





JB PRIESTLEY'S
CLASSIC THRILLER **AN**
INSPECTOR
CALLS

PIP DONAGHY
Inspector Goole

SANDRA DUNCAN
Sybil Birling

DAVID ROPER
Arthur Birling

MARK HEALY
Gerald Croft

EMMA DARWALL SMITH
Sheila Birling

MARK FIELD
Eric Birling

DIANA PAYNE MYERS
Edna

Understudies:

MARK CARTER
Inspector Goole and Arthur Birling

ANNE WHITE
Sybil Birling and Edna

BEN SLEEP
Gerald Croft and Eric Birling

LISA HEWITT
Sheila Birling



An Inspector Calls was first performed by the Karmeny and Leningrad Theatre Companies, Moscow August, 1945

It opened in the Royal National Theatre's Lyttelton Theatre in September 1992 and played at the Aldwych Theatre in London's West End for over a year and at the Garrick Theatre for 6 years.

The performance runs approx 1 hour 45 minutes.
There is no interval.

Director
STEPHEN DALDRY

Associate Director
JULIAN WEBBER

Designer
IAN MacNEIL

Lighting Designer
RICK FISHER

Music
STEPHEN WARBECK

Associate Sound Designer
STEVEN OTIS GUNN

Associate Lighting Designer
IAN SAUNDERS

Fight Director
TERRY KING

Production Manager
SIMON REYNOLDS

Company Manager
PHILIP HOARE

Deputy Stage Manager
JULIE ISSOTT

Assistant Stage Manager
TOM PATULLO

Wardrobe Mistress
YUKI YAMANAKA

Wigs Master
MICHAEL SYLVESTER





ON CLOSER INSPECTION

Nick Hobbes investigates the continuing appeal of *An Inspector Calls*



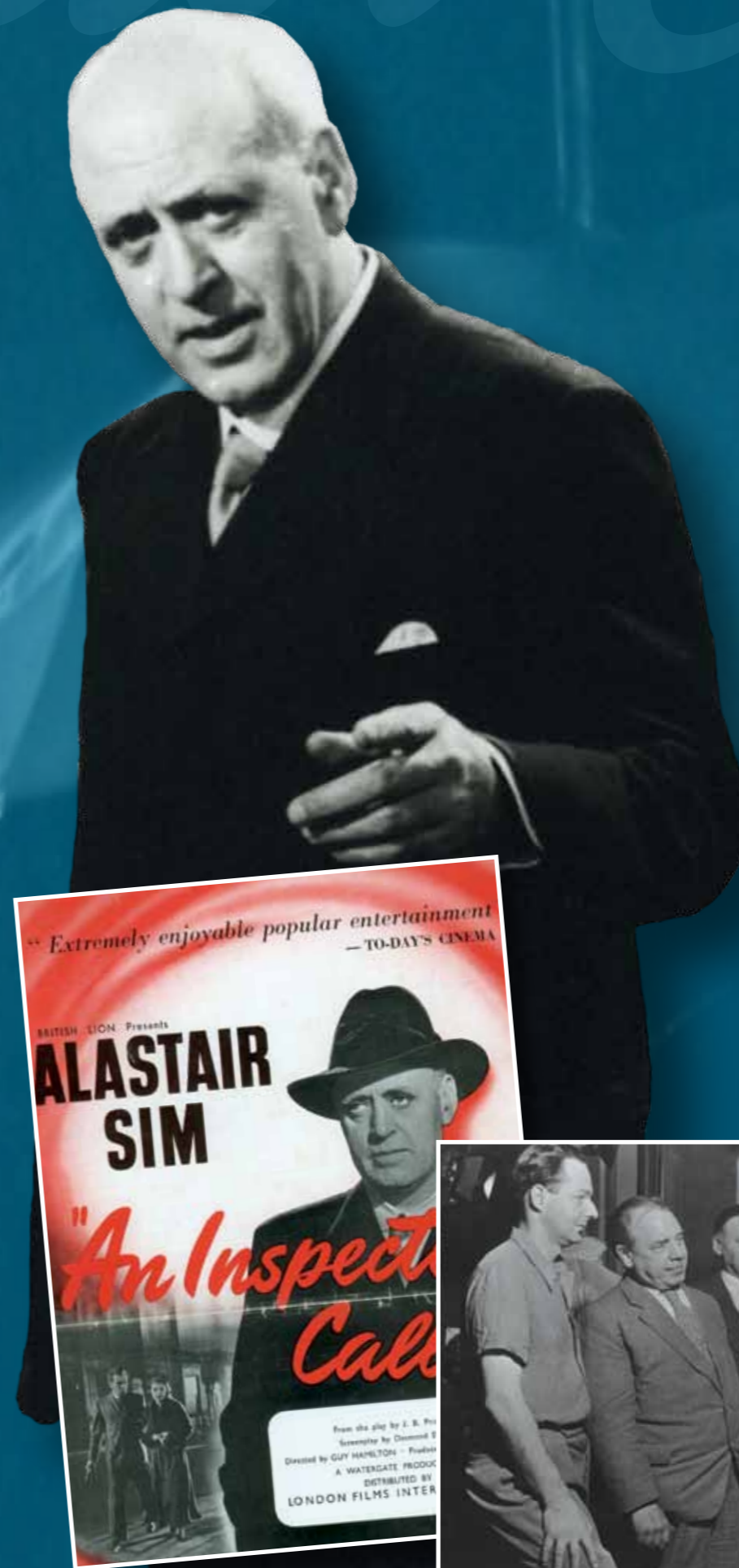
Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* is one of the most popular and oft-performed plays in the English language, regularly described in publicity material as having 'won more awards than any other play in history'. Since its premiere in 1946, the play has been produced all over the world, from major theatre revivals to regular touring shows and amateur stagings – indeed, many an amateur actor can look back upon Inspector Goole as their first leading role. For many years it remained a stock favourite for repertory companies and, even when that noble tradition began its irrevocable decline, continued to crop up on an ever-increasing basis among school and college productions, often being among the first 'serious' grown-up plays tackled by youngsters. And even where staging the play might not be possible, schools – mindful, perhaps, of their own brand of 'inspectors' making frequent, ominous visits – regularly teach the play as a set text in English classes.

For Priestley, who infused the play with what he saw as an urgent and improving message, such success could only have been highly welcome; proof, it might be argued, that the central themes of his work have remained universally important and appealing for over half a century. The question must be asked, however, as to whether the play remains, in the eyes and minds of its audiences, the same beast that Priestley gave life to even as the last echoes of the Second World War were still being heard, or whether the late 20th century's decades of revolution, re-evaluation, and relative values have made it outdated. And, if so, what is there about the play that modern audiences still find so compelling?

Back in 1946, Priestley's reasons for writing *An Inspector Calls* were fairly straightforward. It was a 20th-century morality play aimed squarely at a shell-shocked post-war Britain which he, and many others at the time, saw as being ripe for restructuring into a better world. Much has been made about Priestley's socialism, but at the end of the message of *An Inspector Calls* is primarily a humane one: that we should all be responsible for looking after each other; that society should put the well-being of all its constituents, regardless of their means and position, above all else. To this end he set the play back in 1912, an era he viewed as a prime example of what the country should NOT return to, and populated it with characters who exemplified some of the negative traits he deplored, but who are by no means one-dimensional ciphers. As well as scorn for the outmoded ideas expressed by the Birlings and their company, we are also led to feel some hope. In particular, the Inspector, the strongest character in the play and the one we mostly sympathise with, is quite obviously contemptuous of such views, while the younger generation of characters are shown to be more understanding and ready to embrace their own culpability and to change; surely an optimistic outlook on the part of the author.

While such sentiments are both noble and urgently pertinent today, in a world where Priestley's hoped-for humane revolution never really transpired they are not necessarily the reasons why people continue to stage and enjoy *An Inspector Calls*. Back in 1946, Priestley was among a very small group of writers and thinkers who were outspokenly questioning the merits of established British society. While he may never have been seen as avant-garde or an 'angry middle-aged man' his views were seen as a challenging progressive.

Today, of course, establishment critics are ten a penny and our cultural history is full of hundreds of powerful works excoriating man's inhumanity to man and recommending a revolution in social morality and structure. This makes the message of *An Inspector Calls*, while still relevant, lack a lot



Guy Hamilton, J. B. Priestley, Eileen Moore, Alastair Sim on the set of *An Inspector Calls*

of its freshness and urgency during a night out at the theatre and it is arguable that if the play's sole merits had resided in its message then its popularity would have suffered.

As it is, there are entirely different aspects to the play which make it a favourite with performers and audiences alike and which are probably more responsible for its popularity today. The play is simple to stage and cast, requiring no gimmicks or difficult transitions. Its single setting ensures easy stage design and the even share of time for each character should work to mollify even the most precious of 'am dram' temperaments. The play is also brilliantly structured and paced as the egos and unwholesome characteristics of each individual on stage are built up only to be demolished by the abrasive and ruthless Inspector, while temporal tricks like Mr Birling's supreme confidence in the *Titanic* (remember the story is set in 1912 before the *Titanic's* maiden voyage) play to the audience, inviting us to shake our heads at the hubris on show and making us feel superior to the 'old-fashioned specimens' on stage.

The play's two most appealing features, however, are its probing, heuristic narrative which echoes many of the trappings of the whodunnit mystery form – a firm favourite with readers and theatre-goers in any age – and its remarkable denouement. The former has perhaps been the most responsible for building a solid popularity for the play among those who would ordinarily eschew morality tales; in fact, there must be many fans of the play who regard it as a simple detective tale – albeit one which doesn't unmask the villain at the end. This popular narrative appeal is bolstered by the intriguing hints of a supernatural element to the tale, personified by the Inspector, which can be emphasised effortlessly by directors choosing to follow such a path, giving the play two bursts of genre appeal where none were necessarily intended. Not bad for a social commentary.

And then, of course, there's the superb and disconcerting ending with its wonderfully written and unexpected twist, a sure-fire winner for audiences used to the alluring use of the twist by cinema in films such as *The Usual Suspects*, *The Crying Game*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* among countless others. Was Priestley, more than many of his contemporaries, well ahead of his time?