

THEATER REVIEW: CAT Collaborative's fine dialogue brings intriguing play to life

Monday

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When “An Inspector Calls,” you might want to think twice about answering the door. In any case, definitely ask to see the badge. J.B. Priestley’s mid-century thriller about a privileged family and the consequences of its actions has many layers of meaning — social, political, even meta-physical. But one takeaway from CAT Collaborative’s production, onstage at the Gorton Theatre through April 9, is impossible to miss: it’s great theater. And this troupe does a great job making it come to life.

By Keith Powers/Correspondent

If you go...

WHAT: CAT Collaborative, “An Inspector Calls”

WHERE: Gorton Theatre, 267 East Main St., Gloucester

WHEN: through April 9

TICKETS: \$20. Visit www.capeanntheatrecollaborative.com or email catcollab@gmail.com

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Priestley’s drama revolves around a successful capitalist clan, and how their unthinking actions foist misery on the working poor. A young woman (we never see her, and she has multiple names) has committed suicide; an Inspector Goole (think about that name) comes to investigate this wealthy family, the Birlings, who are celebrating their daughter’s promising engagement at dinner.

One after another the Birlings — father (David Rich), daughter (Ashley Skeffington), son (Colin Colford), mother (Lauren Ashly Suchecki), and the fiancé (Nathan Arroyo-Long) — get cornered into confessing some part in the girl’s suicide.

The father fires her from her job in his factory. The daughter gets her fired from her subsequent job in a shop. The fiancé has an affair with her. The son gets her pregnant. The mother turns her away when she comes begging.

The inspector (Bob Karish) does a brilliant job poking each family member in turn, just enough to get them talking. The gambit works, and by the time the inspector leaves the drawing room, the family’s reputation is ruined. None of them actually caused her suicide, but all of them were complicit.

But wait. Who was this inspector? A phone call to the constable reveals that no such inspector exists. Another phone call reveals that no suicide has happened. They’ve been hoaxed. Everything they’ve confessed was true, but the circumstances that led them to confess were false. But then the phone rings again.

This is drawing-room intrigue at its peak. The set never changes — post-Victorian dining room. The costumes don’t either: a swank family dressed for dinner. No gunshots, nothing unexpected, no deus ex machine — just a family, whose lives unravel because of their own deeds, and through their own words.

Priestley's politics — the play was first performed in the Soviet Union, and the dialogue heaps gobs of socialist guilt on the business success of papa Birley — certainly add a layer of importance to this drama.

As do Priestley's own ideas about time — idiosyncratic, and interesting. Priestley was a follower of J.W. Dunne, who believed (to over-simplify) that everything that happens — from the past to the future — exists simultaneously. It's just our perception of those events that holds us back from comprehending them all.

So if there was a suicide, and it caused all these confessions, and then there wasn't a suicide after all, but then there actually is a suicide — well, all of that fits nicely into Priestley's space-time view of things.

“An Inspector Calls” is simply talk, and this cast excels in making that talk come alive. Director Pauline Miceli has them all in the right place at the right time; the movement and blocking feel organic. Accents are British, of course, but not forced, and never a distraction.

It takes a long time for the Birlings' stories to unravel, and not that long a time for it to rewind itself back into smug superiority. That is a fault of Priestley's, not of this excellent troupe.

But if the maxim “the tale is in the telling” were ever true, it is here. And CAT Collaborative tells it well.

The CAT Collaborative's production of J.B. Priestley's “An Inspector Calls” runs through April 9 at the Gorton Theatre. Visit www.capeanntheatrecollaborative.com or email catcollab@gmail.com.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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