



Present



*Time
and the
Conways*

By J.B.
Priestley

J. B. Priestley

John Boynton Priestley was born in 1894 in Bradford. On the outbreak of World War One he immediately joined the British Army and was sent to serve in France. He saw plenty of front line action including the Battle of Loos in 1915 and in 1917 was wounded, returning home for six months. Having sent back to the Western Front he was gassed and finally classed as unfit for action whereupon he was transferred to the Entertainers section of the army.

On leaving the army he attended Trinity College, Cambridge reading History and Politics. His first job was as a theatre reviewer for the Daily News, also contributing articles for The Spectator and other notable journals. His first significant novel was *The Good Companions* (1929) -also dramatised as a play - but his main work was as a playwright, completing over fifty plays, the best known of which are *Dangerous Corner* (1932), *Time and the Conways* (1937), *When We Are Married* (1938) and *An Inspector Calls* (1947).



In June 1940 Priestley began his broadcasting career with a programme called *Post Scripts* which followed the *Nine O'Clock BBC radio news* each Sunday evening. This was a commentary, particularly covering war events, which became so popular that an estimated 40% of the population were listening. Conservative activists however were less than happy with some of the views expressed and the programme was discontinued in October 1940. Priestley later claimed to have received two letters on the same day - one from the Ministry of Information, thanking him for his services and expressing regret that the BBC has decided to shelve the programme and one from the BBC with a similar (but totally opposite) version of events!

From 1941 Priestley became more active politically and founded the socialist *Common Wealth* party with (amongst others) Richard Acland who demonstrated his commitment to *Public Ownership of Land* by giving away his 19,000 acre Devon estate (*Killerton*) to the National Trust. Later (towards the end of the 1950s) he was a founder member of the *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND)* along with Bertrand Russell, Michael Foot and others.

Since the early 1930s Priestley was inspired by the views of J.W. Dunne who espoused a view of Time with the past, present and future coexisting, but with the Human mind only able to comprehend it in linear fashion. Dunne explained this as all the pages in a book existing all at the same time but we can only read one at a time. This concept (which Priestley never veered from) was the inspiration for all his 'Time Plays' of which *Time and The Conways* is the clearest example. Dunne's best known works include *The New Immortality* (1938) and *Nobody Dies* (1940) but these did not prevent his own death in 1949.

Events of the last twenty years have discredited many of Priestley's political views but here is no doubt of his contribution to present day society. Certainly he was held in high respect for his sincerity, integrity and honesty by all who knew him from all sides of the political divide. He died in August 1984 at the age of 90.

CAST

Conways:	Mrs Conway	Ann Hoole
	Alan	Richard Elston
	Madge	Sam Kirkham
	Robin	Simon Burch
	Hazel	Jay Brooksbank
	Kay	Jenny Hill
Others:	Carol	Claire Daly
	Joan Helford	Sylvia-Mary Haselock
	Ernest Beevers	Matt Ogden
	Gerald Thornton	Alan Byrne

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Act One - An autumn evening in 1919; a birthday party for Kay
Act Two - Another autumn evening in 1938; another birthday for Kay
Act Three - Later that same evening in 1919

The scene throughout is the parlour of Mrs Conway's home, a detached villa in a prosperous suburb of Newlingham, a manufacturing town in the North of England.

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Set Construction	Stephen Hoole, Derek Hillenbrand, Tony Burch, Matt Reading
Furniture, Props, Costumes, Hairstyles, Makeup	Rosemary Taylor, Vicky Remnant, Jodie Reading, Sharon Ogden and <i>especially</i> Shirley Byrne.
Set Design	Shirley Byrne
Posters and Programme	Matt Ogden with John Bull
Prompt	Doreen Williams
Ticketing	Jill Hillenbrand
Stage Manager	Clayton Vellacott
Lighting	Adrian Shepherd
Assistant Producer	Maggie Cooksley
Producer and Director	Andy Hill

The Halse Players would like to thank The New Inn for the provision of rehearsal facilities

Ann Hoole (Mrs Conway)

In playing the part of Mrs Conway, Ann is following in the shoes of some outstanding actresses including Claire Bloom and Penelope Keith. Ann's background is much more in singing than drama and whilst in Gloucestershire appeared in *The Mikado*, *Iolanthe* and *Patience* (all G & S). She has also played the part of Nancy in *Oliver*.



'Mrs Conway is a possessive mother who is at her happiest when her children fulfil her expectations. Unfortunately this doesn't happen very often.'

Ann is a retired teacher and has lived in Halse for 4 years. She spends most of her life trying to keep up with her husband.

Richard Elston (Alan Conway)



It was easy to cast Richard as Alan not because he is actually like him (because in many ways he's not) but because he does share certain key qualities such as kindness, generosity and pig-headedness. Richard sees it the same way: 'I enjoy doing the play because it enables me to put on a different persona. The character of Alan has some interesting similarities to me, although I think it is only his sister Kay who really understands him. The question is who really understands me!'

Richard has lived in Halse for 8 years now (Somerset all his life) and works as a Senior Countryside Ranger for South West Lakes Trust

Previous theatrical experience is confined to last year's pantomime where he played an outstandingly Ugly Sister to great acclaim.

Sam Kirkham (Madge Conway)

This is Sam's second acting role after a memorable non speaking part in last year's pantomime. The non speaking part was unintended and caused by laryngitis so we are hoping for better luck this time. Sam has enjoyed studying the part of Madge who is a clearly defined character she can 'get her teeth into.'

In the daytime Sam works as a Taxation Specialist with Taunton accountants Albert Goodman and enjoys riding in her spare time: 'Horses are much more predictable than theatrical types!'



Simon Burch (Robin Conway)

Simon was active on the boards at school, taking the lead roles in two musicals, *Sweeney Todd* and *Anything Goes*, but this will be his first foray into straight drama:

'I would normally prefer the idea of a Musical or Comedy but this play is clever and interesting. I am enjoying playing the part of Robin but I deny I have been type cast! I don't care for him as a person but there are elements in his character we secretly crave - not least being oblivious to his own failings and the fact that nothing is his fault!'

Simon has lived here or nearby for 18 years and is a self employed landscape gardener. A future in amateur theatre is predicted if he wants one.



Jenny Hill (Kay Conway)

The part of Kay would not have been Jenny's first choice but sometimes the Director knows best!



'Kay is a difficult character to get to know but I've come to like her more and more as rehearsals go on. She's deep but she doesn't let people in easily.'

This is Jenny's first theatrical outing as an adult building on the experience of being a rabbit in a ballet aged 7. 'The ears kept falling off and everyone laughed.' Undeterred she later played leading roles in *Our Town* and *Toad of Toad Hall*.

Jenny has lived in Halse for 14 years and works as a Homestart volunteer supporting families with young children who are having difficulties.

Despite the obvious challenges of working with this particular Director she is looking forward to celebrating her 35th wedding anniversary at the end of this year and maybe to a future in amateur theatre. 'I'm terrified of being onstage in front of an audience but I'm also looking forward to it. I like challenges and this has certainly been one for me. I am interested to see how it turns out and where it leads.'

Jay Brooksbank (Hazel Conway)

Jay has the unenviable task of delivering the first line but she will be able to draw on an early experience of playing the White Rabbit (why all these rabbit connections? Ed) in *Alice in Wonderland*. More recent acting experience was the part of Prince Charming in last year's panto (sorry, chaps - you won't see her legs this time) and she is enjoying the contrast of a straight play:



'Hazel is a great character to play. I enjoy being part of my stage family, but what a formidable lot the Conways must have been! The play for me is a fascinating insight into the attitudes of the time and shows exactly how we are all shaped by the era we live in.'

Jay works as a part time theatre nurse.

Claire Daly (Carol Conway)



Claire studied Dramatic Arts at college and appeared in both 'Grease' and 'Oliver'. She has only lived in Halse since the beginning of the year so the Halse Players did well to discover her so quickly.

'I like my character and think my family and friends would see a lot of similarities - particularly when she talks about all the things she wants to do in life.'

Claire works as a Project Officer for the Somerset County Council.

Matt Ogden (Ernest Beever)

Matt has been treading the boards for thirty eight years (though with a twenty five year dry spell) ranging from Joseph (interpreted as 'man who would not be still') - is this a nativity play? (Ed) to Brecht's Caucasian Chalk Circle. More recently Matt revealed more flesh than most (any?) of us like to see as Ali Baba in the Halse pantomime.



'I like the fact that the characters are all given reasons for being as they are plus the stretch provided by acting the same character twenty years apart. Any criticism of my accent should be addressed to my father who was born in Keighley' - very close to Newlingham in fact.

Matt works as a Civil Servant which he claims has helped put him in touch with Ernest's angry side. He has lived in Halse for five years now - although it does seem longer.

Sylvia-Mary Haselock (Joan Helford)

Having played a leading Shakespearean role at school (Taming of the Shrew), Sylvia acted with the Royal Navy (Alfie) in a competition winning cast. She has not acted for twenty years, however, and is looking forward to playing the role of Joan:

'I do feel a bit rusty as it was all those years ago but I hope to regain my acting confidence. It's great to be part of an acting group again, giving and taking support from one another to make this play a success.'

Sylvia is a Theatre Nurse and has lived in Halse for 21 years.



Alan Byrne (Gerald Thornton)

Alan is our most experienced player by far, a veteran of more than 25 productions. Most of these were in the 1970s and 1980s when he was an active member of the Alton Operatic and Dramatic Society and the Cheriton Players. Credits include My Fair Lady (Colonel Pickering) and Priestley's An Inspector Calls (the Inspector)



On moving to Halse 10 years ago Alan thought his acting days were over but playing the part of Buttons (possibly the most elderly Buttons in theatrical history) in the Halse pantomime has reawakened old desires:

'Being a solicitor in real life, playing the part of Gerald Thornton who is described as "a boring middle aged solicitor" has been a great challenge.'



Alan circa 1938

Andy Hill (Director)



Andy's amateur acting career goes back to the 1980s when he appeared in ten plays (none of them musical) including 'Rebecca,' 'As You Like It' and 'Rope.' This is the first time he has directed and he hopes to do it again when the memory has faded.

Andy has lived in Halse for 14 years and his occupation is a mystery to many. Some think he is retired, others see him as a semi professional golfer. In fact he runs his own business selling Town Centre Christmas Lighting throughout the UK.

It is recommended that you read this article after you have enjoyed the performance, as it contains clues to the plot.

Time and The Conways - a story with no heroes.

In 1985 Jenny and I saw a BBC production of Time and The Conways. Mrs Conway was played by Claire Bloom, Robin by Simon Shepherd (Peak Practice) and Ernest by Keith Drinkel. In fact we used a modern time-shift device called a Video Recorder and in the years since have enjoyed the play on a number of occasions. It has been a long held ambition for me to 'do' TATC but I always envisaged acting (I would love to play Alan) rather than as the Director!

This is a play which succeeds on a number of levels. It is perfectly accessible as the story of a poorly functioning family showing characters with weaknesses and faults familiar to all of us; it is also a vehicle for Priestley's rather odd theories of time. At the same time it is a bitter attack on the arrogance and incompetence of the middle classes in the between-war years, bemoaning the lost opportunities for social change and economic advancement.

For me the great beauty of the play is the realism of Priestley's characters. In no sense are they caricatures, designed to illustrate a single dramatic point but instead are real people with the usual complexities; the villains are not villainous all the time and the heroes.. well, I'm not sure if there are any!

The principal character is Mrs Conway whom we first see as a kindly and devoted mother, full of optimism for her children as they all look forward to a world without war. She is, however, quite incompetent - displaying favouritism and totally unable to understand the strengths or weaknesses of her various children. Occasionally she shows signs of wickedness but her fundamental stupidity is a much bigger vice.

So, turning to the Conway children, who are the good guys? Kay is an obvious candidate, making up for her mother's deficiencies with a clear (but forgiving) insight into the characters of her siblings. She is also prepared to defend them against her mother despite the fact that (in Act 2 at least) she is the youngest. But Priestley falls short of making her a heroine. She fails in her ambition to write (perhaps Priestley feels the middle classes are simply not up to this) and has an affair with a married man (with children, for goodness sake) which really serves no purpose to the plot other than to stain her character.

We are certainly sympathetic to Alan and Priestley does credit him with the insight and intelligence to expound the theory of time to which the playwright is so committed. His lack of ambition however is not just an aversion to the pursuit of material things, it borders on idleness and his failure to exert any influence on his mother to protect the interests of his younger siblings looks seriously negligent.

Madge is the vehicle for Priestley's socialist views and she is the only one of the family whom he invests with any kind of work ethic. Because of this we might expect her to emerge as the only decent one in the family but in Act 2 her principals have lapsed through disillusion, she is selfish about money and finds it difficult to accept any small act of kindness from her brothers and sisters. Perhaps Priestley doesn't like middle class socialists.

Our attitude to Hazel is an interesting one. Looking at the facts she is vain, interested only in the pursuit of enjoyment and social advancement, and is fundamentally shallow. Yet Priestley does not lay this on with a trowel. He allows us to sympathise with the predicament of her marriage (which is nobody's fault but hers) and we feel for her when she has to suffer her mother's attacks as much as anyone.

Robin is probably the most one dimensional character but I suspect our dislike of him is significantly enhanced by the injustice of his mother's favouritism. His fecklessness would hardly have been unusual with such a family background and he does carry the knowledge that he has let his wife and children down. Priestley gives him no credit for having served in the war (nor Alan for that matter) and he may well have to serve in the next.

Carol, of course is different. We are not to know what became of her but Ernest is convinced she was 'better than the lot of you' and the others do not demur. 'Only the good die young' is a familiar theme and a comfort to the tragically bereaved but is Priestley saying more than this? I think probably not. Certainly there is no suggestion that her survival to adulthood would have altered events - an idea one would think the author would have delighted in.

Of the characters outside the family, Ernest Beever is by far the most interesting. The prescience of the author (the coming war and the unionisation of the Railways leading to the loss of their freight traffic) is all delivered through the mouth of Beever. He is also industrious, generous and capable of kindness, hence his special attachment to Carol. Yet Priestley makes him a mean spirited bully implying even that he does his wife physical harm. Perhaps this is a good man made bad by the arrogance of the middle classes.

Gerald, the family solicitor, is important to the play on a number of levels. It is convenient, of course, for him to provide the factual information and he is the vehicle for Madge's failed romance which colours her future character. Gerald also serves to demonstrate that the Conway family do not have real friends; in Act 2 when the family business affairs have gone awry he is eventually treated as hired help and no-one in the family will defend him.

Finally, Joan Helford has our sympathy if not our admiration. Even without the revelations of Act 2 we know she is an unsuitable match for Robin which will end in tears. Like many mothers, however, the need to protect the interests of her children produce a stronger character than we thought. It is difficult to forgive the naivety that brought about the match in the first place however and Alan was very unkindly dealt with...

So, no heroes, no villains. We are used to seeing our characters, both on the stage and on film, more definitively drawn. For me the reason is simple - this is a real play about real people. I commend J.B. Priestley to you and hope you enjoy the play. Any failings are more likely to be ours than his.

A.H. June 2007.