An Inspector Calls by J.B. Priestley: An introduction

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GCSE

Introduction

This six-week scheme is, fundamentally, an exploration of dramatic/theatrical skills, which uses J.B. Priestley’s An Inspector Calls as a vehicle for progression. Over six one-hour workshops, GCSE students will focus on and develop their acting and characterisation skills, while also discussing other ways to stage the play and the themes/context behind it – all culminating in one final performance of an extract of their choice.

While the scheme is not tied to any particular examination board, it can very easily be used within the AQA Drama confines, providing a learning framework or introduction which can be further expanded to support your students’ exam entries. If your centre also studies the play in GCSE English, this can be a fantastic way to enhance the learning through exploring the text from a more dramatic standpoint.

Learning objectives

Throughout this scheme, students will:

- Discuss An Inspector Calls as a play, and develop a good understanding of it
- Learn how to use voice and body language to better convey a character
- Consider and discuss the staging of the play, and how that could be effectively altered
- Discuss how to use props to provoke the audience’s imagination
- Learn how to study, examine and interpret a script.

Workshop 1: Context and character

Learning objectives

In this workshop, students will:

- Begin to discuss and understand the play
- Begin to understand the struggles between classes before the Second World War
- Gain more general contextual knowledge that can be used in performance
- Develop improvisational skills.

Starter (10–15 mins)

Bring the group into a circle and, before introducing the theme, topic or play, begin the following activity.

Pick out two students at random, and ask them to stand at opposite sides of the circle. As a very simple task, ask them to walk towards each other, meet in the middle and shake hands. Now replay the scene, but with you, or the workshop leader, narrating the following: ‘A man walks into a meeting with his boss to ask for a pay rise.’ Ask the group how that changes the scene.

Play with this a couple of times, varying the students and the narration. Other ideas: ‘A man and woman meet for the first time’; ‘A man meets his partner’s father for the first time’ and ‘A working-class woman approaches a middle-class man for a job’. Be as creative as you like, but try to keep within the play’s themes/ideas.

Discussion (10 mins)

Now ask the class to sit down either on the spot or on chairs in a circle, and tell them what play you are about to begin looking at. Ask why that starter may have been appropriate, and what they know about the play (if anything). Give them a brief history: that it was written by Priestley in 1945, but is set in the fictional town of Brumley in 1912. Tell them the basic plot.

Ask them again if the starter makes any more sense now, and ask what they know about the class system around the time of the First World War, the role...
of women at that time, etc. See what responses you get, before bringing the answers together with a little bit of information about the time it is set in and, in particular, the class system.

**Main activity (20 mins)**
In keeping with the last discussion, the main activity for this workshop focuses on how women were perceived in 1912 and the expected differences between the working class and middle class. At this stage, it is very much based on the small discussion earlier unless the students know more information from other subjects. That being said, it is important to help coach and direct their ideas.

Split your class into groups of 4 or 5, and try to ensure the number of groups is an even number. While the whole class will be focussing on family life, one half of the class will look at a working-class home and the other will look at a middle-class home. The aim is to devise a short piece that presents the father returning home from work at dinner time to his family. Ask the groups to focus on how the father treats the mother, and how the children react to both parents. They have 15 minutes to devise and rehearse this. Make sure they are aware that they will be asked to pause/freeze at random moments throughout their performance, so they need to be prepared to use freeze frames.

**Performance and plenary (15 mins)**
Have your class form an audience line in front of your performance space. Explain how the performances are going to work a little differently to what they might expect or be used to, as two groups are going to perform simultaneously: one working-class group will use one side of the performance area and one middle-class group will perform on the other side, creating a split stage scene. Furthermore, they will perform at alternate times using freeze frames and you will use the instruction ‘Freeze’ or ‘Switch’ to change between groups. This gives the whole class the chance to see the differences between classes properly.

Once all the groups have performed, discuss what they have learned and discuss where their knowledge or skills could improve. Stress to them that this was the first workshop on the subject and everything takes practice!

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**Workshop 2: Characterisation**

**Learning objectives**
In this workshop, students will:
- Start to think about the Birling family and what they represent
- Consider how body language creates a sense of character
- Begin to consider how characters interact with each other
- Develop improvisational skills.

**Warm-up (10 mins)**
As this workshop will focus on character, a warm-up based on body language is both useful and relevant. A simple yet effective warm-up is to ask students to walk around the room, ensuring all empty spaces are filled. Imagine the room is balanced on a ball in the centre, and the room will tip if each corner is not balanced. Call out, at random, emotions or traits that can be interpreted by the students and shown in character. For example, if the trait is ‘powerful’ we would look for students to assert their power using levels, stance, general body language, etc.

**Discussion (10 mins)**
Bring the group into a circle and ask them why body language is so important when acting and how it can be used, considering ideas like stance, posture, movement and levels. Ask the group who Arthur Birling is, what he does for a living and what he’s like as a character, etc. Also, be sure to ask why the group think Priestley chose to call him by just his surname in the play, and what that might tell us instantly about him.

**Hot seating (10–15 mins)**
Remaining in the circle, ask if you have a volunteer who thinks they know the character of Birling well. In typical ‘Birling’ fashion, the volunteer will not be seated for this activity, but will stand in the middle of the circle to answer the questions, in character, from those around the outside.

For those who have either not yet read/studied the play or did not complete the homework, this is a really good opportunity for them to become familiar with the

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**Extension**
If you have some students that you want to challenge further, consider providing them with some extra contextual information and ask them to play on that even more. Additionally, ask them to consider levels, along with the way the characters interact on a non-verbal basis.

**Extension**
If your class has already read the play or discussed the characters, you could call out character names during this exercise to really test their knowledge.

**Extension**
If you think it would benefit your class’s understanding, discuss the idea of Birling being patriarchal and a capitalist, and what that makes other characters in the play, e.g. Eva.
character; for example who he is, what he stands for, who/what he holds dear, if he has any secrets, his thoughts on the Titanic/possible future World War, etc. Feel free to change the actor whenever you think suitable.

Main activity (15 mins)
With information now collected about Birling, and a consideration of how he might hold himself, the main activity in this workshop aims to put these skills to the test. Split your class into groups of around 6 and ask for each group to have an Arthur Birling, while the others are workers in his factory, ‘Birling and Co.’ Each group is going to create a short piece based on how Birling acts and, moreover, how other characters react around him, and will be created from a piece of improvisation.

Each scene will start with the people working in the factory. Each person must have a job role. They must do their jobs in-role at all times, and they have done their job for years so they are very relaxed. The tension will slowly start to rise until Mr Birling enters the factory, clip-board in hand. He walks around the space inspecting the workmanship and the workers themselves, and can ask questions if he wants. If he asks a question, no matter what the response, Birling must sigh before making notes. This will continue until Birling leaves, at which a sigh of relief can be heard as the workers carry on with their jobs.

The only way this works is if the factory workers remain in role too, and consider how they work when unsupervised versus how they work when watched very closely by their boss!

Performance and plenary (15 mins)
To begin Workshop 3 early, which focuses on the staging of the play, having the students perform their short pieces in the round is one option, or you could have them stage it conventionally depending on how you think the performers will adjust.

If you do decide to perform in the round, once all of the groups have performed (and if you have time remaining), ask the students what the advantages and disadvantages of this are before the session draws to an end.

Workshop 3: Set and staging the play

Learning objectives
In this workshop, students will:

- Consider the many different ways in which a play can be staged
- Start to think about how An Inspector Calls could be staged
- Learn briefly about other movements
- Continue to develop their improvisational skills.

Starter: Discussion (10 mins)
Bring the group into a circle – either standing or seated, but not on the floor. Place a chair in the middle of the circle and ask, if the space in the middle of the circle was a stage, what could the chair represent? Ask if, by seeing that chair, we feel a sense of where we could be: A classroom? A waiting room, perhaps? Or maybe an interview, etc. Encourage students to offer their ideas or interpretations.

Explain that, sometimes, due to restrictions or budget, theatres (and schools) can’t afford to build big, elaborate sets like the one Priestley suggests in An Inspector Calls. Sometimes less can be more, and there are many ways in which a text can be staged.

Explain that the play could be presented as a minimalist piece, and ask the students if they know what that word or term means. If not, give a brief explanation but don’t go into lots of detail for the purposes of this workshop. Now ask the students the following: If we were to put on An Inspector Calls as a play, and we couldn’t do the elaborate dining-room set and focussed more on minimalism, how could we look at staging it? Give them a minute or two to talk before feeding back, and then discuss the ideas as a group.

Quickly inform the students that this workshop is devoted entirely to set and staging, and that it will require them to be alert and able to use their imagination – just as we would expect the audience to.

Activity 1 (15 mins)
To begin with the most minimalist staging possible, explain to the students that some contemporary productions now, rather than having any staging at all, devise a short piece of script which the actors read from an off-stage position to describe
the scene. This plays very much on the audience's imagination, so requires very clear and concise description.

Split the class into groups of 3–5 and, based on their homework, ask them to devise a very short script to be read to the group, which sets the scene for a play similar to An Inspector Calls. This does not have to be exactly like the play, particularly as Priestley's description of the set is extremely specific due to the 'drawing-room drama' movement; even this would need re-writing into an appropriate form if a company were using this method of staging.

After just over 10 minutes, invite the groups back to a circle and see if any of them would like theirs to be read out. You can judge these as a class on their effectiveness from an audience’s perspective.

**Activity 2 (20 mins)**
This next activity offers the students a little bit more freedom in terms of the route they take. Building up from the absolute minimalist vocal set, students could either:
- Make use of the props you have provided, creating an ‘iceberg set’ that focuses on the surface material (i.e. the symbol/signifier, like the chair from the beginning of the workshop) and doesn’t create any depth (as that is superfluous and unneeded); or,
- Consider using some of Brecht's Epic Theatre conventions and using labels on a blank canvas to suggest props or particular items of value.

**Sharing and plenary (10 mins)**
To end this session, have the students share with each other what they have been working on. I would suggest doing this almost like a tour, in which each group talks the class through what they have chosen and why, and why they have picked out those particular objects to show.

**Workshop 4: The Court**

**Learning objectives**
In this workshop, students will:
- Be introduced to The Birlings as a family
- Expand their play and character knowledge
- Expand and develop on their ability to ‘feed’ off one another’s dialogue
- Continue to develop their improvisational skills.

**Starter (15 mins)**
‘Open Thoughts’ is an improvisation-based, character-building circle game that challenges the person in the middle to be as creative as possible when developing the story. This is how to play: Student A, as Birling, would stand in the middle and might say ‘I remember my first day at Birling and Co.’. Someone in the circle would then respond by elaborating on that, saying ‘My first day at Birling and Co. was nerve-wracking’. Student A might say ‘My hands trembled, but I didn’t let my father see’, and then the next person in the circle would add, ‘My father was a great chap, but very strict about work’, etc.

**Discussion (5 mins)**
Explain to the students that they are to imagine, after the events of An Inspector Calls, that there was a court case for the girl’s death to determine which of the Birlings was most responsible. It is their job to ‘play’ this scene out, improvising in role, before coming to a decision on who was the most to blame.

Each student should have a character, and if they don’t they are either on the jury or the public gallery as audience members. Some students might not know the full story yet, but should learn this throughout the workshop through the information the other students (in-role) provide.

**Activity (40 mins)**
As this activity is so largely based on improvisation, there is no formal structure to control how it is performed. The rules are: The proceedings remain formal, the judge has any and all final ruling, everyone will stand when the judge enters and leaves, the defence lawyer can defend all Birling clients, the prosecuting lawyer can call anyone to the stand including witnesses. The final rule is to have fun with the idea, as it can be a really enjoyable way for the students to almost self-teach a text when the activity is controlled properly.
Workshops 5 and 6: Rehearsals and performance

Learning objectives
In these workshops, students will:
- Draw on the knowledge gained over the last four workshops
- Continue to expand their play and character knowledge
- Work more with scripts
- Consider, in groups, how to stage their extract
- Continue to develop their improvisational skills.

Workshops 5 and 6 are tied together to allow the students the opportunity to delve deeper into an extract of their own choosing from the play, while also considering, in detail, how they would like to stage it. This freedom will support their own personal development and growth, as well as providing further preparation for their GCSE if you have chosen to use this scheme as an introduction.

Starter: Discussion (10 mins)
This is a slot for you to brief the class on how the next two workshops are going to work, what your expectations are, and what you would like the outcome to be. This will also be a time for the students to get into groups (should you not have chosen those for them; I would recommend no more than 4) and choose the extract they would like to work on – this could be anything along the lines of the opening few pages, the introduction of The Inspector, the end of Act 2 or the ultimate end of the play with Act 3.

Rehearsal (45 mins)
Once the students have got into groups and chosen their extract, this is time for them to hold read-throughs of their script, design their set, and block the movement before rehearsing properly.

Workshop 6: Performance
Although this is scheduled to be a performance session, 10 minutes at the beginning would give students any time they need to have a final run-through, change into costume and/or gather props. Of course, some props may be used in multiple groups, so ensure these are accessible.

Plenary and discussion (5 mins)
If there is any time left at the end, it would be a fantastic opportunity to remind students what they have achieved in such a short span of time and discuss the positives and negatives of the experience. Open a forum-style conversation in a circle, and simply offer time in which to congratulate and reflect!

Homework
As Workshop 5 is the last before the performance session, students should strongly consider using any time in between to consider any props or costume they need or would like to have, as well as rehearsing. If this is going to be adapted into a final GCSE piece, students would need to make sure they are completely off script for Workshop 6.