**An Inspector Calls**

From Stephen Daldry, the Oscar-nominated Director of The Reader, The Hours and Billy Elliot, comes the multi award-winning West End production of J.B. Priestley’s classic thriller, An Inspector Calls.

The production features one dramatic and impressive set. When the Opera House curtain rises we see, immediately behind it, another theatre curtain and a proscenium arch – so that it’s almost like a theatre within a theatre. The curtain is deep red, heavy velveteen material with thick gold fringes along the bottom.

When that curtain rises we are looking at a stark and desolate set, a sort of wasteland. It’s a cobblestone street, at first rolling with fog and wet with rain. To the left is a red phone box with the glass panes broken and a tall gas lamp beside it. Illuminating the back of the stage is a screen, like a cinema screen, showing a film of a dark, stormy sky with turbulent clouds and sparse glimpses of sunlight coming through. The notes I have read about this production say the screen is deliberately filmic with broad black bands at the top and the bottom, to extend the drama beyond the little set you can fit on a stage.

The most eye catching and extraordinary thing on the set is the Birling’s house. It’s right in the centre of the stage and is raised up off the floor so that it seems to balance precariously on stilts. Where the house rises up, the cobbles have been torn back, like the house has erupted from the ground. The house is at head height of the characters on the street below.

It’s a grand, two story, sandstone house with a turret or attic room perched on top. The house is shaped like an old style flat iron, with the front door at the point at the forefront and four windows on either side stretching towards the back of the stage as the house widens out.

The house deliberately appears imposing and sinister, designed the notes say, to resemble the house in Hitchcock’s Psycho. Black, wrought iron railings surround the door.

The door and the house aren’t full size, to fit on the stage, and characters inside the house must stoop low to use the door. But the house is constructed like a dolls house, so that it can open right up. The house splits open, the front door pivoting on hinges to the left, so the point of the house is folded back to reveal the dining room inside.

When the house opens up we can see into a room big enough for three or four members of the cast, with a door at the back of the room that they enter and exit through. The dining room is a grand Edwardian room, papered with green and white exotic flowers, and with a grandfather clock, a fireplace with gaslights and a chandelier hanging above. The room is full with mirrors and ornaments and pictures on the walls. In the centre is a table with four chairs, covered in a green cloth topped with a white one. Sitting on the table is a candelabra and a bucket of champagne.

Later in the play, a set of heavy wrought iron steps is dropped down, leading from the left side of the dining room down to the cobbles below, allowing characters to move from the house to the street.

Characters and costume

Inspector Goole, played by Liam Brennan, is about 50 years old, average height, with an angular face and balding. When he first appears he is wearing a trench coat and a trilby hat, and carrying a briefcase. He is the model of a 1940’s movie detective. Later he takes off the coat and hat to reveal a dark blue, three piece, pin stripe suit with a shirt and tie.

Mr Birling, played by Geoff Leesley, is a heavy set man of about 60 or 65. He has a balding head and a thick mutton chop moustache. He’s dressed for a formal dinner in a black dinner jacket with tails, a black waistcoat and a wing tip shirt with a dickey bow. He smokes a fat cigar.

Gerald Croft, Sheila’s fiancé, is played by Matthew Douglas. He is a tall, well built man of about 30, with a head of thick dark hair. He looks strong, hefty. He too is dressed for the evening in a black dinner jacket with tails, sharply pressed trousers and a shirt and dicky bow. His waistcoat is of a fine jacquard material.

Eric Birling, the younger Birling boy, is played by Hamish Riddel. He is slightly built with thick dark hair andis in his early 20’s. He too is dressed for the dinner party in a black dinner jacket, tails and a dicky bow.

Mrs Birling, played by Caroline Wildi, is a mature woman, well built and handsome. Her sandy hair is piled on top of her head and she wears an elegant burgundy beaded evening gown. Round her neck is a thick choker of pearls, a necklace with a bright gem stone, two more long strings of pearls and she wears ear rings with sparkling jewels.

Sheila Birling, played by Katherine Jack, is a pretty young woman in her 20’s. Her dark hair falls in ringlets at the nape of her neck and tied back with a white flower. She wears a n immaculate long white formal gown with a tight bodice, full lace skirts and long white formal gloves. Her long train trails on the cobbles when she is on the street, and the maid fusses to keep it clean. Sheila has a string of pearls at her neck and droplet pearl ear rings. Later in the play Sheila’s dress is clearly broken down, torn and soiled.

The maid, Edna, is played by Jilll Stanford, a stout older woman maybe in her 70’s. She wears a dowdy brown dress with an apron tied over it, and heavy shoes. When Edna is outside she pulls on a shapeless overcoat against the rain. Edna comes and goes throughout the play, often silently flitting around. In the audio description there isn’t time to say every time she moves, so we’ll only talk about it when it’s important, but she is an almost constant presence throughout.

Also constantly present, but without any lines is an urchin boy and sometimes a squad of boys and girls. The boys are in shorts, vest tops or woolly cardigans, and the girls are in light pinafores. At least one of these street kids is constantly present on the street, coming and going, but we can only talk about them when it matters to the plot.