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STAGE REVIEW: 'An Inspector Calls' at ActorsNET of Bucks County

By Anthony Stoeckert Jun 8, 2017 Updated 1 hr ago



Mort Peterson and Carol Thompson In "An Inspector Calls."

"An Inspector Calls" spends a lot of time with the title character asking questions of the other characters. This typically isn't my favorite format for a play, but that may be because I had never seen it done with the tension and drama that ActorsNET of Bucks County brings to its stellar production of J.B. Priestley's 1945 play.

This isn't a mystery, but it looks like one. The play, at the Heritage Center Theatre in Morrisville, Pennsylvania through June 18, is set in an English industrial city. It's 1912 and the Birling family is gathered for. Arthur (George Hartpence), is the patriarch, and a successful businessman who speaks of the virtues of capitalism. He is positive that war is not in England's future.

Arthur is thrilled at the news that his daughter Sheila (Tammy Goldberg) is engaged to Gerald Croft (Tom Swain). Croft is just the kind of son-in-law he's wanted and Sheila is overjoyed when Gerald gives her a ring — "Now I really feel engaged," she says.

Also celebrating are Arthur's wife Sybil (Carol Thompson) and their son Eric (Tom Smith). There is a slight issue in that Gerald's family is of higher stature, but Arthur's credentials are pretty good — he's former Lord Mayor, is "on the bench" and may be in line for a knighthood.

The festivities are interrupted by Inspector Goole (Mort Paterson). Arthur assumes it has something to do with the bench, but Goole has disturbing news. A woman with multiple names, including Eva Smith, has killed herself by drinking disinfectant, and she left behind evidence that connects her to the family members.

Goole starts with Arthur, who fired Smith a year and a half ago because of her involvement with a labor movement. Arthur dismisses the connection, there's no way this woman killed herself over something he did 18 months ago. Goole isn't convinced, it could have been the first step.

We then find out Sheila recently had Eva fired from her job in a store because she dared to mock Sheila. It's also unveiled that Eva had more than one name, and her interactions with the other members of the family get more and more personal, and consequential.

Goole isn't out for facts that can lead to an arrest, his is a higher calling — he's seeking the truth. Actually, he seems to know the truth, his mission is that those responsible for this young woman's death understand what they did.

Goole himself is a mystery. How can he know the things he knows? After he leaves, the family members suspect he's a fraud, but there is no doubt he has taken Eva's death to heart. "She had been turned down and turned out too many times," he says, "this was the end."

This is a play that won't work without the right cast, and director James Cordingley has assembled a wonderful group of actors for this production. Paterson is just perfect for the Inspector, he has a lot to say and is judgmental, but never preachy. His is wise and not surprised by what these people have done, but is still human enough to care about the young, dead woman.

Hartpence and Thompson do fine work as the parents. Hartpence plays Arthur with a sense of entitlement, even a touch of superiority, but he remains likable, and comes off as a man trying to do best by his family. Thompson is formal, nearly royal, as Sybil, but the veneer is broken when Sybil's role in the death is revealed.

Goldberg is a standout as Sheila. She's a tricky character — a blushing fiance to start, but we see a darker side of her later on. Tom Smith is the troubled Eric, funny and charming at the beginning, but there are hints that he's trouble. He is perhaps the one member of this family we end up sympathizing with. Eric plays an important role in the dead woman's life, and that he truly cared for her is clear, thanks to Smith.

Swain plays a key part as the fiance to Sheila. He may have the most to lose in all of this, and his secrets affect the people closest to him, but he keeps his composure and tries to protect himself and the Birling family.

Hartpence and Cordingley designed the set, and it's terrific, a convincing scene for the home of a wealthy family. The production also includes a powerful use of projection.

This is a talky play that feels like an edge-of-your-seat thriller. Powerful acting and taught direction will do that.

ActorsNET of Bucks County will wrap up its season with the classic musical "The Threepenny Opera," July 14-30. The company has announced its 2017-18 season. It will present "It Can't Happen Here," Oct. 13-29; "Fiddler on the Roof," Dec. 1-17; an Agatha Christie play (either "The Mousetrap" or "Witness for the Prosecution"), Jan. 19-Feb. 4; "Red Velvet," March 2-18; "Present Laughter," April 20-May 6; "The Sum of Us," June 1-18; and "Romeo and Juliet," July 13-29.

"An Inspector Calls" continues at ActorsNET of Bucks County's Heritage Center Theatre, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through June 18. For tickets and information, go to www.actorsnetbucks.org or call 215-295-3694.