

'An Inspector' is calling at TCNJ

An Inspector Calls

Where: The College of New Jersey, Route 31, Ewing.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday.

Admission: \$6 to \$12 with discounts for seniors and groups; (609) 882-5979 or (www.shakespeare70.org)

BY ANITA DONOVAN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

In 1946, J.B. Priestley's "An Inspector Calls" was an entry in the popular mystery genre, but it signified far more — an ironic, and not altogether sanguine, take on modern society that seems as applicable today as then. As a thrice-wounded veteran of World War I — "the war to end all wars" — Priestley saw history repeating itself yet again 30 years later.

With dismay, he turned his plea for civility into an intriguing entertainment. Now the Shakespeare 70 company brings it to life with intensity and menace.

The plot centers on the Birlings, an affluent family of England's North Midlands. Arthur and Sybil Birling are hosting a family dinner to celebrate the engagement of their daughter Sheila to Gerald Croft, the son of a peer. Just as they and their son Eric are offering toasts to the happy couple, an unexpected visitor arrives: police in-

spector Goole, who requests a little of their time to answer questions regarding a death that has occurred that day.

A young woman, it seems, has killed herself this afternoon. Goole thinks the Birlings may have known her and might be able to shed some light on why she would have taken her life. The Birlings do not recognize the woman's name, but when Goole produces a photograph, she does look familiar to some of the family.

Priestley sets this who-dunnit — or who-knew-it — in 1912, two years before the Great War and within only a day or two of the Titanic disaster — which, in a sense, becomes a symbol for the unfettered optimism of the Birling family in particular, and English society in general. Only a few moments before Goole enters, patriarch Birling is holding forth about the new "unsinkable" ocean liner that has just left for New York.

As events unfold, both private and public, the family is forced to reconsider its comfortable, insulated existence, as well as its good opinion of itself. The younger members, at least, recognize themselves as part of a larger, changing world. Sixty years after Priestley's inspired fable, we're still hard at it.

Director Carol Thompson leads an ex-

perienced cast that is well up to the subtle demands of the script and comfortable in the period of the piece. George Hartpence leads the cast as Inspector Goole, with a characterization that smoothly balances reality and fantasy. Brian Bara and Catherine Rowe are convincing as the self-satisfied Arthur and Sybil, with Aaron Wexler as their indulged son Eric. Glen Calhoun imbues Gerald Croft with a sense of entitlement that gives way to humility. Susan Blair is the timid housemaid who watches as her employers are brought to task. Bride-to-be Sheila Birling, the pivotal character in the plot, is called upon to react and reflect on each and every disclosure, and Cat Miller turns in a dazzling performance full of nuance.

To underline the contrast between the haves and have-nots, Thompson enlists an ensemble of what we might term "Third World extras" who hang out in the street outside the comfortable Birling home designed and lit by technical director Dale Simon. Special care is given to authentic accents, with assistance from dialect coach Mort Patterson.

With "An Inspector Calls," Shakespeare 70 lives up to its reputation for fine classical theater and also does us a service by bringing Priestley's thought-provoking work to our attention.