

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Government Inspector

BY NIKOLAI GOGOL

TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED BY ALISTAIR BEATON

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

MARCH 20–APRIL 20, 2008

WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY

ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

PUBLICATIONS EDITOR

MICHAEL PALLER

RESIDENT DRAMATURG

MARGOT MELCON

PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY ASSOCIATE

ARIEL FRANKLIN-HUDSON

PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY INTERN

Words on Plays is made possible in part by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

A.C.T. is supported in part by the Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art, and the donors of *The Next Generation Campaign*.

THE NEXT
GENERATION
CAMPAIGN



GRANTS
for the
ARTS



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Nikolai Gogol, 1841 (© CORBIS)

NIKOLAI VASIL'EVICH GOGOL was born on March 19, 1809, in the small town of Sorochintsy in the Mirgorod district of Ukraine (also known then as “Little Russia”). He was the first surviving child of Maria Ivanovna and Vasilii Afanas'evich Gogol-Ianovsky, landowners of modest means. Gogol's parents were alarmed by their son's tiny size and fragile health. To bolster his chances of survival, they named him for St. Nikolai, whose icon the neighboring town of Dikanka revered. They also built a small church in the name of their infant son on his home estate of Vasil'evka. The circumstances of his parents' marriage underscores the seemingly spiritual nature of Gogol's birth; he was the product of what

the family considered a divinely ordained union. At 13, Gogol's father had seen the Virgin Mary in a dream: pointing to a baby girl, she told him that the child would someday be his wife. Vasilii Afanas'evich recognized his neighbors' seven-month-old daughter, Maria Ivanovna Kosiarovskaia, whom he later married.

Young Nikolai was the darling of the Gogol-Ianovsky family, even after the birth of five siblings. The conditions of his childhood resound in Gogol's writing. His mother instilled in him colorful beliefs about heaven and hell; his father, an educated man who wrote Ukrainian folk comedies, showed Gogol the beauty of the surrounding countryside and the humor of its inhabitants; Gogol's paternal grandmother filled his mind with Cossack legends, ancient songs, and terrifying folk tales.

The Gogol-Ianovsky home was a lively place, filled with visitors who enjoyed the family's hospitality and the abundance of their table. Despite the richness of the land, however, Gogol's father was a dreamer who managed his estate and affairs poorly. When Gogol

left for school at age ten, a distant relative and family benefactor, Dmitrii Prokof'evich Troshchinsky, financed the boy's education.

In the spring of 1821 Gogol arrived at the High School for Advanced Study in Nezhin. Students and teachers at Nezhin did not warm quickly to Gogol, whose physical repulsiveness exacerbated his social ineptitude. The other boys thought the mottled skin of Gogol's pointed face and his unusually long, thin nose gave him a birdlike appearance. This epithet would be repeated throughout Gogol's life. The Nezhin school offered a nine-year course of study in a wide range of subjects, but Gogol took little interest in his schoolwork. He preferred instead to invent elaborate fabrications, assign nicknames to students, and write satirical verses about the teachers. Held at a distance by Gogol's insightful mockery, the community at the Nezhin school called him the "mysterious dwarf."

In 1825, during Gogol's fourth year at school, his father died, leaving 16-year-old Nikolai the male authority in the family. Bolstered by his new status, Gogol returned to school that August with renewed vigor. He finally made friends among the boys who shared his growing interest in literature. The family benefactor, Troshchinsky, lent the students books from his personal library; French authors predominated in this collection, but there were also works of British, Spanish, and Russian literature. The students eventually decided to establish their own library of books and periodicals—of which Gogol was the librarian—by pooling their meager resources. Among the new talents of the day, Aleksandr Pushkin especially impressed Gogol. Pushkin's work, notably his novel in verse *Evgeny Onegin*, inspired Gogol and his fellow students to try their own hands at poetry.

Readings of student poetry gave way to theatrical performances. In a converted gym Gogol and his boyhood friends performed works of Russian writers, as well as the Ukrainian comedies of Gogol's father. Gogol was in his element onstage. Dressed as a crotchety old man or a female gossip, he displayed such dramatic talent and confidence that many thought Gogol would become an actor. Any aspirations he had for the stage remained unrealized, but those who were moved to tears and laughter when Gogol read his work in progress in Russian drawing rooms testify to the writer's great talent for losing himself in his characters.

During his final year at school, Gogol's thoughts turned increasingly to St. Petersburg. From his provincial distance Gogol perceived the Russian capital as a wondrous city of wealth and opportunity. There, he wrote friends and family, he would make a name for himself and serve Russia in government service or law. In his letters, blind enthusiasm, conventional Christian piety, and a fascination with the latest fashions color Gogol's depic-

OPPOSITE Avdotya, by costume designer Beaver Bauer

tion of the civil servant. He arrived in St. Petersburg in December 1828 armed with letters of introduction that proved rather ineffectual. Gogol was insulted by the humble positions offered to him, disillusioned by the mindless workings of the civil bureaucracy, and irritated by the constraints of his own poverty. He finally accepted a post that paid poorly but demanded little of his time, and encouraged by the March 1829 publication of his short lyric "Italiia" (Italy) in *Son of the Fatherland*, he devoted himself to writing.

His next effort did not fare so well, however. At his own expense, Gogol published a poem he had written in school, *Hans Küchelgarten*; its failure was so disastrous that he bought back all the copies and burned them and considered emigrating to the United States. Instead he embezzled the money his mother had sent him to pay the mortgage on her farm and fled to Germany. When he ran out of money he returned to St. Petersburg, where he took another lowly government post. He continued to pursue his writing career, this time finding greater success publishing short stories replete with the folk and folklore of the Ukraine.

Gogol's first collection of stories, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, published in two volumes in 1831 and 1832, was a breakthrough work, demonstrating his skill at mixing the fantastic and the macabre while distilling something essential about the Russian character. He became famous overnight, admired by such members of the Russian literary elite as Pushkin, Vasilii Zhukovskiy, Sergei Aksakov, and Vissarion Belinsky. In 1835, he published two new books: *Mirgorod*, four stories based on provincial Ukrainian life, and *Arabesques*, Petersburg essays and stories, including "Nevsky Prospect" and "Diary of a Madman." In 1836 he published a satirical



story (“The Coach”) in Pushkin’s periodical *The Contemporary*, which featured Gogol’s story “The Nose” in its third issue.

Having acquired a reputation for his short stories, in 1832 Gogol began work on a play but abandoned it when he realized that as a satire on bureaucracy it would not pass the censor. Two other plays, both satires, were begun but not finished until 1842. Gogol’s dramatic masterpiece, *Revizor*, or *The Government Inspector* (also translated as *The Inspector General*), was produced at the court theater by special order of the czar in 1836. It was taken by many to be a realistic satire on governmental corruption, but the satire bit too deeply and, despite the czar’s endorsement, the play was viciously attacked by the reactionary press and officialdom. Gogol, already broken in health, left Russia again, complaining that his work was universally misunderstood.

From 1836 to 1848 Gogol lived mainly abroad, spending most of his time in Rome. During this period he was at work on his masterpiece, the comic epic *Dead Souls*; the first part was published in 1842. A four-volume edition of his collected writings, including previously unpublished stories such as “The Overcoat,” also appeared that year. *Dead Souls* was hailed by democratic intellectuals as a masterpiece permeated with the spirit of their own liberal aspirations, and, after Pushkin’s death, Gogol became the leading figure of Russian literature. Believing his God-given writing talent obligated him to dedicate his life to revealing to Russia the righteous way of living in an evil world, Gogol decided to continue *Dead Souls* as a *Divine Comedy*-like trilogy.

In 1847 he published an intended moral testament, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, to almost universal rebuke. Radicals who had viewed Gogol’s work as shining examples of social criticism were deeply disappointed by this last book, in which he eulogized the autocratic czarist regime, the conservative official church, and the patriarchal Russian way of life.

In 1848 Gogol made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On his return he continued with *Dead Souls*, but by now he had fallen under the influence of Father Matvei Konstantinovsky, an ultraconservative religious fanatic, who convinced Gogol that his fictional writings were unholy. During a regime of fasting and prayer, Gogol burned several manuscripts, including part two of *Dead Souls*, just ten days before his death on March 4, 1852.

The information for this biography was drawn and adapted from “Gogol, Nikolai Vasilevich,” *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2000); *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 198: Russian Literature in the Age of Pushkin and Gogol: Prose* (The Gale Group, 1999); and “Gogol, Nikolay,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2008), Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-2767>.