CREATIVE STAGING

Rob Halliday looks at 'An Inspector Calls' and 'Machinal'

I'm sure that there are some people on this planet who just don't think in the same way as the rest of us - who see things differently, imagine things differently, and so create things differently. And I'm sure that Stephen Daldry and Ian MacNeil are two people who fit into this category.

Daldry and MacNeil are the director/designer team who have now taken the London theatre scene by storm not once but twice, with productions at the National Theatre which have received huge critical acclaim, won countless awards, packed theatres for long periods of time - yet have never been the safe, conventional pieces of direction and design that the public and critics often go for.

J B Priestley's 'An Inspector Calls' came first. When it appeared in the National's publicity leaflets many peoples' thoughts ran along the line of 'what are the National Theatre doing reviving that tired old warhorse, the story of a fake Police Inspector visiting a wealthy family and revealing that each was independently involved in a young girl committing suicide' - familiar from amateur productions staged in traditional box sets. When the play opened, the critics were, for once, united in acclaim. The play left the Lyttelton, toured Britain, returned to the Lyttelton, moved next door into the larger Olivier to let more people in to see it, and has now moved across the river to the Aldwych Theatre. And it is soon to spread to New York and Tokyo.



The Royal National Theatre production of J B Priestley's 'An Inspector Calls' which has received huge critical acclaim for its design.

It is also the best production I have seen in a long time. I'm afraid that with theatre my cynical nature often comes through; I'm sure the same is true of many other people who work in theatre. If a show is not perfect, they lose interest and start looking at the mechanics of the show and its effects. I've sat through 'An Inspector Calls' twice, and been riveted both times. Put simply, it is a superb production.

The show opens with an almost conventional look - red tabs in, a wooden floor on the forestage in front of the tabs. A more careful examination reveals that things may not be all that they seem - on stage right is a traditional red telephone box, its door lying on the floor; on stage left the floorboards are splintered and bent upwards, with an old radio sitting on the ground. Then as the show starts, with distant air raid sirens and battle sounds, a small child appears from a hole in the forestage, plays with the radio, then tries to lift the tabs and peer underneath. The music builds and the tabs fly to reveal a devastated landscape with smoking craters, surrounded by a huge grey sky and, centre stage, a doll's house sitting suspended on wooden stilts. Inside, the Birling family are having a celebratory dinner.

Even this early into the show, Daldry and MacNeil are daring. The audience are still adjusting to such an unconventional setting and Daldry just lets them look at it - for the first five minutes the cast stay inside the house, visible only by peering through the windows. Later, as the Inspector, with a quite superb performance by Kenneth Cranham, appears, and the action expands, the front section of the house splits and swings open to make the inside of the house visible, and to allow the cast to climb down to stage level and back into the house. This sets the tone for the whole production - the blasted landscape is treated as the house and most of the action takes place there rather than in the dining room, as it would have been in a traditional production, yet it is played with such assurance and conviction that the approach is quickly accepted by the audience.

But the house still has a purpose, and comes into its own as the family collapse into disarray once the Inspector has revealed each member's involvement in the girl's suicide - the whole house suddenly tips, sending crockery and furniture flying out and down to the floor below, smashing around the family. Later it rights itself again as, once the Inspector has left, the family reassert themselves and block what they have done from their minds. But Daldry doesn't just use scenic effects to get his point across - he also has 16 supernumerary cast members, who appear as the ghosts of the future to view the family's collapse. Remember, this is a commercial West End production, yet without these extras a whole dimension of the show would have been lost.

Technically, the show isn't that complicated, although its move through so many different theatres has led to changes at each stage. Ian MacNeil's design is based around the perspective of a conventional Victorian theatre, for example - a pros arch and red tabs - and so when the show transferred into the open stage Olivier Theatre at the National, a false pros arch was constructed. In the show itself the depth of the Olivier stage only helped the play, with the huge wraparound cyclorama seeming genuinely epic, and the vast area of the blasted landscape giving a beautiful sense of space and distance to the action.

The more cramped confines of the Aldwych have caused some re-design and the action is more compressed, especially the entrance of the supernumeraries. The weight of the house, with its steel frame and the two hydraulic rams used to tilt it and then pull it upright again, also caused concern to the Aldwych production team, but in the end caused no problems. Some re-engineering was however required to make the house lower, to overcome some particularly nasty sightline problems from the rear of the stalls.

A new floor was constructed for the Aldwych, since it is so much smaller than the Olivier. This also incorporates a waterproof lining, to make possible a great effect: inside the proscenium arch, a copper pipe fitted with sprinkler-type nozzles has been installed. This is connected to a tap and at certain points in the show water is fed along the pipe and appears as a fine haze, giving both depth to the stage and making the early scenes look as though they are taking place on a cold, rain-swept evening. The effect works well on its own, but the falling water also tends to catch and pull down the dry-ice and Skywalker-generated smoke which are also used, improving those effects as well.

Supporting the set, effects and action is Rick Fisher's superb lighting which, though a comparatively tiny rig, adds an unbelievable amount of atmosphere to the show while always keeping the actors clearly visible. The main rig consists of a few Silhouettes on the front-of-house upper circle slip positions, which light the pros arch and make it part of the show, some Sils and beamlights on the lower circle, Sils and Parcans on the pros booms to give crosslight on the forestage, and a bunch of Sil 30s on the downstage electrics bar. Slightly further upstage Patt 243s give toplight and backlight, and there are ladders and booms on stage to give more crosslight.

The most difficult element, access-wise, is the curved bar containing 24 1K Patt 743 fresnels and 24 2K Patt 243s fresnels, which are used to light the cyclorama, avoiding all of the nasty lines that often appear when a curved cyc is lit with conventional floodlights. The rig was supplied by White Light, but is run through the theatre's own dimmers and controlled from their Strand Mini Light Palette 90.

Mark Bloxsidge, the Aldwych's chief electrician, explained that the rig is really a large series of specials, and in performance the cues will gently fade from a special on one person to a special on the next, so that the stage is always kept fairly dark overall. The only



Sophie Treadwell's 'Machinal' given life by a combination of artistic and technical flair.

effects are an HMI lamp, used as backlight for the entrance of the ghosts of the future, and a barndoor-less 5k fresnel on the front of the upper circle. I remember when I first saw this show - the moment when this fresnel came on, washing the stage and illuminating most of the audience - was the only moment when I went back into technical mode and started thinking about the lighting as lighting. But then as the Inspector rounds on the audience in his central speech about collective responsibility, the play's main theme, this lighting makes perfect sense. Once again, Daldry and his team had made the unconventional work.

But while Fisher's lighting supports and creates the visual atmosphere, the play is also lifted by its use of sound (designed by Rod Mead) and music (by Stephen Warbeck), which underscore the action at crucial moments. At the National, the music was played by a live band and the sound effects were replayed from the National's mixture of samplers and cart machines.

At the Aldwych, the limited space led to an agreement being struck with the Musicians Union and the band being recorded. The score and effects are replayed from six Denon 2000F CD players and, since the opening sequence stretched even that set-up to the limit, a cassette player for the recorded rain! Operator Gary Newman is kept busy. The effects are taken through a Soundcraft 8000 16-8 desk and through a mixture of Hackney Cabs and EV S200s, which are supplemented by Bose sub-base units and JBLs at the rear of the auditorium. The system is beautifully clear, giving a very wide sound, but a sound that is made all the more exciting by the fact that when it stops, the Aldwych is wonderfully quiet, without the now-common hum of air conditioning, scrollers and all the other paraphernalia of modern theatre. The sound rig was supplied by Orbital Acoustics.

The only question arising out of 'An Inspector Calls' really was how Daldry and his team would follow it up. The answer was 'Machinal', a largely unknown piece by American author Sophie Treadwell which appeared in the Lyttelton Theatre in October last year. The play centres around one lone individual in a time when lives were becoming increasingly mechanised and standardised.

'Machinal' - French for mechanisation - was part of Theatre Projects Consultants' original design for the Lyttelton back in the 1970s, and the theatre was equipped with a full stage-size truck with built-in revolve, mainly to speed the change-overs between shows in the National's rep system. This truck can move into an upstage storage area, which is separated from the main stage by a steel fire door. When on the main stage, it can be lowered so that it's flush with the wings, it can be raised, or it can be tilted to give a raked stage. The theatre was also equipped with three forestage lifts, to allow a forestage or an orchestra pit to be formed quickly and easily. There is also a huge side stage area, again for storing shows - this originally had a stage truck as well, but that was removed some years ago. And finally, the safety curtain is a once-novel split design, half of which lowers to the floor while the other half lifts.

In 'Machinal', Stephen Daldry and Ian MacNeil use every piece of that stage equipment. And they let the audience see what they are doing - there is no masking in the show, and the cast use the fly floors and walkways as acting areas. Even the front of the stage has been replaced with metal mesh so that the lift machinery in the basement is visible. The problems caused were enormous. As Stephen Rebbeck, the production manager responsible for 'Machinal' explains: "the stage equipment hadn't really been used in this way before, and our engineering department were kept very busy during the technical period servicing and repairing all the machinery."

To all of this equipment, Daldry and MacNeil added their own centre-piece: the roof, a huge steel construction which lifts, lowers and tilts throughout play, sometimes with actors underneath it, sometimes with them on top of it, and once with it lowering down and them appearing through it. Rebbeck's original plan was to construct the roof from wood, but when it was decided to use it for acting on, the construction was changed to steel. Calculations by structural engineers showed that its unusual design, with a hole in the centre, meant that if one of the four support points was lost for any reason, perhaps because of the failure of a hoist, the structure would twist, and so two diagonal cross pieces were added to prevent this. This took the total weight up to eight tons, and necessitated the purchase of four new four-ton hoists, which are attached to the theatre's roof trusses. The hoists are fixed speed, and so the rest of the action in the show had to be worked around the roof. They are also low tech hoists, with no positional information, so positioning during the show is done by string marked with tape.

To match the roof, the theatre's back wall and fire shutters were painted rust-coloured, but other areas were left untouched. "Ian MacNeil loved the stage floor, with its broken paint and old tape marks," says Rebbeck, "so when we added new floor panels to the downstage lifts we actually had to break them down to look like the floor on the rest of the stage."

Technically, therefore, the show is complicated, and the kind that theatre crews





Daldry and MacNeil used this huge steel construction which lifts, lowers and tilts throughout the play to underscore the message of 'Machinal'.

can often get annoyed with, especially given that Stephen Daldry likes to create as he goes; elements of the show were still being added right up to the technical rehearsal. Yet, according to Stephen Rebbeck, the crew feel very involved with the show, "Daldry is very good at making people feel involved and taking their suggestions on board, and the technicians now appear in the show, riding down on the roof in the opening sequence making sparks fly by grinding the steelwork, and being in view when the trucks move - but it all fits with the concept of the production."

With the show now part of the Lyttelton repertoire, change-overs have to take place very quickly. The roof is stored flat on the upstage truck (it can be split and left suspended, but the 100-odd bolts make this process too time consuming) and, when needed, the truck is brought downstage, the hoists are attached and the roof is lifted out, leaving the truck clear to have the rest of the set built on it. The majority of the work is completed in three hours.

For 'Machinal', Daldry and MacNeil were again joined by Rick Fisher for lighting and Stephen Warbeck for music. Fisher's challenge on this show was less to add atmosphere, since the roof and size of the acting space have an atmosphere all of their own, and more to control that vast space, which he does with the help of a centre followspot to pick Fiona Shaw, who plays the heroine, out of the more general wash lighting, which gives different shapes and moods to the roof and the theatre as a whole. The overall look is very stark, with some tight specials again being used to isolate scenes. But there are also a few moments of lighting effects, such as the mirrorball under the raised stage to suggest a club, and the rotating guilty gobo used at the end of the trial scene to give the feel of an old black-and-white film. Control in the Lyttelton is from a Galaxy, and the house rig is now largely Strand gear.

Somehow, though, the sound is of more importance in this show. In 'An Inspector Calls', it was used as underscoring. Here, the sounds of life in the twenties - the office equipment, the industrial machinery - are part of what drives the central character to her madness. Christopher Shutt, one of the National's sound team, was responsible for the sound design of the show, in conjunction with composer Stephen Warbeck. Shutt asked to do the show because of his familiarity with Daldry's earlier work, and echoes Rebbeck's comments about the directors way of working. "He surrounds himself with a bevy of people, and asks them for their ideas. If he likes the ideas, he lets you have a pretty free rein, which makes people feel involved to a great extent."

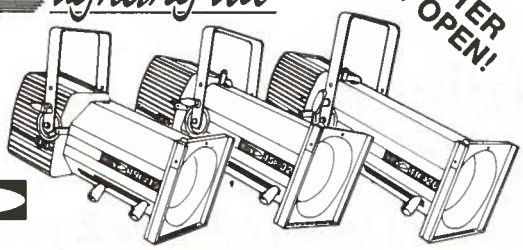
An example of their work is the show's opening sequence, set in a busy office filled with people working typewriters, filing papers, sending telexes and so on. In performance, the office sounds become underscoring as well as sound; music rising and falling with the tempo of the scene. And in fact it is *music*, developed through the rehearsal period - a percussionist plays a filing cabinet, some dustbin lids and a selection of chain and metal suspended from a wardrobe rail. The cast play their machinery, and Shutt supports them with recorded sounds of phones ringing and typewriters clacking. The overall effect, as it runs for perhaps ten minutes, is that the sounds get to the audience, and they too feel the overwhelming effect they are having on the young woman.

Shutt's effects (every real piece of stage equipment in the show has its own recorded sound) are replayed from a combination of Akai S1000 samplers and cartridge machines, and are then mixed with the sound from the sub-stage four-piece band through a 30-channel Cadac J-type console and sent out through the Lyttelton's standard system of EV Deltamaxes hidden in the pros arch, EV Dominators on the back wall, and base bins of various origins. Shutt also attached two old EV horns to the roof piece. "They had been in the roof of the Olivier Theatre since the building opened, but had never been used, so I stole them," he explained. "The designer saw them, and told me to leave the dust on them!"

Having designed the show, Shutt now operates it in performance as well, aided by PC-based MIDI sequencing software written by Matt McKenzie, that was brought in to cope with of the complex sequences in the show. He likes operating because he feels it is the final realisation of his design and also because, on a more practical level, "I have everything in my mind, whereas if another person were to operate the sound they'd be looking at cue sheets, which you don't really have time to do with a show like this which is so busy from beginning to end."

'Machinal' is not, I suspect, going to have the longevity of 'An Inspector Calls', due to the practical problems of transferring it into any other theatre. I also have to admit that, whilst I thought it was a great piece of work and quite superbly staged, I didn't enjoy it as much as 'An Inspector Calls' where the actors, rather than the technology, were in control. But then I also suspect that that feeling is exactly what 'Machinal' is intended to evoke - so perhaps it succeeded after all.

Stephen Daldry is now artistic director at the Royal Court Theatre. I'm looking forward greatly to seeing what his imagination, and the imagination of the rest of his team, come up with there.

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