

'An Inspector Calls'

by: Stuart Duncan, TIMEOFF, 09/27/2006

Shakespeare '70 takes on J.B. Priestley's drama.

It's astonishing that a play written six decades ago, and penned partially as a Socialist tract, could have such relevance for today's audiences. J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*, staged by Shakespeare '70 at The College of New Jersey, is as powerful as any new drama you have seen in years.

The play was written in 1945 and first performed that year in Moscow. A London premiere followed the next year and, in 1947, Broadway. Priestley set the play in 1912, the scene was the dining room/drawing room of the prosperous Birling family in Brumley, an industrial city in England's North Midlands.

The story is simple, yet loaded with controversy: the Birling family has just finished a dinner at which their daughter, Sheila, has become engaged to Gerald Croft. Arthur, the father, is particularly pleased because Croft is, like himself, in the manufacturing business (specifically wool). Arthur, we find, likes to pontificate and enjoys being listened to when he makes such statements as "there isn't a chance of war" or (about the Titanic) "she is unsinkable." It is 1912, remember. Edna, the maid, busies herself; Eric, the Birling son, seems to be paying a lot of attention to the liquor cabinet. Clearly it is a happy, self-satisfied family.

The doorbell rings and Inspector Goole promptly announces that he has just come from the local infirmary where a young girl has just died in considerable agony after ingesting disinfectant. He has a few questions for the Birlings and he prefers to address each member, one by one. As the questions continue, it becomes obvious that each family member was in some measure responsible for the young girl's plight. Father and mother refuse to accept their share, but the youngsters are more malleable and penitent.

After the inspector departs, there is some attempt made to gloss over the accusations and it is discovered that there is no inspector by the name of Goole on the force. A hoax, perhaps? At the final curtain (after two hours, 15 minutes, including two intermissions) there is indeed a phone call: a young girl has just died, an inspector will be over to ask some questions.

Shakespeare '70 has some wonderful actors, directed by Carol Thompson. George Hartpence is a stunning Inspector Goole, armed with only a small notebook and a Midlands accent. Brian Bara is superb as Arthur Birling, capitalistic conservatism at the ready, oozing out of every pore. Aaron Wexler is strong as the son, Eric. The women have less opportunity to shine. Catherine Rowe battles defensively as the mother. Cat Miller has become an actress of real stature, beautiful and graceful.

Priestley could not resist a third-act speech "with a message." It is mercifully brief and you will probably forgive him. Director Thompson has dressed the production with working-class poor from time to time, reminding us that at the turn of the 20th century, 15 percent of the population was consuming two-thirds of the national income, leaving the working class to exist on the remainder. Priestley (the J.B. stands for John Boynton) is hardly recognized today. He wrote articles, novels and several plays, many tinged with the politics of the era. This one is well worth seeing.

An Inspector Calls continues at the Black Box Theater, The College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Road, Ewing, through Sept. 30. Performances: Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m. Tickets cost \$12, \$10 seniors, \$6 students. For information, call (609) 882-5979. On the Web: www.shakespeare70.org

©PACKETONLINE News Classifieds Entertainment Business - Princeton and Central New Jersey 2006

September 27, 2006 2:42 PM