

Part Two – Staging the Play

Introduction

The emphasis of this section of the pack is on the staging and interpretation of *An Inspector Calls*. The video and the activities are intended for students who already know the play but wish to explore it more fully as a text for performance. The video is divided into sections that cover key moments in the play. Each section begins with a clip from the Royal National Theatre production followed by interview extracts. The aim is to allow close study of the intentions and effects of staging decisions so that students can see the play's transition from a script to a theatre production.

The Royal National Theatre production

There have been many productions of *An Inspector Calls* since 1946, but none has caused so much controversy as Stephen Daldry's, designed by Ian MacNeil, for the Royal National Theatre in September 1992. Acclaimed for its stunning visual interpretation of the play, this production abandons conventional ideas of realism and presents a boldly non-realist vision of the play. In doing so it gives powerful emphasis to Priestley's ideas about time: 1912 is the date the play was set; 1945 is the date the play was written and the date the Welfare State was created; 1992 is the date this production opened, a time when the Welfare State was being dismantled by a Conservative government, whose political philosophy was close to the Birlings'. The success of this production has been phenomenal. It has toured the world and is currently still running in the West End in London. As Pip Donaghy, who plays the Inspector in the current production says, it is rare to see 'a morality play in the West End in a commercial setting.'

The 1954 film adaptation

Three sections of the video consist of clips from the 1954 film adaptation of *An Inspector Calls*. These film clips are not included for the purposes of film study (without the whole film they couldn't be) but to offer some idea of what a more traditional production of the play might have looked like; restrictions on how much of the film we could use and the fact that it is not available for sale (only on loan through libraries) have prevented us from treating the adaptation more thoroughly as a film text. Taking three clips out of context like this obviously has its disadvantages – the stagey and mannered style is easy to laugh at; we can see how far theatre and film have travelled in their expectations of audience. However the clips are intended to be used to allow comparative work on the key scenes they represent.

An Inspector Calls as a set text

While this production stays very close to Priestley's text, if *An Inspector Calls* is a set text and students are going to answer an examination question on the play, they need to keep the text and the production separate in their minds. Students should be aware that exam questions may ask them to:

- write about the play they have read
- write about a production they have seen
- write about ways of staging or interpreting a speech or scene

Preparation for the last two types of question will mainly be found in this section of the pack.

Preparation for the first type of question will be found in the first section of the pack.

An Inspector Calls as a coursework text

If students are studying the play as a coursework text, then writing about a specific aspect of staging or interpretation is an excellent way of focusing on the text as a drama text. The video and activities around it provide plenty of opportunities to do just that. The numerous writing suggestions in this section may be used as the basis for wording assignments to fit individual students' abilities and folder requirements. The prompts offered within the viewing and discussion tasks could also be used to support and structure student essays and oral assignments.

Teacher guidance on using the video

We have assumed that students using the video will have read the play already and will not be coming straight to the video as a short cut to that textual knowledge.

In each section, it is suggested that students view the production clip first, discuss them, and then view the interviews with the set designer and actors.

The tape is clearly signposted with captions to help cue the clips and interview extracts. It is not expected that teachers will want to go through every section in the same amount of detail. Viewing and note-taking tasks would become repetitive if this approach was taken. We have assumed that teachers will generally want to view several sections together with their class and adapt viewing instructions to suit the needs of their students. Therefore teachers should decide in advance which video sections they want students to view more closely than others.

Interview transcripts

Some extracts from interviews with the Royal National Theatre designer, and three of the actors are included on the video. Transcripts of these interviews appear within the activities where they are particularly pertinent and lend themselves to oral or written tasks. Transcripts of the rest of the interviews on the tape will be found at the end of the pack on pages 72–74, and are included as a reference for students attempting written or oral assignments.

What you see on the video and what you read in the transcripts may at times be slightly different. Sometimes the actors talk as if they are in role and switch from the third person ('she') to the first person ('I'). To make this less confusing to read, we have altered the transcripts so they are mainly in the third person and used speech marks to indicate any switches to the first person. There are a few interview extracts included in this section of the pack which do not appear on the video tape itself. Where this happens, there will be a note in the text to tell you.

Part Two – contents and video timings

Listed below are all the screen captions, each of which lasts 5 seconds. The timings that accompany the list are there to assist teachers who have VCRs with real time counter displays. Zero the counter at the beginning of the English and Media logo.

Page No.	Video Timing	Video section titles
47	01.31 03.40	1. The curtain rises Ian MacNeil, the set designer, on the opening
47	04.27 05.33	2. The Birlings celebrate and the Inspector arrives Ian MacNeil and Pip Donaghy (Inspector) on the Inspector's first appearance
49	08.49 09.54	3. Birling tells Gerald about his knighthood Barry Stanton (Birling) on social climbing
50	11.24 12.08	4. Birling's values Barry Stanton on Birling's values
50	12.37 13.15	5. 'Please sir, an Inspector's called' Ian MacNeil and Pip Donaghy on the Inspector's entrance
51	14.17 15.18	6. The questioning begins Pip Donaghy on the Inspector's questioning
52	16.47	7. The Inspector's entrance – the 1954 film adaptation
53	18.26 21.05	8. Sheila's confession Annabel Mullion and Pip Donaghy on Sheila's confession
53	24.21	9. Sheila's confession – the 1954 film adaptation
54	27.13 29.13	10. 'a public confession of responsibility' – end of Act Two Pip Donaghy, Ian MacNeil and Annabel Mullion on the crowd
56	30.37 31.39	11. The Inspector stops the show Pip Donaghy on moral responsibility
56	33.12 33.53	12. The Inspector's final speech Pip Donaghy on the Inspector's final speech
57	35.28 36.30	13. The destruction of the Birlings' house Ian MacNeil and Barry Stanton on the destruction of the house
57	37.51 38.32	14. Sheila sees the truth Annabel Mullion on Sheila's reactions
58	39.48 40.44	15. The restoration of the Birlings' house Ian MacNeil and Annabel Mullion on the Birlings' escape from the truth
59	42.48 43.58	16. 'You began to learn ... now you've stopped' Ian MacNeil and Annabel Mullion on the closing moments
59	45.10 46.29	17. The final curtain Ian MacNeil and Annabel Mullion on the final curtain
60	47.18	18. The ending – the 1954 film adaptation
61 61 63 64	49.15 text only text only text only	19. Ian MacNeil and Pip Donaghy on time The set Music and sound Reviews of the 1992 Royal National Theatre production
68 72	53.36 text only	20. 1997 Labour Party Election Broadcast – <i>Second Chance</i> Interview transcripts

1. The curtain rises (01.31 Play ref. page 1)

This section of the video focuses on the very beginning of the Royal National Theatre production, where the curtain rises on the set and before any speeches have begun.

I Talk briefly about how Priestley's play begins, the suggestions he offers for the set and lighting and your ideas about some of the ways that this might be staged in the theatre.



The curtain rises

This production gives added power to Priestley's ideas about time by setting the play in both 1912 and 1945.

I Work in small groups to watch and make notes. Each person in the group (or each group in the class) could take responsibility for one of the following:

- the use of music and sound
- the use of lighting and special effects
- the appearance and activity of the characters on stage
- the design of the set

I After viewing, share your observations and talk about:

- your first impressions of this as the opening of a production of the play
- the way that the curtain rises
- the atmosphere, mood and feelings that this opening suggests to you
- any clues in the set design, costumes, characters or sound effects that one of the time zones this production exists in is 1945, the year the Second World War ended

2. The Birlings celebrate and the Inspector appears (04.27 Play ref. page 6–7)

At this moment in the Royal National Theatre production, Birling is making his 'War won't happen' speech and the engagement celebration is in full swing. At this point the Inspector first comes on stage, much earlier than his scripted entrance in the play.



The Birlings celebrate and the Inspector appears

I Each person in the group (or separate groups in the class) should take responsibility for looking closely at one of the following:

- the set design
- the appearance of the Inspector
- the use of music and sound effects
- the use of lighting and special effects

I Share your observations and talk about :

- your first reactions to what you've seen
- the ideas about the Birlings suggested by the house
- the ideas about the Inspector that the staging of his entry suggests



Ian MacNeil and Pip Donaghy on the Inspector's first appearance

Ian MacNeil

'After the curtain goes up, we see the house and we hear the conversation that's going on inside with the doors closed. Now that's usually played as curtain up and you're in a dining room. What they are saying is important but on a strictly theatrical level, it's a bit dull that conversation. Nothing much is happening, they're just stating who they are, what the relationship to each other is. There's nothing very interesting going on emotionally yet. So it's useful to create the diversionary activity. The mind can take in several things at the same time, 'What's the little old lady doing? What's her journey? What's her relationship to the children? What's the children's relationship to the house?'

There's some relationship between the Inspector and the maid. There's something going on. He's arrived, he gives an orange to the boy. The boy trusts him enough to take it although they don't know each other, ostensibly. An orange is obviously a symbol of the war because a child at the end of the war would never have seen an orange before and would be very excited by it.

It may be suggested that he's come from abroad, maybe he's in a demob suit. He's got a cheap cardboard suitcase, maybe he's a demob soldier who's come from abroad. It's almost like a Western or a film noir* movie where there's a man in town, he's come to sort something out.'



* Film noir – a group of 1940s films, often thrillers, which shared a visual style (shadows, rain, darkness, diagonal angles etc.) suggesting suspense, uncertainty and isolation.

I It is clear that the director and designer have made strong choices about where they want to focus audience attention. Discuss some of the points that Ian MacNeil raises. For example:

- do you agree that the Birlings' conversation in the dining room is 'a bit dull theatrically' and that 'there's nothing very interesting emotionally going on yet'?
- do you think that the 'diversionary activity' involving the maid, the boy and the Inspector works to get the audience thinking and involved?

Pip Donaghy

'When I first make my entrance as the Inspector, through the auditorium it occurs to me that I'm a time traveller. Here I am in 1997, and I'm dressed in clothes from 1945 and I walk in to the world of the Birlings who are in 1912. I walk through the audience. I think I have a faintly ghost-like aura around my entrance and it gives them a bit of a fright. I'm dressed rather strangely with a funny hat and a suitcase which could carry a nuclear bomb or god knows what.

I walk through the auditorium and slowly up on to the stage. I stand under the lights. I give the little boy an orange and Edna brings me a cup of tea.

The side lighting makes me think of melodrama* straight away. Also the way the stage is offers a kind of physicality, so to begin with, I certainly have quite a cartoon-like shape. My body takes up cartoon-like shapes with the hat and the shadows across the face. It gradually becomes more naturalistic* as you engage with the other characters.

The music is wonderfully powerful and melodramatic. When I first come through the auditorium it feels incredibly powerful and even sinister. For an actor it's wonderful stuff, because you can really take it on and it gives you such a power base as you come on to the stage. And even though I have nothing to say for quite a while, as I stand there under the lamp-post I can feel that my figure is very strong because of the musical entrance.'



* Melodramatic – larger than life action and emotion, extravagant and sensational, often using music; from the Greek *melos* meaning song and drama.

* Naturalistic – using realistic detail, like real life.

I Discuss your response to some of the points made here. You may want to consider the following:

- what are some of the themes and ideas of Priestley's play that the opening of this production is emphasising?
- what is the effect of having the Inspector come on to the stage from the audience rather than from the wings or through a door?
- what is the effect of staging the Inspector's first appearance so that he stands and watches the Birlings' house as they celebrate?
- what impression of the Inspector do you get from the way the maid and the boy interact with him?

I Look carefully at Pip Donaghy's description of his entrance and then watch the production clip again so that you can study the visual impact of the staging more closely:

- how many of the points that Pip Donaghy makes can you see?
- what else do you notice that adds to the atmosphere of suspense?
- does what you see remind you of other plays, films, TV programmes or paintings?



Writing suggestion

Using the work you have done on Sections 1 and 2 of the video, write a detailed account of the staging of the opening to the Royal National Theatre's production of *An Inspector Calls*. Write about three or four of the elements that you found most striking or interesting and include your response to them.

3. Birling tells Gerald about his knighthood (08.49 Play ref. page 7–8)

In this section, Birling and Gerald are left alone to smoke, drink port and talk. Birling is keen to point out to Gerald that he may soon be 'Sir Birling'.



I Look back at the work you did on page 6 on 'Class tensions – the Crofts and the Birlings'. Remind yourselves about the connections the Crofts and the Birlings have, their class differences, Mr Birling's feelings about social status and the reasons Gerald might have for wanting to marry Sheila.



Birling tells Gerald about his knighthood

I Half the class should concentrate on Birling and the other half on Gerald.

Afterwards, talk about the following:

- does the character come across as you imagined or not?
- what methods do the actors use to get their characters across to the audience? (gesture, eye contact etc.)



Writing suggestion

Try writing an explanation of what is going through Gerald's mind at this moment in the play as if you were the actor playing Gerald.

4. Birling's values (11.24 Play ref. page 9)

Birling is giving his 'a man has to make his own way' speech but is interrupted by a ring at the front door.



Birling's values

┆ Individuals or groups should take responsibility for looking closely at one of the following:

- what Birling says, how he says it, and what's going on in his mind
- how the Inspector looks and the effect of his presence
- anything you notice about the music and the sound
- how the set looks and the ideas suggested by it

┆ Share your observations and talk about:

- how effective you find the staging of this moment in the play
- what it made you feel as you watched it
- what connections you noticed between what you heard and what you saw

┆ Look back at the work you did on dramatic irony on page 7 and think about how effectively the staging of this moment in the play conveys some of those ideas and prepares the audience for one of Priestley's central themes, that 'We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other.'

5. 'Please, sir, an inspector's called' (12.37 Play ref. page 9–10)

This is the point in the play when Edna announces the Inspector's arrival to the Birlings.



'Please, sir, an inspector's called'

┆ Talk about what you see and hear at this moment.

┆ Look again at the following two moments:

- the house when shut
- the house when open

At each of these points, on your own, note down all the ideas, associations and feelings the image suggests to you.



Ian MacNeil and Pip Donaghy on the Inspector's entrance

Ian MacNeil

'When the house opens you need a reason for it to open up having delayed it so long. Why do the doors of a house peel back like a doll's house? Why does that happen? It's as if the Inspector does it. It's as if the Inspector has magic powers. The house opens because he's arrived, and conveniently there is a line saying 'give us more light', and so the maid goes to the doors and as she reaches towards them they magically open.'