

## review of *The Art of the Dramatist* by J B Priestley

*first published in 2006*

'Working in the Theatre with people is tricky because in there, away from daylight and common sense, everybody knows best. Not being really sure of anything, we all pretend to be absolutely certain about everything'.

In defiance of his own penetrating observation, Priestley, in this collection of diverse articles, lectures and miscellaneous pieces, seeks to unravel the mysteries of this most mysterious of art forms.

Lovingly but not uncritically edited by his son, the anthology falls into three distinct parts; Priestley's earliest theatrical influences and inklings, his overview of the history of drama and his thoughts on the current industry. Although most of the pieces are many decades old, the book is as urgent and relevant today as it was when these articles first appeared. Indeed, so modern do both argument and style feel that one experiences a mild frisson to hear Shaw described as one of our greatest living writers.

Ripe for a major reappraisal, Priestley is currently thought of as author of the hardy perennial *An Inspector Calls* and precious little else. However, in his lifetime he saw almost 40 of his plays produced, along with several film scripts and television plays. Motivated solely and tirelessly by his love of the art, Priestley was a rare talent in that he understood not only drama but also the theatre. He was equally in tune both with the artistic demands of the art and with the necessities and obligations of the industry. He sought, with that movingly naïve post-war simplicity, to fuse these elements into a unified arena of magic whose rightful place was at the forefront of national life. Without a hint of false modesty Priestley, as his name would suggest, saw himself as a straightforward servant of the art, at most perhaps a master craftsman. Certainly no troubled genius, and indeed towards the end of his life he made the admission that he may have written too much.

His early meditations bring to life that impossibly distant world of actors remembered from his childhood – performers the majority of whose careers had been during the reign of Queen Victoria. 'In those days actors looked like nothing else on earth' he declares with assiduous understatement; 'and my young heart, as innocent as an egg [!], went out to these romantic beings'. Such early excitement survived the growth of his critical faculties and indeed never waned throughout his life. Occasionally irate with actors, producers and governments, his is the righteous anger born of love. Even theatre-goers were not always immune from his ire; 'in London, people giggle and guffaw too easily... I always preferred the North, where they sat with tightened lips and narrowed eyes, grimly awaiting their money's worth'. It's hard to know which group should be more offended by its description.

Particularly gratifying is his breathless gallop through the history of theatre. This chapter is a tour de force of learning worn lightly, selflessly presented as an 'idiot's guide' from which nevertheless even the most erudite reader will take something new (in seventeenth-century France, for example, theatre

critics sat *on stage* and accompanied performances with a sneering commentary).

His thoughts on theatre today are clarion. 'An indifferent young actress with a film reputation would probably be given a leading part in preference to a really excellent actress'. Can anyone not think of half a dozen recent examples of this? Whilst not philosophically opposed to cinema, Priestley's main gripe is that it has pillaged much of the talent of theatre without bothering to return the favour.

Nostrils anxiously scanning for the first whiff of show-business, Priestley implores us to instead reconnect with the central, basic tenets of the art. 'We ought to think of the Theatre as it looks during an early rehearsal on a winter morning, cold and rather dirty, with the players in old clothes looking pinched and dreary, with no lights, no orchestra, no applause. But if the play, director and players are all of the right sort, something wonderful is beginning to happen, a delicate, intensely personal yet corporate affair.'

The only argument he fails to develop wholly convincingly is his theory of why it is so difficult to write a good play. He sets out to explain why such a task is harder than writing a novel, at which one sits up with delighted curiosity, but he cannot come up with anything more concrete than the observations that an audience is forced to experience a play in one real-time gulp, and that an audience brings a complex, dual perception to every theatrical event. His comparisons are always useful and gratifying, however; comparing theatre to cinema he notes 'in a very good restaurant we have a dinner that is specially cooked for us; in a canteen we are merely served with standard portions of a standard meal.' Priestley is always able to back up these abstract parables with the solid, practical observations that only a lifetime in theatre can provide.

Hopelessly out of date, though, are his lyrical musings on the role of the Arts Council in a proto-socialist society, but perhaps this is less to Priestley's discredit than to the politicians who have by omission run the industry into the ground over the past five decades. Goodness knows what Priestley – never far from despair regarding the nation's theatre even in the ruddy 1950s – would make of the ghostly pallor of today's funding bodies.

Priestley is at his most eloquent and sharp when writing straightforwardly about what makes theatre magic. The prose is deft, insightful and inspiring, but the current emaciation of the art-form renders this text almost unbearably moving. Say what you like about the inequalities and hypocrisies of post-war Britain, at least every self-respecting bowler-hatted commuter and market town Rotarian would take his wife to the latest Noel Coward on a Saturday night. Today families think nostalgically of a time when they all watched the same television programmes in the same room. If theatre is communal and social, how can we be surprised it has not survived the death of community and society?

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