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An Inspector Calls

Re-imagining a classic



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An Inspector Calls, 25 years on . . .

I think this might be a first: the first time I've written about the same production for a second time for LSi. Not that you'd necessarily remember the first time around, since it was way back in the February 1994 issue - it's in the online archive, if you're interested ([//plasa.me/inspector](http://plasa.me/inspector)) . . .

That a production is still around after that length of time, 25 years since its debut, is no longer entirely surprising: a number of musicals are still playing after longer runs. It's not even unique for a play: *The Mousetrap* has just clocked up its 64th year in the West End.

It is perhaps a little more surprising for a production originally created for just a short run and shorter UK tour at the National Theatre, of a play everyone at the time knew of as a slightly tired old war-horse, a staple of regional and amateur productions, a drawing room drama about a suicide and who might have been responsible for it. But in the hands of the then up-and-coming, now very much up-and-come, director Stephen Daldry and his team of designer Ian MacNeil, lighting designer Rick Fisher and composer Stephen Warbeck, *An Inspector Calls* became something quite, quite different. Visually, the detailed period drawing room was swept away for a doll's house perched on stilts, the cast at first crammed inside it, an enormous glowering sky, a cobbled streetscape and pouring rain. The action became less a police investigation, more a social history of Britain, a plea for social integration and support from the state from Britain's post-World War Two future to its pre-World War One past. It is remarkable in many ways that the same words can support both styles of production - except one suspects that what Daldry really found and unleashed was the message that the show's author JB Priestley had actually intended all along. Perhaps he just

read the hints the author had dropped, particularly when describing that if a realistic set was to be used it should be able to be moved around between acts - before adding that "producers who wish to avoid this tricky business would be well advised to dispense with an ordinary realistic set . . ."


It's fair to note that compared to some of those other long-running shows, *An Inspector Calls* hasn't had a continuous run of 25 years. After its debut at the National's Lyttelton Theatre, it toured the UK, then transferred to the bigger Olivier. From there it took on a commercial life, playing in the West End and New York, Japan and Australia. Now it reappears on the British touring circuit every few years, occasionally venturing into the West End. It has unquestionably reshaped the perception of the play; even if you haven't seen it, you'd doubtless recognise images of it.

Which is perhaps why those involved see no real reason to change the way it looks - lighting designer Rick Fisher notes: "I really wanted to do it in the same way it's always been done." But the technology of lighting doesn't stand still, which is why the show's latest West End run saw some brand new lighting technology take its place alongside some lights that have been with the show from the beginning.

THE PAST

The production's history, and Fisher's involvement, actually stretches back even further than its 1992 National debut. Tracing that history gives an insight into both the intertwining nature of theatre career paths and that somewhat pot-luck nature of just sometimes being in the right place at the right time - even if you don't realise that right at that moment. "Back in something like 1986, at





"Producers who wish to avoid this tricky business would be well advised to dispense with an ordinary realistic set . . ."

JB Priestley

Rob Halliday charts the evolving production and lighting design of JB Priestley's classic play . . .



Photos: Mark Douet

that point in my freelance career when I was just beginning to be invited into main houses after doing lots of smaller stuff, I was doing a very strange show called *Mouthful of Birds* at the Birmingham Rep, with not one but two directors and two authors," Fisher recalls. "No-one understood it, including most of us sometimes. The only person in the building who kind of got that it was something interesting was a young trainee designer called Ian MacNeil, who was the Art Council resident designer at the time - a scheme that is sorely missed."

Fisher and MacNeil kept in touch. "A few years later Ian said, 'I've got a director, I think he might be quite good, and we're going to be doing a play at York Theatre Royal. But I'm not going to tell you what the play is right now.' He eventually admitted it was *Inspector Calls*, but said they were going to do something interesting with it, not just the living room."

The lighting designer had 10 spare days in his schedule which meant he could light the show, scheduled as part of York's rep season. That production was the foundation for the current one. "It was set in a theatre, a theatre that had a big dolls house in it - I think we even had some old theatrical lights around the set. There was a sense that the kids who open the show had stumbled into a disused theatre or a theatre that had been bombed during the blitz and found that this play was on, like the old movies that used to show continuously, so if you missed the first five minutes you just stayed at the end and watched it all again. That theme - of recurring time - stuck with us. There was a stormy landscape; there was a lamp-post. The house did tip. It didn't have the cobbles; it didn't have the rain. I don't have a strong memory of how we lit it, so I think it was probably a little bit more traditionally lit. But my memory is that we liked it, and that the audience found it intriguing. And I do sort of remember that Ian eventually said to me, 'Stephen and I went back to see it before it closed, and we both noticed that the lighting really enhanced the production . . .'"



From there, all involved continued with their careers, Daldry taking over the tiny Gate Theatre in London where, as Fisher notes: "his star started to rise rather dramatically, doing very big plays in a very little space." Through that, Daldry was invited by the NT's then-artistic director, Richard Eyre, to stage a play at the National. After exploring many options, he asked to re-visit *Inspector*.

THE NATIONAL

With the show scheduled for a short UK tour as part of the NT's commitment to visiting the regions, *Inspector* had to be designed for pros' arch theatres and so at the National played the pros' arch Lyttelton. Design decisions made because of and influenced by that theatre have defined and shaped the production ever since. "The production developed into what we know now," Fisher explains, "with the big cobblestone floor, the house, the smaller house in the distance, the telephone box, the sky. We also took advantage of the side-stage to stage-left of the Lyttelton stage - the floor and sky went all the way off into that side stage, giving us a huge expanse to work with."



Photo: Ivan Klynd (1992)

- ↑ As seen in LSi, February 1994: the 1992 production at the Lyttelton Theatre, pictured are Kenneth Cranham (Inspector Goole) and Karl Buckland (child)
- ↓ The house in the production's 2016/17 revival



Photo: Mark Doucet

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The show also retained that feel of being set inside a traditional Edwardian Theatre - though that was a challenge in the 1970s concrete Lyttelton auditorium. "Ian designed a fake proscenium arch. Being Ian, he couldn't have his proscenium arch parallel to the front edge of the stage, it had to be on the wonk - that helped with the feeling of that huge expanse, but it meant that it ran straight under my number one bar, and it probably masked all of the proscenium bridge that the Lyttelton has to this day. And this was all way before the days of moving lights. I just kind of accepted that I wouldn't be able to use the number one bar or most of the portal bridge."

But he still approached the show in quite a conventional way, focusing in the NT rep rig. The cyc received special treatment. "Ian designed a cinemascope movie screen sky, I think based on a sky he found in a magazine that he then photocopied in interesting ways - this was way before Photoshop - then handed to the NT paint department, working with them to develop a beautiful piece of scenic art. It wasn't trying to be a real sky. I knew I had to not use traditional cyc lighting - I wanted to keep light off the black borders at the top and bottom. So we rigged a bar full of Fresnels, I think originally in four colours including a sulphurous yellow that just made the blue look like mud, draining all the colour away."

Set built, rig focused, it was time to start lighting the show. And then things took a turn to the unexpected. Fisher recalls:



"What happened is that every time I put a conventional frontlight on, from the good old 45 degree-ish angle like in the books to do the general cover, it was fine - but the floor didn't look so good. It looked plastic (it was fibreglass, vac form, bespoke - of course - because there were at one point five different scales of brick in the floor to give the sense of perspective). It was also raked, so the light hit it more in your face than if it had been a flat floor. It just looked plasticky, and it also felt like you could see the joins in the 8x4 sheets where it had to come in and out for rep. "But every once in a while, when I turned on something in the slots just downstage of the proscenium, or something that was on the side, the light skittered off into the distance. And remember, stage left had a lot of distance. So the light lit somebody, but they weren't lit on the ground, they were just lit as a person."

This is, of course, a technique that has long been used to light dance, letting performers float independently of the floor. But though Fisher would later add Matthew Bourne's innovative *Swan Lake* to his resume of long-running shows, at this time he'd only done tiny bits of dance. It was a new discovery; the choice was whether to run with something that looked better, even if it was unconventional. "It was just a few cues and all of a sudden that worked, and I kept doing a bit more of it - finding that worked - so when that front-of-house light comes on, I found I didn't really like it that much any more. So . . . I turned it off! The only thing that really worked from the overhead rig was the backlight, so ultimately we gridded all of the other bars. The flyman did eventually shout down, in that wonderful NT way, 'what the fuck are you lighting this show with?!'"

"In effect, the show started to tell us what looked good. And we went with it. Later, I did a lot of post-design rationalisation, but then we just found something that worked and went with it."

What Fisher arrived at, which remains the heart of the show's lighting today, is a series of crosslights that can get in to the performers without lighting the floor. This is often described as 'head high' crosslight and often thought to come from the sides of the stage, but neither detail is quite correct. Rick Fisher continues: "You don't want it straight across the stage, but from a little bit in front. So when the actor is looking across the stage, to the person they're talking to, their face is lit, they're not in the shadow of the person they're talking to. And it should be a little bit higher than head high, so they don't have to look directly into it. Sometimes you want different heights of sidelight, again to get around performers."

The colour palette is muted: "A wide range of colour from open white all the way through to 202," as the designer describes it, though the lighting inside the house (which the family perform most of the first scene locked inside, remarkably) is a little warmer - 205/206 corrections. "Again, the post-design-rationalisation is that once the family come out of the warm cocoon of their



house and enter the wasteland of facing up to the Inspector and their possible actions, it becomes harsher. And they don't belong in that landscape, so the sidelight allows us to 'inspect' them, but they don't connect to the landscape because they don't have a traditional sunlight shadow onto the floor. They're always floating; they can move around the stage but they're not grounded in that landscape."

The crosslight also allows the different element of the stage - the performers in the landscape, the house, the sky,

the telephone box, and the rain - to be individually lit and balanced. The rain - water sprayed through nozzles of various sizes from an overhead pipe, some directed down, some up to bounce off a piece of guttering - was a challenge. It, too, ultimately lit from the side to make it sparkle while keeping its surroundings dark. Historically, a set of specially adapted narrow-angle PAR battens have done this job, though in New York it was lit with Lekos and with the PAR battens becoming hard to maintain, this became one of the elements updated for this West End run.

Spatial wizardry

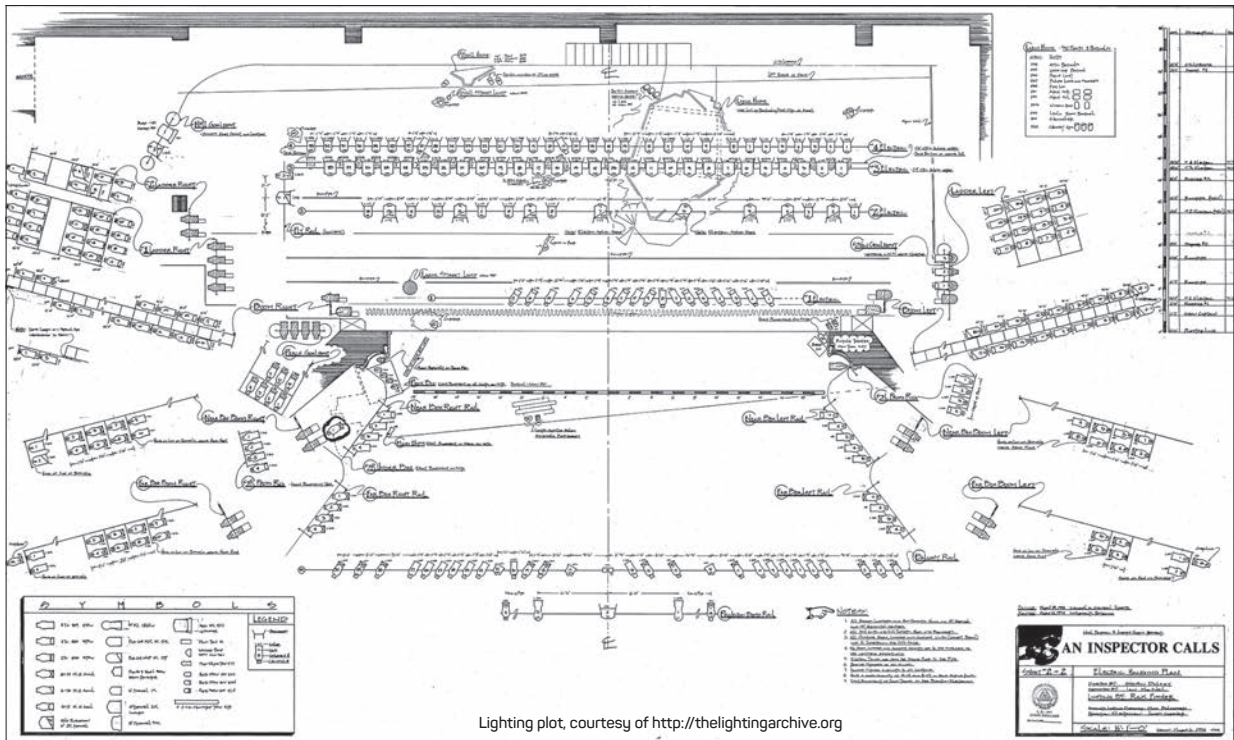
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Lighting plot, courtesy of <http://thelightingarchive.org>

- ↑ Above: The lighting plan for Broadway, 1994
- Facing page: The 21st century update
- ↓ Below: Rick Fisher photographed on the stage of the recent production during a presentation for the ALD

The show has three other key moments. There's the first appearance of the Inspector. "I wanted to cast a big shadow of him on the side of the house, so there's been a light hidden away originally at the bottom of the slot in the Lyttelton, sometimes behind the telephone box, just to do that. For a long time it was a Patt 23, which kind of goes back to seeing some old lights on stage in York, but now it has become a Source Four, so it's a bit more discrete."

There's the appearance of the crowd from the future, from 1940s Britain, who appear in a cloud of smoke dramatically lit in HMI white. "It was the age when *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was relatively recent in all our minds. The idea of the aliens coming out of a very, very bright light through smoke was an iconic image - like all things, we were like magpies taking and stealing and borrowing ideas."

And then there's the break with the show narrative, as the Inspector says 'stop' then steps out of the play to address the audience directly. "To me, it's like the worklights or, even better, the cleaning lights have come on, those horrible lights that make the theatre look terrible so you can see where everyone's left their sweet wrappers," says Fisher. "I wanted to drain all the theatricality out, to show everyone warts-and-all what it is. So we have a big 5k Fresnel on the circle front that casts a shadow of the proscenium on the sky, you could see it was a flat painted sky, that there were just people looking dusty, that some of the audience were lit. What's really important is that the cue doesn't happen on the world stop, that beat when

someone says 'turn on the worklight', so it feels accidental, not expected. Then, slowly, it subverts and turns into the big speech where the Inspector is traditionally lit by two 45 degree angle spots - for that one moment I do want you to connect to what the Inspector is saying in a very traditional, simple way."

EVOLUTION

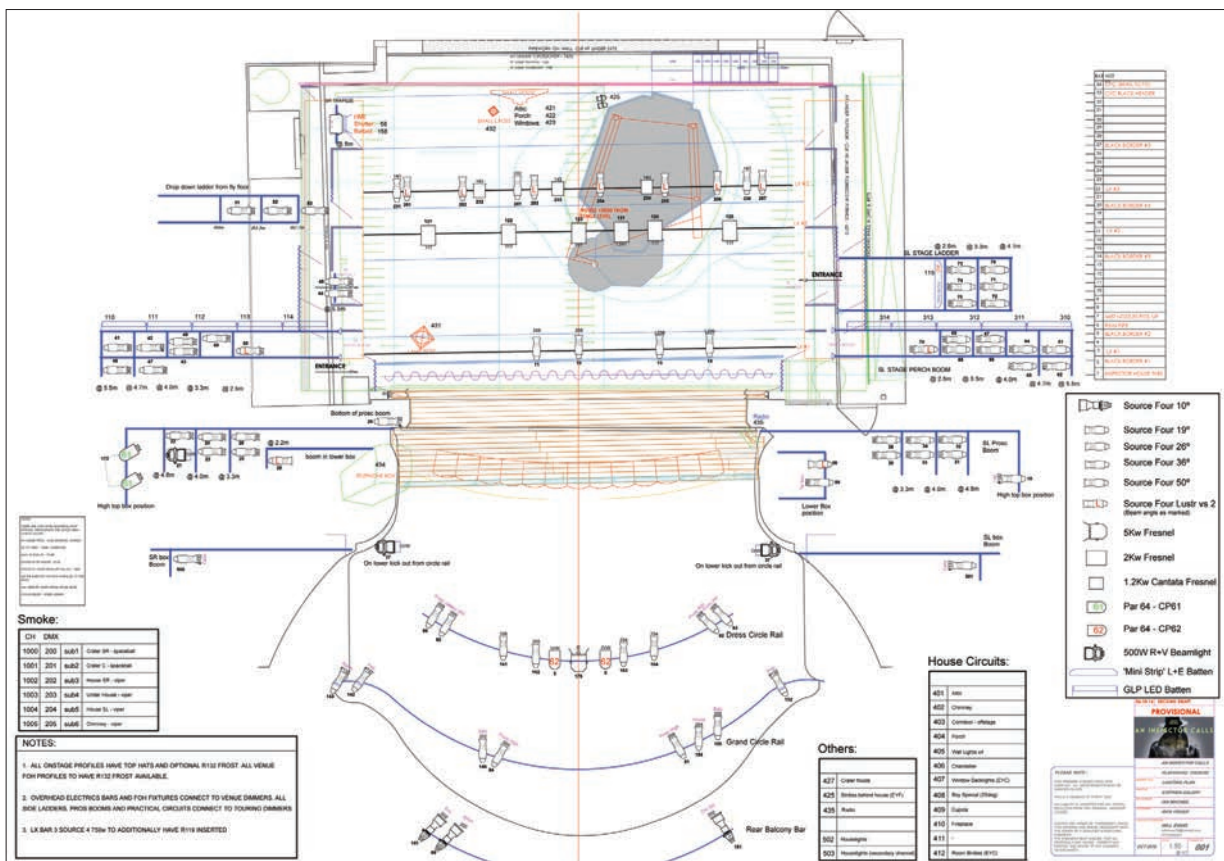
The show's lighting has always evolved over time. The lights it was lit with originally - the generation of Silhouettes and Harmonys and Cantatas - have fallen out of use. New York in 1994 did feature ETC's then-new Source Four, but alongside a bunch of more traditional Lekos as well as some other light fittings not usually found on Broadway. Fisher adds: "There are lights in the craters in the floor; I told them just to go by the kind of lights they'd use outside their houses, cheap and already waterproof!". The rig has also expanded and contracted over time, becoming much bigger in New York ("my production electrician and Mike Baldassari, my associate, said 'rig spares - if you don't use it, no-one cares, if you want to add it, it ain't going to happen . . .'"); Fisher won a Tony Award for his work on the show), and ultimately contracting down to a very efficient touring package in the hands of a line of associates that have included Ian Saunders, Tony Simpson and now Will Evans, the show produced by PW Productions, whose managing director, Iain Gillie, was the show's assistant production manager way back when at the National. They have getting the show in down to a fine art, notably the way that the cyc and cyc lighting bar are rigged and focused before the rest of the set is built.



Photo: Ian Saunders/ALD



Photo: Mark Doucet



Now the rig has evolved to incorporate some new technology. "We had plenty of warning about coming in to the West End this time, and we knew there were some things we needed to solve - the PAR battens were becoming hard to maintain, getting to the cyc bar in the event of a blown lamp or burnt-out colour was tricky, but we had plenty of time, and lots of support from our rental company, White Light, to figure out new solutions - though they did ask that in return maybe their weekly payment should enter this century . . ."

In both cases, LEDs have provided a new solution. The PAR battens are gone, replaced by two vertical runs of five of GLP's X4 Bar to give an intense, narrow sheet of light across the rain . . . "though of course now they're there, we do move them a little bit and use some of the pixels at a few other points in the show."

While the rain was lit in a single colour, the cyc was a trickier project. "We used to have four colours, with the lights across the cyc often run at different levels to give just the right amount of blending and just the right colour. I give Will Evans a lot of credit for the way he handled this transition - he went to White Light, rigged the four colours, then matched the resulting mixes in a Source Four Lustr2 on the Gio console we use now. We looked at using the cyc lens, but using a profile spot just felt like we retained more control particularly at the edges of the cyc - this is something that became possible as wider angle profiles have got better - they didn't really exist when we first did the show."

"The Lustrs work really well. Of course, the cloth reacts a bit differently to the LED light, so we took Will's preparation work then just played with it more in the theatre, making individual adjustments. It looks great - plus we know that in one moment in the show we used to have almost all the cyc lights turned on; maybe 36kW of power. Now we're doing it with seven Lustrs."

Lustrs established in the rig, they also snuck into some of the front-of-house lighting positions. "Particularly in some of

the Edwardian theatres the show visits, we've always been hampered by only having so much room in the area where our front-of-house crosslight lives. Having the Lustrs here now just gives us more options in that open white to 202 range, maybe even just a little bit deeper."

Though the Lustrs do nestle between four 500W R&V beamlights, for which Fisher and his team "have not yet found a replacement that quite does the same thing - that extra bit of oomph, that different quality of light that I can't quite define but know is there."

THE INFLUENCE, THE FUTURE

Inspector Calls is back in hibernation now, after a long, successful and largely packed-out West End run at the Playhouse Theatre. It'll doubtless be back, though - it's too good a production to vanish for long, particularly since its message about the need for society to support society rather than everyone being abandoned to their own fate feels in many ways more relevant than ever in this Brexity, Trumpity age.

Even when it is not playing, though, its ongoing influence is clear to feel in other productions, particularly *Billy Elliot*, which the same team went on to create and which is still touring the UK.

For Fisher, the show provided, in many ways, the formation for the way he works to this day. "What I learned from this show about how I like to light people is still in evidence in everything I do. It allows me to give visibility but somehow to retain the feel that darkness is still there."

Look in many theatres today, at the lights clustered low just in front of and behind the proscenium or around the jaws of the National's Olivier, and it's clear this approach has spread far beyond just one designer. "I didn't invent this," Fisher notes. "This show, for very practical reasons, distilled it for me, and maybe other people saw it and took note of it. I just think it's become a way of doing it, allowing you to light people very clearly as they move around the stage." ✕