the audience. There is no hint of the question in the words of the speech, but it is absolutely explicit: how far is it true of this society that we are members of one body?”

*John Braine (1978)*

**“David Hare [the prominent, contemporary playwright] asks why write plays, why not write essays? If you feel something strongly, why not write a piece in The Guardian about it? He concludes that the experience of listening collectively and listening in public with other people is a deeper form of receptivity - you can take more in than if you sit and read an article about it. I think that is true.”**

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

Using the preceding quotations about the play’s political approach, think about the following questions.

- The first production of *An Inspector Calls* was in summer 1945 in Moscow because, Priestley asserted, no suitable theatre was available in Britain. The play was performed in Britain later the same year. Do you think that the location of the première is significant?
- Is the ‘lesson’ of *An Inspector Calls* too simplistic?
- How does Priestley prevent his play from becoming a political diatribe?
- What theatrical techniques does the production use to highlight the social message of Priestley’s drama?
- Do you agree with Julian Webber that most members of a present day audience will only consider the play’s political argument in passing?
- Can you think of any other plays, films or television dramas which have a strong political or social message?
- Do you agree with the playwright David Hare (mentioned above) that listening in public touches us more deeply than simply reading about a subject?
- Some recent party political broadcasts have abandoned ‘talking heads’ in favour of mini-dramas or dramatised sketches. Why do you think this might be?
- Do you think that drama is a proper forum for politics?
- Can a play really make you reconsider your political beliefs?

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# SECTION TWO

## PRODUCING PRIESTLEY'S PLAY

### i. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### POST-SHOW ACTIVITY

Imagine you have the opportunity to interview the director of *An Inspector Calls*. Make a list of five questions which you would ask him, including any elements of the production which puzzled you. Swap question lists with a partner and see if you can imagine what the director's answer to each of your partner's questions might be.

On the next page are director Stephen Daldry's responses to five of the most frequently asked questions about the production. When reading these remember that often there is no right or wrong answer - it can be a matter of individual interpretation. Sometimes the director himself has no firm answer to a question (for instance, see what Stephen Daldry has to say about the small boy in the production). Often audience members can see things in a production which the director or actors had not imagined.



**FAQ 1.**

**Why is the production not set in 'the dining room of a fairly large suburban house' as specified in the stage directions?**

"People often think that the French's acting edition is a record of the first production, but of course the first two productions [of *An Inspector Calls*] were in Moscow. It was those two productions which Priestley liked and enjoyed most of all... Basil Dean who first directed it in Britain put it in a living room: in the first two productions it wasn't in a living room.

"[For] the original production in Moscow... [Priestley] had talked about a big cyclorama\*. Priestley was very keen on painting watercolours of skies, and we talked about whether that might be a good idea, to go for one of these huge skyscapes for our background. I suppose the other thread was that the designer, Ian MacNeil, met someone who had designed *An Inspector Calls* in the 50s at the Malvern Festival. She was very pleased with her beautiful box set\*\* and Priestley went to see it and she asked how he'd liked it and he said 'I never intended it for a box set, I didn't write it for a box set and I wish people would stop doing it in a box set'. So I thought perhaps it would be useful to try to do a production he would have wanted, to try and re-establish him in a more radical tradition."

**FAQ 2.**

**Why the surrounding wasteland?**

"The landscape is important because the Inspector has to get the Birlings out of the house. These people live in one world and it is only when they get into this other landscape - the existential landscape, the wasteland landscape - that anything can possibly happen. But that landscape is a dream landscape: there they can sort out their lives and work out what they are going to do. Ultimately they have to go back into their own little world, but they get this opportunity to glimpse another world. It is a dream landscape where the past, present and future can all exist."

**FAQ 3.**

**Edna the maid has so few lines in Priestley's script, why does she have such a significant role in your production?**

"My thinking about Edna is that she is past, present and future. If anybody is aware of everything, and if anybody has a spiritual dimension, it would be Edna rather than the Inspector. She has somehow always been in this landscape.

"Edna, for me, is a bridge between the two time zones that we're using on stage. She's usually played as a young maid and I felt it was more powerful to have a much older woman, someone who has been with the family a long time so you got a sense of the past, of her seeing from 1912 the potential of the future."

## FAQ 4.

Who is the little boy who appears at the start of the play?

“I don't know who he is. I think he might be the Inspector as a young boy. But I think he is probably me.”

## FAQ 5.

Why does the crowd of people dressed in 1940s clothes appear?

“The Inspector plays with the idea, as Priestley does, that the confessions are public not private. The Inspector is often very anxious about who is on stage and who is not on stage at a particular time.

“In one of the early editions of the play the inspector starts using the word ‘we’ and I could never understand why he switches from ‘I’ to ‘we’. So when he started to say ‘we’ it seemed logical to assume that he was speaking on behalf of a group or a collective of one sort or another. It seemed logical to bring that collective onstage.”

\* *cyclorama* - a curved, white canvas wall around the back of the stage which can be transformed through lighting

\*\* *box set* - a set which simulates three walls and the ceiling of a room

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*Quotations are taken from a 1999 interview with Stephen Daldry and from the Royal National Theatre Platform Papers 3.*



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SECTION TWO ~ PRODUCING PRIESTLEY'S PLAY

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## ii. WHO IS THE INSPECTOR?

*“We needn’t harp on the Inspector’s surname - the play, in any case, spells it out for us. (Literally. We are twice told that his name is G-O-O-L-E, as if to assure us by negation that it is really G-H-O-U-L.) The mistake that Gerald, Arthur and Sybil make is to conclude that if Inspector Goole is indeed a ghost - a fake, a fantasy, a figment of the imagination - then he never existed at all... If he wasn’t a ‘real’ inspector, Inspector Goole was none the less just as real as the Birlings. They are all ghosts, equally.”*

Wendy Lesser (1997)

At the heart of *An Inspector Calls* is the enigmatic Inspector himself. For director, Stephen Daldry, the Inspector’s function in the play is not to provoke guilt but to inspire understanding:

**“If you play *An Inspector Calls* like an Arthur Miller play, where the family is eventually going to tear itself apart in the search for the truth, then the Inspector is a little like a family therapist. The family fight that therapy before they get to understand the truth about themselves. Guilt is not the interesting emotion: what is interesting is how the Inspector helps them all to achieve an emotional understanding of who they are.”**

Although the Inspector may initially appear to be all-knowing and omnipotent, a closer examination of the play shows that he is actually not always entirely in control of events. Stephen Daldry finds it **“interesting how anxious the Inspector seems to be in the first quarter of the play when things seem to be going wrong all the time. The sequence of who he is going to question next seems to be up for grabs. He knows the sequence that he *wants* to ask them in, because it is the sequence in which events actually happened. But he does go out of sequence which, I think, is not what he planned.”**

Several actors have tackled the role of Inspector Goole during the lifetime of the production, and Stephen Daldry believes that there are certain key issues which each actor must tackle in rehearsal. One task for the actor **“is to ask, what does the Inspector know and what doesn’t he know before the play begins? What is in Eva Smith’s diary and what is not in the diary? Deciding what he knows and what he does not know does incredibly change the nature of his questioning.”**

The other key area is to ask what is his relationship with Eva Smith? As Stephen Daldry says, **“Is she just any girl or does he have a more personal relationship with her?”** In this production the Inspector is presented as a representative from Priestley’s 1940s, travelling back in time to warn the Birlings to consider the consequences of their complacent, Edwardian lifestyle. The decision to make the Inspector a visitor from the future opens up some intriguing possibilities in considering precisely who he might be. When planning a film version of the play, Stephen Daldry wondered about making the Inspector **“the result of Eva Smith’s pregnancy”**. This would make Eric his father and Mrs Birling his grandmother. The Inspector’s visit to the family would then be motivated by an attempt to resolve his own family history.

Ultimately, of course, these questions can never be fully resolved. As Stephen Daldry explains, **“In the end what is interesting is that it is subjective because Priestley doesn’t say exactly, so it all depends on interpretation.”**



Stephen Daldry suggests that the actor playing the Inspector needs to consider whether there is a more personal relationship between himself and Eva Smith.

- Do you agree?
- If the actor decided that there was a more personal relationship, how might this affect his performance?
- Can you think of specific moments in the play when this decision would be important in influencing how the action was presented?

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY

Think about Stephen Daldry's idea for a film version of the play, making the Inspector the offspring of Eva Smith and Eric.

- How do you think this idea would work in a film of the play?
- How would it affect the action?
- How might the director of the film demonstrate that the Inspector has a more personal interest in the Birling family and in Eva Smith's death?

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY

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### iii. EXPLORING THEATRICALITY

The radical approach taken by the creative team on this production of *An Inspector Calls* has come as a surprise to some audience members who are familiar with Priestley's text - after all Priestley says nothing about surrounding the house with a wasteland or having Mr Birling use a public phone box to call the hospital. However, lighting designer Rick Fisher argues that the production's more adventurous approach to the text can produce something startlingly original which is still entirely true to Priestley's intentions. He feels that some audience members think that the job of the creative team is to "get a script, often with stage directions in it, and follow them slavishly to try and do what the author wanted. They do not always see that there is another way of looking at things. By a lot of study, work, dreaming and inspiration, you can pull out of a play what is there which maybe you would not find in the more traditional way."

One of the most obviously radical elements of the production is its overt theatricality: the direct addresses to the audience; the false proscenium arch; the red, velvet curtain which tantalisingly falls at crucial moments of the play and has to be coaxed up by the Inspector and his young companion.

Many critics have identified this approach as Brechtian - constantly using alienation techniques to remind the audience that they are sitting in a theatre, watching a fiction. However, the word used most frequently by designer Ian MacNeil when talking about the theatricality of the production is "fun".

#### POST-SHOW ACTIVITY

As a group, make a list of all the elements of this production which emphasise the artifice of the theatrical experience, encouraging the audience to be aware that they are in a theatre. Using your list, look back at Priestley's text to see if you can discover *why* these directorial and design choices might have been made. Is there some textual justification for each of the choices? (This may be something explicit such as a specific line or it may be more implicit, to do with the atmosphere of a scene or the overall intention of speech).

Here are some of the elements which may have appeared on your list.

**The false proscenium arch and velvet curtain** are constructed in every theatre to which the production tours. They were a particular surprise to audiences watching the very first performances of this production which took place at the Lyttleton Theatre in London, a space described by designer Ian MacNeil as "a huge, brutalist 1970s building which lacks the kind of old-fashioned charm which a Victorian or Edwardian theatre has. It was amusing to see the safety curtain go up to reveal a red theatre curtain and a false proscenium at the start of that story."

**The police inspector as theatre director** is a crucial facet of Priestley's play, according to critic Wendy Lesser in her book *A Director Calls* (1997). She argues that "the Inspector himself fills a rôle somewhere between that of a playwright and that



of director. He steers the characters along their predetermined paths, refusing to allow them to wiggle out of their assigned lines ('You have no hope of *not* discussing it, Mrs Birling') and exerting a magnetic pressure on their attention." One technique used in Stephen Daldry's production to highlight the Inspector's directorial rôle is to have him enter and leave the stage via the auditorium. Can you think of other ways in which the production emphasises the Inspector/director parallel?

The **Expressionist set** makes no pretence that the play's events are taking place in a naturalistic environment. It is impossible not to be aware of the set's artifice when Gerald Croft enters down the precarious slope of the collapsed house, crockery tumbling as he staggers down to ground level.

**Illuminating the audience** when the Inspector shouts 'Stop!' at the end of Priestley's second act is a huge theatrical moment. Lighting designer Rick Fisher feels "it is as if God has peeled off the roof of the theatre and switched a big searchlight on to look at these people. We drain all the theatricality out of the event and it is as if someone has just turned the work lights on in the theatre. This is a moment out of time and I think that is quite a satisfying and a jarring moment."

The **false act endings** are a surprise to those familiar with the play's three act structure. As Rick Fisher explains: "Normally the audience would have gone out for their ice creams and would have come back and found that Act Two begins exactly where Act One left off. In our production, once the little boy raises the curtain he sees almost a shadow play of Gerald and Sheila still arguing, silhouetted against a very brightly-lit sky. Then the boy switches us back to the theatrical reality when he switches off the radio, and we go back into the story again." This is perhaps one of the most Brechtian of the theatrical techniques used by the production - reminding us that we are watching a fictional representation of events and making us aware of the artificiality of the three act convention. At the same time we share the little boy's frustration at being excluded from what is developing into a gripping tale.

The **Inspector's direct address to the audience** during his final speech is another crucial and calculated theatrical technique. Stephen Daldry explains his decision on the grounds that "Priestley is a very clear writer: he tells you what the point of the play is. So if he is doing that, why hide it? This is what Priestley intends; it is an authorial voice; it is coming straight out to the audience. So let's stage it that way."

Think about the reasons behind the production's self-conscious theatricality. Some of the quotations which follow may give you some ideas.

- Why are these obviously theatrical elements are used?
- What effect did they have on the audience when you watched the play?
- Did any of these elements enhance your enjoyment or understanding of the play? How?
- Did any of these elements diminish your enjoyment or understanding of the play? Why?
- Ian MacNeil calls theatre "a very, very self-conscious activity". What elements of the theatre building itself and the whole experience of going to the theatre encourage this self-consciousness?



***“When I think about the Theatre, I only wonder when at least some part of our minds will be able to travel in time, to recapture the past that has not really vanished at all, to see the old velvet curtain rising and falling again, to applaud once more the brave players.”***

*J.B.Priestley, quoted by Wendy Lesser (1997)*

“It is a sort of hymn to the theatre. I think Stephen [Daldry]’s greatest skill is to continue to see the world through the eyes of a child. Starting the play like a movie, with a child finding another world. It is like Narnia. In our lives there are little, magic doors which take us into other places and the theatre is one of those doors.”

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

***“In Daldry’s hands, An Inspector Calls becomes not only a play about poverty and wealth, chance and responsibility, isolation and community; it also becomes a play about how our world overlaps with and differs from the world of theatrical characters.”***

*Wendy Lesser (1997)*

“The theatre is a very self-conscious environment: you experience things in parallel; you are aware of the rest of the audience; you are very aware of being in a public place. It is fun. Theatre is a huge pleasure.”

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

***“A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”***

*Bertolt Brecht,*

*A Short Organum for the Theatre, trans John Willet (1978)*

“A strong Brechtian flavour infuses both Priestley’s script and Daldry’s production. A contemporary political commentary set as if in another era; characters who seem primarily ‘moved by social impulses’ rather than their own idiosyncratic personalities; an emphatically artificial atmosphere that makes it ‘harder for our spectator to identify with’ those characters - all of these elements are built into *An Inspector Calls*.”

*Wendy Lesser (1997)*



## iv. FILM FACTS

“ Film language is really rich in conveying ideas through visual means and a good film often has very few words in it. Pure film is a kind of weird intersection between image and word.”

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

By the 1940s, the time when Priestley was writing *An Inspector Calls*, even Hollywood had been touched by the influence of the Expressionist movement from the early part of the century. Films of the era - particularly *film noir* - and the subsequent work of directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, made full use of Expressionist techniques and approaches. According to designer Ian MacNeil, the resulting films “gave an expression to the unease of the twentieth century. So *The Third Man* or Humphrey Bogart movies are about unease and discomfort and anxiety and contemporary living.”

By making reference to these familiar film noir images in the design of the production, Ian feels that the play works on the audience in what he calls a “visceral” way - whether or not we recognise the film images, they help us to tap into an immediate mood. “I’ve nothing against words but it is great to use other means to convey fear - sometimes words are inadequate. So we use the *Vertigo* music and some of the imagery from *Psycho* just as an associational thing to tap into. It is a kind of currency of anxiety and fear which we all share. The more you get good at it, the more people feel and hopefully the more they hear the play.”

Look out for some of these cinematic references in the production:

- The **cinema screen sky** which, explains lighting designer Rick Fisher, “very consciously has a black border at the top and one at the bottom. We wanted it to be like a big cinema screen and we wanted it to feel very filmic, to extend beyond what little set you could put on stage.”
- The **Birling’s house**, precariously balanced on stilts, high above the wasteland which surrounds it, bears a remarkable resemblance to the house of horror in Alfred Hitchcock’s shocking 1960 film, *Psycho*.
- The **eerie music which emerges from the radio** is the only musical element not composed especially for the production. It is taken from Bernard Herrmann’s score for Hitchcock’s 1958 thriller *Vertigo*.
- The **Inspector’s first entrance** pays homage to one of the most characteristic images of *film noir*. Dressed in a trench coat and with his trilby hat pulled down over his face, the Inspector stands beneath a lamp-post to light a cigarette. His shadow is cast across the whole set, conjuring up immediate associations with 1940s cinema.

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# SECTION THREE BEHIND THE SCENES

## i. IN REHEARSAL

Director Stephen Daldry feels that the danger for productions of *An Inspector Calls* is they can become overly reflective and consequently lacking in energy: “What characters tend to do onstage is to report offstage, historical action. That is when the play feels heavy.” To solve this problem “you have to get rid of reflective acting and put the action into the present so that the only *real* action which is happening is the dominant *onstage* action between the characters.” For Stephen Daldry, “the most interesting thing which is happening is not necessarily the Birling family trying to recall their relationships with Eva Smith, it is what the dynamic on stage is at that moment: *how* they are explaining their relationship or don’t want to explain it; or *how* they are fighting with the other people on stage as they try to tell, or avoid telling, their story.”

Take the start of the Inspector’s questions to Gerald Croft as an example. The exchange between the Inspector and Gerald begins as follows:

INSPECTOR: When and where did you first meet her?

GERALD: All right, if you must have it. I met her first, some time in March last year, in the stalls bar at the Palace.

*An Inspector Calls, p.34*

Stephen Daldry argues that “the play goes dead if Gerald, for no reason except that the Inspector is asking the question, suddenly gets lost in the reverie of trying to remember who Eva Smith was and what his relationship with her was. That means the action is offstage and reflective and past-historic.” However if the director tells the actors that “this scene is *not* about Eva Smith, it is about how much Gerald wants to admit to the Inspector, then all the action is in the present.”

The question which the actor playing Gerald must ask himself is “how much at the moment is he prepared to tell the other person on stage? It is certainly not the whole story. Gerald has a *version* of the truth, based on the assumption that the Inspector does not know he was keeping Eva Smith as a mistress. On this basis he met her, she was hungry, he looked after her, and he was a knight in shining armour. That is his selling line.” With this question in mind, Gerald’s reply - ‘All right, if you must have it’ - becomes an aggressive action to the Inspector, saying ‘I have done nothing wrong. I have no guilt’. And you add into that a whole series of class antagonisms about *why* Gerald has to answer this question: why he should even be asked this question and especially why he should be asked it in public. If you do this then the action stays firmly in the present.”

*For details of how to make use of this technique in rehearsal, look at Section Four: Practical Approaches, exercise f.*



## ii. COLLABORATIVE THEATRE

One popular image of film and theatre directors is of a dictatorial egomaniac, issuing orders to frightened minions. In practice very few directors live up to this image, least of all Stephen Daldry who takes pride in his collaborative way of working. The creative team on this production have worked together on many occasions. Here are a few of their comments about the process of working collaboratively.

***“If you were to ask the creative team whose idea many of the things were, I think none of us could tell. We know that we came to a lot of the ideas together and then we just fed off each other, tried different things out and made it better.”***

*Rick Fisher (lighting designer)*

“I tend to work very collaboratively. The only thing I think I do is try and create a context in which people can do something wild. . . . That seems to be the proper role of the director really, to take anything from anywhere if it's of use. If somebody's motoring, then clear the motorway and let them go.”

*Stephen Daldry (director), quoted by David Tushingham (1994)*

***“Without a piece of text or an image I find it hard to start as a composer. I do not know if composers can be divided into ‘collaborative’ composers and ‘pure’ composers whose ideas spring just from their imagination, but I certainly get the most stimulation and the most ideas when I am working on a rich seam of material. I like the idea of theatre or film being something where lots of different imaginations come together.”***

*Stephen Warbeck (composer)*

“Stephen [Daldry] goes into a rehearsal room and deals with actors while I go and talk to carpenters, costume makers and painters. But ultimately we are doing the same thing - trying to achieve the same thing.”

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

***“There are certain times when I might have written something and I will fight very hard before changing it. If someone is trying to change something which you feel is right for that moment, then you will hold out longer for that. You are not an entire pushover doing exactly what somebody else wants you to do.”***

*Stephen Warbeck (composer)*



“On a good day you feel like a writer - you have all these feelings and emotions. How can you get them out? How can you give expression to them? Words are not my medium so I have to find another way. Wood, people, bits of fabric are storytelling tools. I find it quite hard to do but it is very gratifying: the idea that people will feel something about what they are looking at, rather than simply being impressed by it.”

*Ian MacNeil (designer)*

**“Deadlines can be stimulating because you know you just have to do it!”**

*Stephen Warbeck (composer)*

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY

Read through the preceding quotations about collaborative theatre. In groups of three or more, discuss the following questions:

- ❑ What do you think the advantages of working collaboratively might be?
- ❑ What about the disadvantages?
- ❑ What kind of ‘ground rules’ for collaboration might be necessary when working on a theatrical production?
- ❑ What do you think that the rôle of the director is in this process?
- ❑ How do you think that the collaborative process might be different if you are working on a new play by a living writer?
- ❑ Do you think that this production of *An Inspector Calls* reflects the collaborative working methods of the creative team?
- ❑ Does it matter to an audience how the production has been put together?
- ❑ By discussing these questions in a group you have been working collaboratively. Can you draw any general conclusions about the collaborative process from your own experiences?

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### iii. TRICKS OF THE TRADE

When you watch the production, look out for some of the following theatrical techniques and approaches.

#### Musical Points of View

Composer Stephen Warbeck wanted the music to be “part of the conscience of the play”, showing the Inspector’s perspective on events rather than those of the Birling family. He explains that he “decided early on that the music should not respond to the thin veneers of the Birling family or to the formality of their life and their social interests. You could have little Edwardian bits of music but we wanted the music to be part of the heart of the play; part of the wider world which comes in and throws the Birlings’ world up in the air.”

#### Creative Costumes

Sheila has two identical dresses, one of which is immaculate, and one of which is ‘broken down’ or treated to make it look torn and soiled. Once the destruction of the Birling family begins, the actress playing Sheila changes into the second dress. This helps to create a visual impression of how the family members have been forced to engage with the harsh realities of the world around them.

#### Musical Inspirations

While composing the music for *An Inspector Calls*, Stephen Warbeck sought inspiration from European music of the mid-twentieth century. Particularly influential were the works of the Austrian composer Schoenberg (1874 - 1951) and the French composer Messiaen (1908-1992) whose *Quartet for the End of Time* was written and performed in a concentration camp in 1940. Stephen Warbeck feels that “that bit of the century created some very wonderful, pained and very serious music”.

#### Side Lights

Rick Fisher’s lighting design makes use of side lighting - more common in dance productions than in theatre. This technique allows Rick to “light the people very brightly but still keep the dark, foreboding atmosphere, which is one of the things which is central to the whole interrogation style of the piece”.

#### Selecting Instruments

The original Royal National Theatre production of *An Inspector Calls* at the Lyttleton Theatre in 1992 had a budget for only two instruments. Composer Stephen Warbeck chose the piano because “it is such a flexible instrument” and the cello because he wanted something “very emotional and very passionate, yearning, moving and painful”. When the production moved to the larger Olivier Theatre two further musicians were added - a trumpet player and a percussionist. For Stephen Warbeck the trumpet gave “the potential for a slightly militaristic atmosphere and, used muted, it can be like a knife that cuts through the other sounds”.

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After you have seen the production, think about the following questions.

- ❑ Can you remember specific moments from the production when music played an important rôle in influencing the atmosphere or mood?
- ❑ Do you feel that the decision to use musical styles from the 1940s rather than from 1912 works in this production?
- ❑ Imagine you are composing music for *An Inspector Calls*. The available budget will run to only two musicians. Which two instruments would you select and why?

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## iv. THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

This production of *An Inspector Calls* first opened at the Royal National Theatre in 1992. Since then it has enjoyed phenomenal success in both Britain and the United States. But why has the production been so successful? The show's creative team offer their answers to this question.

### Stephen Daldry (director)

*"I think the play is very successful because it has a very strong forward narrative and it is very dynamic. It is still a surprising play and if you play it emotionally, it is a very unusual play. The characters do tear each other apart in a very emotionally-charged way. It is a romantic play - it is connected with a yearning for a different sort of society."*

### Stephen Warbeck (composer)

"The play was written for a very specific political purpose which was to encourage people to return a Labour government in 1945. And the play succeeded (though maybe not on its own!). What Stephen [Daldry, director] and all of us were doing was enabling a play to break free of its specifics, notably the specific of what the play was doing when it was written, and the specific of its Edwardian setting. Somehow, through skill and good luck, a successful freeing of a piece of literature from where it is moored in time took place. As a theatrical experience, I think people find it exciting thing to see a well-made play break free of these boundaries and become an exciting piece of theatre which uses the language of theatre fully. This production is not afraid to use any of the aspects of theatre technique to make its point."

### Rick Fisher (lighting designer)

*"The opening images are still the best five minutes you are going to have in a theatre anywhere. And I think that makes you sit up and listen to what people say in a very fresh and exciting way."*

### Ian MacNeil (designer)

"The play is very redemptive. The possibility for personal change is very great - the play allows for that. And it is a good night out - the writing is very skilled. Fun, scary, funny, moving, a bit of an emotional roller-coaster - what more do you want?"



# SECTION FOUR PRACTICAL APPROACHES

“ A play that has never found a theatre, actors, audiences, is not really a play at all.”

*J.B.Priestley (1948)*

The following practical drama exercises are intended to encourage students to explore the processes of rehearsal, helping them to appreciate an actor’s approach to character, to share a director’s thoughts about the script and to understand the theatricality of the play.

Many of the exercises can be used on their own to examine particular issues raised by the play and to stimulate discussion about the production. Alternatively, the different activities can be used together to build a structured practical workshop or series of workshops.

The exercises are equally suitable for those studying the play and those who have seen the production but not read the text. Some exercises can be undertaken in a relatively confined classroom space; others would benefit from the greater space of a studio or school hall.



## a) FAMILY ALBUMS

Divide the class into groups of six. Every person in the group should take on the rôle of a different character from the play (including Edna but not including the Inspector). Each group needs to create three, still photographs - all the characters appear in all three photographs.

*The first photograph* is taken before the events presented in the play begin. It shows how the family would like to be seen - the kind of photograph which they would be happy to have on the mantelpiece for any visitors to see.

*The second photograph*, which should be far more expressionistic, shows how they *really* feel about themselves and about the rest of the family before the play begins. Urge the groups to be quite bold when creating the second photograph, trying to communicate as much information as possible in their still image.

*The third photograph* is taken after the end of the play - before the arrival of the second police inspector.

Stress that the photographs are not attempts to 'stage' a scene but are intended to uncover the truth about each of the characters - how they behave in public and how they feel inside. If the class has already seen the production, try to discourage them from re-creating the images which they have seen - it is their own ideas which count in this exercise.

Share all of the completed tableaux with the rest of the class, encouraging the class to discuss the images. You might find the following questions useful in shaping the discussion:

- How did particular relationships differ in photographs 1 and 2?
- How much of the public façade remains in photograph 3?
- Who was in the centre of each image and who was at the edge? Why?
- Did some characters change more than others in the different photographs?
- Were any characters more difficult to include? What might this tell us about those characters?



## b) TALKING PICTURES

To take the **Family Albums** exercise a stage further, ask each member of the group to imagine what their character might wish for at the start of the play and at the end of the play and to express their ideas in sentences beginning *"I wish..."*. For example one student might decide that in photograph two Gerald Croft would say, *"I wish Sheila would stop harping on about last summer"* and in photograph three he might say, *"I wish I'd never got caught up with the Birling family - perhaps I could have been happy with Daisy Renton?"*.

When a group shows its second and third photographs to the class, while the students are holding the still image, ask one or two characters to tell us their wishes. The watching students might then be able to suggest ways of adapting the photograph to ensure that each character's secret wish can be hinted at.

Remember to stress that there are not necessarily any right or wrong answers - different actors might interpret the same character in different ways - but all ideas must have a root in the play text.

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## c) READ ALL ABOUT IT

This is another exercise to explore character in a physical way. Each student chooses a character from the play (it can be the same character they played in the **Family Albums** exercise) and pairs up with someone who has chosen a different character. The students should imagine that, before the start of the play, their character comes across a newspaper report, with a photograph, about the horrific death of Eva Smith/Daisy Renton. This is the first time that they have heard of the death.

Each student has a turn at showing their partner a short improvisation of the moment when the newspaper report is read by their character. (Students may find it useful to have a 'prop' newspaper to use). Whether or not they choose to use words in their improvisation, students should try to capture the physicality of the character's response - they should think about their character's body language and facial expressions, both before and after the newspaper report is read.

Encourage the students to imagine the circumstances of the reading, as well as the character's reactions. These may be different for different characters. For example, Mr Birling might be sitting down to read the paper after dinner; Sheila may catch sight of the photograph while passing a newspaper vendor; Edna may glance at the newspaper article when she is tidying the drawing room. The circumstances of the reading - whether the place is public or private, for instance - may affect the character's reactions.

While one student tries the improvisation in rôle, their partner observes and afterwards comments on how far they succeeded in communicating the character's feelings. Try to encourage students to give their partner positive suggestions of how the character's response could be made more convincing. The performer should try the scene again, taking on board their partner's comments.

When both partners have had a turn, try the exercise again. Use the same characters but this time imagine that the newspaper report is an old one, and that the character has come upon it, a year *after* the Inspector's visit. See how their reactions have changed now that they have full knowledge of their rôle in Eva Smith's death, and are able to look back on the experience of the Inspector's visit with a sense of perspective.

Once again think about the circumstances of the reading; perhaps Mrs Birling finds the cutting in her diary, while Gerald comes across an old newspaper in the garage. After the students have tried this exercise, ask them how and why their character's response may be different this time?

This can be a very revealing exercise about the structure of the play as well as about the individual characters. Edna, for instance, would probably have no strong emotional response to seeing a newspaper report of a dead woman whom she does not know. But a year after the Inspector's visit, she may realise how the death of this unknown woman has changed the life of the whole Birling family, and respond to the newspaper article quite differently. Encourage the class to share their different discoveries, perhaps showing some of the improvisations to the whole group.



## d) CONFESSIONS

“ In a good theatrical production we are offered a piece of life so shaped and coloured and contrived that everything in it, down to the smallest detail, is significant... A startled look, a cough, a turn of the head, none of these is accidental and each has its own significance.”

*J.B.Priestley (1947)*

Ask the students to think about different circumstances in which a ‘confession’ might be made. Examples might include

- a police interview room
- a daughter owing up to her mother or father
- a law court
- friends chatting over coffee
- a confessional
- a child confessing to a headteacher
- a therapist’s consulting rooms
- a television show (eg. Vanessa or The Jerry Springer Show)

Look at Sheila’s confession to her involvement in the sacking of Eva Smith from her job at Milwards (from p.22 “*You knew it was me all the time, didn’t you?...*” to p.24 “*...It’s too late. She’s dead.*”) Working in pairs, the students should experiment with staging an alternative setting for Sheila’s confession. Depending upon the setting each pair selects, the Inspector’s lines can be transferred to another appropriate questioner (a lawyer, a priest etc) while the lines spoken by Eric and Gerald can be omitted.

When working on this scene, encourage the class to take note of the above quotation from J.B.Priestley’s Theatre Outlook. Students should think about the relationship between the actors and audience, and about the layout of their ‘set’ (even the placing of a single chair can be important); as well as about the delivery of their lines.

Show some of the stagings to the rest of the class and ask the students to consider the following questions:

- ❑ Which of the alternative settings made most sense of the confession?
- ❑ Do these alternative settings suggest any different ways in which the rôle of Sheila could be played?
- ❑ What choices did the director and actors make in the production about this section of the play?
- ❑ Can you think of reasons for these choices?
- ❑ Think about what discoveries you have made through this exercise and consider how they may support or contradict the following two quotations from the play’s director, Stephen Daldry:

*“The Inspector plays with the idea, as Priestley does, that the confessions are public not private. The Inspector is often very anxious about who is on stage and who is not on stage at a particular time.”*

*“The play is essentially a process of self-revelation which the Inspector enables them to have. It is self-revelation rather than simple guilt - guilt is not the interesting emotion. What is interesting is how the Inspector helps them to achieve an emotional understanding of who they are.”*



## e) SPEECH MAKING

This exercise encourages students to re-discover the passion which lies under the calm surface of Priestley's play. One student volunteers to play the Inspector and to read the Inspector's long, final speech from p.55 "*Stop! And be quiet for a moment...*" to p.56 "*...fire and blood and anguish. Good night*". For the purposes of this exercise, look only at the Inspector's words, ignoring the brief comments from the other characters.

The Inspector reads the speech aloud to the rest of the class with as much passion as possible. As the Inspector is speaking, the other students should talk amongst themselves - not to drown out the voice of the Inspector completely, but loud enough to make the Inspector struggle to be heard. It will help if you give the class a context for their background talk - they could, perhaps, be upper class Edwardian characters making polite conversation over dinner. On a given signal the background chatter cuts out, allowing the Inspector to complete the speech. Listen out for the urgency in the Inspector's voice and the additional commitment which the reader gives to the lines.

Try the speech again with a different volunteer to read the Inspector's words. This time, the class should listen to the speech but should heckle, disputing points raised or arguing with the sentiments expressed. Again, on a given signal, the heckling stops dead and the Inspector continues.

After trying the speech in both ways, you might wish to think about some of the following questions:

- Can the class hear an additional urgency in the Inspector's voice after the reader has battled with the background noise?
- Does this add anything to the speech?
- Did the experience of being ignored or heckled change the readers' feelings about what they were saying?
- How did they adapt their delivery to cope with the noise or the heckling?
- Does this delivery of the speech reveal any climactic moments in the writing?
- Does it stimulate any discoveries about the character of the Inspector himself?
- Think back to how this speech was delivered in the production. Do you agree with the choices made by the director and actors?

Try the same exercises with some other long speeches from the play. You could use Mr Birling's dinner table speech (pp. 6-7) or Gerald's admission that he knew Daisy Renton (pp.36-37).

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## f) SCENE STUDY

This exercise allows students to experiment with some very basic approaches to 'actioning' a scene. This technique should allow them to discover how subtle character shifts can be marked in the text and how to avoid what director Stephen Daldry calls "reflective acting". This exercise is quite a challenging one for students and you should allow plenty of time for them to work on it. Before beginning make sure that you have read **Section 3.i** In Rehearsal.

Select a scene from the play - a scene of around one and a half pages is probably best. Some suitable scenes might be:

- The Inspector's arrival  
from p.10 Edna, "*Please, sir, an inspector's called...*" to p.11 Eric "*My God!*".
- Sheila and Gerald's conversation alone  
from p.25 Sheila, "*Well, Gerald?*" to p.26 Sheila, "*... You'll see. You'll see*".
- Gerald's confession  
from p.34 the Inspector, "*When and where did you first meet her? ...*" to p.35 Sheila, "*You wait, Mother*".
- Mrs Birling's interview  
from p. 43 Sheila, "*He's probably just gone to cool off...*" to p.44 the Inspector "*You have no hope of not discussing it, Mrs Birling*".

Divide the class into groups - there should be at least as many students in each group as characters in the selected scene. The group's first task is to read the scene aloud, trying to get as much sense of character as possible into their delivery of the lines.

Each group then begins to examine their scene in close detail. They should divide the scene into sections or units. Each unit marks an important shift in the scene - perhaps the mood changes, the balance of power shifts, or the focus of the scene alters. Remember that a unit might start or finish in the middle of a speech.

Having divided the scene into units, the group gives a brief title to each unit. The titles are a way of identifying quite specifically what is going on in each section. Unit titles for the scene portraying the Inspector's arrival might include 'Mr Birling is interrupted', 'Mr Birling tries to impress', 'The Inspector takes charge'.

Once the units have been given titles, the group goes through the scene line by line. Each unit is broken down into 'actions'. An action gives the character's intention for each line. The action must be expressed as an active verb (eg. to annoy, to flirt, to provoke, to probe, to retaliate etc); it cannot be passive (eg. to be pleased, to be flattered, to be anxious).

Whilst they are 'actioning' the scene students will find themselves making interpretive choices, disagreeing over a character's intentions and debating precisely the right word to express the intention of the line. It is important for them to discover that interpretative decisions can vary widely and may markedly affect the way in which the scene is played.

You might find this example useful to show the students what they are aiming for. Some of the choices of 'actions' in this example are deliberately provocative - perhaps the group can offer alternative suggestions?



**UNIT: MR BIRLING TRIES TO IMPRESS**

BIRLING: (TO SEEK INFORMATION) You're new, aren't you?

INSPECTOR: (TO CONFIRM) Yes, sir. (TO JUSTIFY) Only recently transferred.

BIRLING: (TO PATRONISE) I thought you must be. (TO IMPRESS) I was an alderman for years - and Lord Mayor two years ago - (TO WARN) and I'm still on the Bench - so I know the Brumley police officers pretty well - and I thought I'd never seen you before.

INSPECTOR: (TO AGREE) Quite so.

BIRLING: (TO HURRY ALONG) Well, what can I do for you? Some trouble about a warrant?

**UNIT: THE INSPECTOR TAKES CHARGE**

Inspector: (TO CHALLENGE) No, Mr Birling.

*An Inspector Calls, p.11*

When the scenes are fully 'actioned' it is time for performance. Each group should read their scene aloud to the class, announcing each action before reading the line which follows. Readers should ensure that, having announced the action, their reading of the line which follows does reflect the intentions which they have identified.

It is particularly interesting to juxtapose two groups' readings of the same scene and to compare the choices which each group has made.

Students should also think about how their final reading in front of the class differed from their initial group read-through. Have they made any interesting discoveries about any of the characters? Have they discovered any moments of crisis in the scene which were not initially apparent?



# SECTION FIVE

## SELECTED FURTHER READING

**Brome, Vincent, *J.B. Priestley*** (Hamish Hamilton, 1988)

One of the more readable biographies of Priestley, detailing his literary, political and personal life.

**Lesser, Wendy, *A Director Calls: Stephen Daldry and the Theatre***

(Faber and Faber, 1997)

A fascinating exploration of Stephen Daldry's directing work, including a detailed analysis of his production of *An Inspector Calls*.

**Priestley, J.B., *An Inspector Calls*** (Heinemann Plays, 1992)

Specially designed with GCSE students in mind, this edition includes a clear introduction as well as points of discussion and suggestions for writing.

**Priestley, J.B., *Time and the Conways and Other Plays*** (Penguin, 1969)

An affordable anthology of Priestley's key 'time plays' including *Time and the Conways*, *I Have Been Here Before* and *The Linden Tree* as well as *An Inspector Calls*.

***Platform Papers 3: Directors*** (Royal National Theatre Publications)

Transcripts of interviews with theatre directors including Stephen Daldry. Only available from the Royal National Theatre's bookshop.

**Other books consulted in the preparation of this pack include:-**

Atkins, John, *J.B. Priestley: The Last of the Sages* (John Calder, 1981)

Braine, John, *J.B. Priestley* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978)

Collins, Diana, *Time and the Priestleys* (Alan Sutton, 1994)

Cooper, Susan, *J.B. Priestley, Portrait of an Author* (Heinemann, 1970)

Dunne, J.W., *The New Immortality* (Faber and Faber, 1938)

Nightingale, Benedict, *Fifty Modern British Plays* (Heinemann, 1982)

Priestley, J.B., *Literature and Western Man* (Heinemann, 1960)

Priestley, J.B., *Theatre Outlook* (Nicolson and Watson, 1947)

Priestley, J.B., *Plays*, vol. 1 (Heinemann, 1948)

Tushingham, David, ed. *Live 1: Food for the Soul* (Methuen, 1994)

Willet, John, ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (Methuen, 1978)



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