

Review: ACT's 'Government Inspector' is light and lively

By Pat Craig
STAFF WRITER

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Director Carey Perloff rummaged through her mental toy box for the motivation to create her fanciful, colorful production of Gogol's "The Government Inspector," which opened Wednesday at ACT.

Inspired both by Russian folk toys, from nesting dolls to dervish dancers, as well as the frenetic action of vintage Looney Tunes, Perloff and her cast of excellent comic actors create a light-hearted and wonderfully entertaining revival of the 1836 Russian comedy about wildly misplaced government corruption and the eagerness of everyone involved to slice up the political pie.

Helped in no small part by Alistair Beaton's 2005 translation, a fanciful and completely off-kilter set by Erik Flatmo and Beaver Bauer's evocative costumes, the play, above all else is a tribute to the pure joy and exuberance of theater. In that sense, the play is happily reminiscent of productions from ACT's early years, when panache, jolly excess, and a giant-sized cast was often the norm.

"The Government Inspector" is set in a tiny Russian town, far away from the big cities and undue meddling from the government. This is why the town council is so disturbed when the Mayor (Graham Beckel) announces that a strong rumor suggests that there is a government inspector coming to town, and, to make matters worse, he is traveling incognito.

And, truth be told, there is plenty, from the state of the hospitals and schools to the post office and local legal system that leave much to be desired. In fact, the town's basic workings have so many flaws, it is impossible to determine just what the inspector will be looking for.

But just in case, all eyes are open in an effort to spot the inspector, which is why Khlestakov (a charming, slithery and silly Gregory Wallace), gets the royal treatment when he arrives in town. Not only does the mayor insist Khlestakov leave the seedy local hotel and stay at his place, but in short order all of the town's movers and shakers treat the visitor like a rich uncle with a bad cough. And, believing he is the inspector and realizing that money speaks much louder than talk, they set about bribing him.

Of course, Khlestakov isn't the inspector, but he's not pointing out the mistaken identity. He just enjoys the insanity that is making him well-fed and wealthy and seems content to ride the gravy train as far as it will take him.

And through it all, there are any number of performances that sparkle as tiny gems of comedy. Beckel plays the Mayor as the inept ringmaster of a strange human circus; Joan Mankin and Geoff Hoyle play Bobchinsky and Dobchinky, two tiny busybodies with a wild intensity; Dan Hiatt as the Magistrate and Anthony Fusco as the Postmaster give new meaning to the idea of inept bureaucrats; and Sharon Lockwood and Amanda Sykes, as the mayor's wife and daughter create ditzy seductresses as they become more and more smitten with Khlestakov.

Reach Pat Craig at 925-943-4736 or pcraig@cctimes.com

THEATER REVIEW

WHAT: ACT's "The Government Inspector," by Nikolai Gogol, translated and adapted by Alistair Beaton

WHERE: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

WHEN: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours, 45 minutes

TICKETS: \$17-\$82

CONTACT: 415-749-2228, www.act-sf.org