

# J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*: Class injustice and a muted, stifled cry of despair

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*An Inspector Calls* by the National Theatre finished its run across the north of England recently at the Alhambra theatre in Bradford.

The play is the best known of the 39 stories and plays by author, playwright and broadcaster, J.B. Priestley. His other works may have justifiably fallen from favour thanks to their inability to speak past their time, but *An Inspector Calls* (written and first performed in 1945) has a certain significance and is more enduring.

## *An Inspector Calls*

In the fictional industrial town of Brumley, in 1912, the upper-middle class Birling family are celebrating their daughter's engagement to the son of a rival industrial magnate. Factory-owning family head, Arthur Birling (Jeffrey Harmer), pontificates on "self-reliance" and "looking after one's own," and the bright future ahead, including potential inclusion in the next honours list.

The mood changes when the brooding, methodical Inspector Goole (an excellent Liam Brennan) arrives to investigate the suicide of Eva Smith, a former employee at Birling's factory. Birling eventually admits firing Eva after she led a strike of women workers for equal pay, but denies any responsibility for her death. This sets the pattern for Goole's other interviews. All the family had contact with Eva, they collectively ruined her life, but they deny responsibility for her death.

Birling's daughter, Sheila (Chloe Orrock) had been served by Eva in a department store. After Smith smiled when Sheila was trying on a dress that did not suit her, Sheila and her mother intimated that if Eva was not dismissed, they would take their custom elsewhere.

Eva, destitute, had turned to prostitution. Sheila's fiancé Gerald (Simon Cotton) met her, gave her money and moved her into a friend's empty flat. Sheila breaks off their engagement when Goole gets Gerald to confess to his relationship with Eva.

Arthur's wife, Sybil (Christine Kavanagh), is patron of a charity for women in trouble. She had rejected appeals for help from Eva, now pregnant. Sybil blamed Eva for being irresponsible, telling her to seek help from the "drunken young man" who got her pregnant.

Everyone but Sybil realises this must be Sheila's older brother, Eric (George Rowlands), who breaks down and confesses. After a drunken binge he raped Eva, then stole from the family business to support her. Eva refused the money.

The Birlings descend into angry recriminations.

They have a brief moment of hope on learning that no Inspector Goole is employed at the police station, and no suicide has been reported. Relieved that they are just victims of a hoax, Sheila and Eric suggest the family use the experience to atone for past "sins." Their parents dismiss this as misplaced youthful "idealism."

And then the phone rings. A female worker has been admitted to the

infirmary, and an inspector will call...

There have been various interpretations of Priestley's conclusion: either someone with inside knowledge was tipping the family off, or Goole's "visitation" was an almost supernatural warning to make amends before it is too late.

One key element in the play is its hindsight. Written in the aftermath of World War Two, and set in the context of the development of World War One, the play's characters exemplify the political blindness of ruling class circles in Britain and across Europe when the evidence of social catastrophe is there to be read by anyone with eyes. Arthur's sermonising explicitly rejects the likelihood of a war Priestley's audience knew had occurred—and had been repeated.

After his investigation, Goole's final and most significant speech refers directly to the coming war: "But just remember this. One Eva Smith has gone—but there are millions and millions and millions of Eva Smiths and John Smiths left with us, with their lives, their hopes and fears, their suffering and a chance of happiness, all intertwined with our lives and what we think and say and do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish. Good night."

These are lines that would have reverberated even more powerfully when the play was first staged in 1945. With no suitable British venue apparently available, it received its premiere in the Soviet Union, at Moscow's Kamerny Theatre and Leningrad's Comedy Theatre. Its first British production was in 1946, with a young Alec Guinness playing Eric Birling.

## Priestley

John Boyton Priestley (1894-1984) was born in the former textile city of Bradford and much of his later fiction bore the mark of his Yorkshire background.

Priestley served in the army during World War One. Badly wounded in June 1916, when he was buried alive by a trench mortar, he later also suffered the effects of poison gas.

After the war he built a reputation as an essayist and critic, becoming well known with *The Good Companions* (1929). More popular with readers than critics, his third novel—about a travelling music hall troupe—dated badly. It suffered by comparison, for example, with the work of the "Angry Young Men" playwrights of the 1950s. John Osborne's *The Entertainer* also used a vaudeville performer, but for a more direct portrayal of the state of society.

During the Second World War, Priestley broadcast nightly the *Postscript* on the BBC. The broadcasts—which were variously credited with stiffening civilian morale during the Battle of Britain

and popularising the need for a post-war welfare state—reached a peak audience of 16 million in 1941 (second only to the addresses of wartime prime minister Winston Churchill) before the government pulled the plug.

Priestley was widely condemned by other writers both for his popular success and for his middle class provincialism. Virginia Woolf called him “the tradesman of letters,” while George Orwell derided “the Priestleyan assumption that ‘real life’ means lower-middle-class life in a large town and that if you have packed into your novel, say, fifty-three descriptions of tea in a Lyons Corner House, you have done the trick.”

Graham Greene wrote that Priestley “became in the months after Dunkirk a leader second only in importance to Mr Churchill. And he gave us what our other leaders have always failed to give us—an ideology.”

In 1940, Priestley criticised his former friend George Bernard Shaw’s support of Joseph Stalin: “Shaw presumes that his friend Stalin has everything under control. Well, Stalin may have made special arrangements to see that Shaw comes to no harm, but the rest of us in Western Europe do not feel quite so sure of our fate, especially those of us who do not share Shaw’s curious admiration for dictators.”

In 1942, Priestley co-founded the Common Wealth Party. Well within the safe confines of the parliamentary Labourite politics of the time, it called for public ownership of land, greater democracy and a new “morality” in politics. Even this was enough for Orwell to include Priestley’s name on a 1949 list of artists deemed “fellow travellers” of the Stalinist Communist Party.

Priestley lived through some of the most momentous events of the 20th century; two world wars, the Russian Revolution, the British General Strike, the hungry 30s and the rise of Fascism. His engagement with these colossal events and their social implications never seems to have risen above vague social democratic conceptions.

Overtly political writings such as *The Arts under Socialism* (1947) express the most tepid reformism. His evident aspiration for something fairer—he was a founding member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, for example—never went beyond that “ideology” identified by Greene, even though he was clearly interested in bigger artistic questions. *Literature and Western Man* (1960) was a 500-page survey of western literature up to the 1930s—which in passing does distinguish between the toleration of artistic innovation in the Soviet Union under Lenin and its bureaucratic suppression under Stalin. Priestley thought Lenin “conservative in his literary taste” but “far more tolerant than his successors: if he could not appreciate all the new experimental writing and theatre work, he did not dictate to the poets and producers what they should do.”

*An Inspector Calls* is essentially a morality tale, told within the strict confines of the prevailing morals of the presently existing bourgeois class society. But, as Trotsky explained, morals and morality are not absolute. They are informed by class interests. Goole’s mission is to warn the Birlings to change their ways before it is too late, and resume their social positions with “improved” morals.

Even reading Priestley’s conclusion as implying a social reckoning does not stretch to upsetting the existing social structure.

The working class is present throughout his work, but not in the foreground. Working class characters, like the Birlings’ maid Edna (Frances Campbell), are not there to express themselves but to be acted upon by a kind of paternalistic sentimentality. Goole’s final

speech is actually a cross-class appeal for sympathy for the pathetic downtrodden.

### Daldry’s Production

*An Inspector Calls* remains Priestley’s best-known work. There was a notable 1954 film by Guy Hamilton, starring Alastair Sim. More recently, Aisling Walsh directed a decent 2015 television adaptation with David Thewlis as Goole.

The play fell from favour for decades, having been identified as the type of middle-class drawing-room play that had been overtaken by the “kitchen-sink” dramas of the 1950s/60s.

Its return to favour owes much to director Stephen Daldry, who in 1992 revived Priestley’s dissection of class injustice under capitalism. Daldry’s revival has been seen worldwide by more than 4 million theatregoers. There is evidently as receptive an audience as ever to hear confirmation that the wealthy in capitalist society are often also blessed with the characteristics of lying, cheating, hypocrisy and brutishness.

With whatever limitations, Daldry has long been interested in historical and political questions. With his undeniable talents and consistently creditable casts, Daldry has created an often highly engaging production which has deservedly endured.

Ian MacNeil’s clever set design powerfully contrasts the Birling mansion with the squalor outside it. Daldry has Goole at all times outside the mansion, addressing the audience directly and establishing a genuine connection. It is little wonder that the production has continued to strike a chord with audiences over the last 30 years.

A significant proportion of the audience has been young people, as the play appears regularly on the GCSE syllabus for 15/16-year-olds across England. Many recent polls have indicated a leftward turn among this layer: one recent British poll found that 67 percent would like to live in a “socialist economic system” and at least 75 percent viewed climate change and Britain’s housing crisis as problems specifically associated with capitalism. The play’s appeal is clear.

An observant young viewer would be able to discern a half-articulated cry of despair at the present conditions of the world in the play, but one that is muted and soon stifled. Despite Daldry’s commendable achievements with Priestley’s play, is it not high time, someone might ask, to take this material into the modern world? There are now billions of “Smiths,” not millions, struggling to feed their families as their toil fattens the profits of corporate magnates who make the Birlings of yesteryear seem like impoverished upstarts, in a society offering no future to the youth, and on the precipice of another world war.



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