TV Review: An Inspector Calls

Irritating music and script changes blunt the impact of the BBC’s stylish adaptation of J.B. Priestley’s classic play, says Rhys Thompson

Monday 14 September 2015

★★☆☆☆

J.B. Priestley’s play, *An Inspector Calls*, is most familiar as a GCSE set text that sends chills down the spine of any former student when they remember trying to come up with some convoluted explanation for its symbolism and “author’s intention”. Given its status, it takes a brave soul to attempt to adapt the text for television; every amendment will be noticed and scrutinised. Unfortunately, the BBC’s new script removed any subtlety from the original text and plastered every scene with irritating ‘plinky-plonk’ music.

Helen Edmundson’s screenplay kept most of the play’s original structure, but fleshed out the narrative through a series of invented flashbacks. The most successful parts of the show were, perhaps unsurprisingly, Priestley’s sections. It began with some appropriate ‘scene setting’ moments, with a rather pretentious voice over. When the Birling family sit down for dinner, and Priestley’s script begins, it slowly grinds into place.

For those unaware of the plot, the Birlings are an upper-middle class family, who are celebrating the engagement of their daughter, Shelia, to the son of a wealthy business owner. Mr Birling (Ken Stott) is their nearest business rival, so he hopes Sheila’s engagement will bring the two companies together, for “lower costs and higher prices”. Whilst this develops into hardly the subtlest of critiques of the capitalist class, it offers an intriguing insight into the class structure of Edwardian England. The play shifts into another gear when the eponymous Inspector visits the Birlings to ask about their connection to a young girl, Eva Smith, who has just committed suicide. As the night develops, they begin to realise that they all are involved in her death...

And so concludes the English lecture.

No one could call *An Inspector Call’s* morality message subtle; in all honesty, it has all the subtlety of...
an ostentatious brick. The Inspector’s long speeches about community and responsibility can, when read, come across as unabashed political sentiment. The genius of Priestley’s play is in the underlying message, thrilling final act and the symbolism of Eva Smith as an ‘everyman’ figure.

The casting was unanimously excellent. Stott outstandingly played the flailing Mr Birling, whose dreams of a knighthood gradually fade as the evening progresses. Although still strongly associated with Blackadder, Miranda Richardson imbued the character of Mrs Birling with exactly the right amount of righteous indignation and middle class pomposity. David Thewlis underplayed the part of Inspector Goole, but shined during the part’s departing speech. It’s just a shame they were underserved by the script.

The main problem with Edmundson’s adaptation was the decision to spell out every detail and nuance in laborious detail. There was no real need to make Eva unequivocally turn to prostitution, when the implication is sufficient. An inference is often more effective than a definitive answer in a story as deliberately ambiguous as An Inspector Calls. The ‘dumbing down’ ran right through the programme; it began with an opening caption, “England, 1912”, it’s a very minor point, but it would have been less insulting to the intelligence of the audience to establish the period through dialogue and setting, rather than a blunt caption.

Talking of dialogue, I imagine there was consternation amongst many English teachers when Mrs Birling jokingly talked about Eric being “squiffy”. As if an ageing middle-class lady would have used such a word! The sections where Priestley’s dialogue was unaltered were much more successful, although some of the changes did work; for example, original lines were often split between the drawing room setting and the invented flashbacks, which added a consistency to the piece.

As expected from a BBC historical drama, the production values and the set designs were very good, though the writer could have cut much of the added dialogue and allowed the programme to take its time. It was perhaps a budgetary restriction, but it seemed odd to bother having flashbacks to locations like the Palace Variety Theatre and not actually show them. It would have given breathing space to the stodgy script.

Dominik Scherrer’s music score continued the production’s theme of excess. The continual piano themes became intensely irritating, with such a thought provoking concept, ambience, diegetic sounds and silence would have been much more effective.

Deciding to make a purposefully ambiguous play unambiguous by answering all the questions means this production somewhat misses the point; it is just too literal. Whilst not perfect, the Alastair Sim film version is more successful at combining Priestley’s vision and the demands of a screen audience. Making changes to classic (but rather archaic) plays is fine, but those changes must be better than the original. Unfortunately, few of the amendments improved the piece. The talented leads were all very well cast, especially Ken Stott as Mr. Birling and David Thewlis as the Inspector, but they couldn’t save this adaptation. A missed opportunity.
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