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
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The Mayor, by costume designer Beaver Bauer (all costume sketches © 2008 D. B. Bauer)
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CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

*The Government Inspector* was first performed in the original Russian at the St. Petersburg State Theater on April 19, 1836. The world premiere of Alistair Beaton's translation and adaptation of *The Government Inspector* opened at the Chichester Festival Theatre on June 30, 2005.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

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<td>ABDULIN</td>
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<td>ENSEMBLE</td>
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THE SETTING

A remote provincial town in 19th-century Russia.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1, SCENE 1. The Mayor of a provincial Russian town has received a letter warning him of the imminent arrival of a Government Inspector from St. Petersburg. The Mayor calls together the town’s leading officials—the Health Commissioner, Education
Director, Magistrate, and Doctor—to prepare for the visit of the inspector, who will, according to the letter, be traveling incognito and bearing secret instructions to evaluate the performance of the local government. In a panic, the Mayor instructs his officials to hide their corruption and cover up all of their unethical practices—which are profound and widespread. When the Postmaster arrives in a flurry of curiosity, the Mayor instructs him to burn any defamatory letters.

Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, two local landowners, burst in with the news that there is a young official—Khlestakov—staying at the inn and refusing to pay his bill. They are certain that he is the dreaded Government Inspector. Frenzied, the Mayor sends his officials to fix up the town and heads off to greet the inspector with Bobchinsky, Dobchinsky, and the Superintendent of Police in tow.

The Mayor’s wife, Anna, and daughter, Marya, come in just after the Mayor’s entourage has departed. Anna and Marya fantasize about what the Government Inspector might be like, and send their servant, Avdotya, to the inn to spy for them.

scene ii. At the inn, Khlestakov’s servant, Osip, muses that his master is a government clerk of the lowest rank who is unable to pay his bill because he has lost all his money gambling. Khlestakov comes in and demands that Osip go down to the dining room and have the landlord send them some lunch—despite the fact that he has not paid for anything. Osip reminds his master that the landlord has refused to feed them until they pay, but Khlestakov will not listen to reason, and Osip eventually follows orders, returning with a sullen waiter who brings Khlestakov lunch and sends Osip to scrounge in the kitchen. Khlestakov complains extensively about the food and then demands dessert. Osip returns with the news that the Mayor has arrived at the inn and is “asking questions” about Khlestakov. Khlestakov, certain that the Mayor is there to arrest him, panics. The Mayor appears and offers to show Khlestakov the local institutions, such as the prison, which makes Khlestakov panic even more; his confusion grows as the Mayor invites Khlestakov to stay at his home instead of at the inn. He also gives Khlestakov four hundred rubles and tells him not to worry about paying his bill. While Khlestakov is still not sure what is going on, he is perfectly willing to play along with the Mayor’s generosity.

scene iii. Anna and Marya wait impatiently for news of the Government Inspector. When Dobchinsky arrives with a letter from the Mayor, Anna and Marya interrogate him until he explains that Khlestakov is coming to stay with them. Anna and Marya argue about what they will wear and insult each other until Osip arrives, followed by Khlestakov, the Mayor, and the Mayor’s entourage of civil servants. They discuss the lunch they had at the hospital, and Khlestakov launches into an elaborate fantasy of his luxurious and privi-
leged life in St. Petersburg. The Mayor and company believe his grandiose imaginings and are awed and afraid. Exhausted and drunk, Khlestakov retires to take a nap.

**ACT II, SCENE I.** The next morning, while Khlestakov is still asleep, the Mayor sends the Superintendent and Constable to keep watch at the gates and refuse entry to any citizens with petitions for the Government Inspector. Anna and Marya then come in, arguing about whom Khlestakov paid more attention to the day before. When Osip comes in, the Mayor, Anna, and Marya interrogate him about Khlestakov’s rank and how best to keep him happy. Osip tells them that Khlestakov likes his servant to be well treated, and the Mayor gives Osip some money.

The Mayor, Anna, Marya, and Osip leave, and the Postmaster, Education Director, Health Commissioner, Magistrate, Doctor, Police Superintendent, Bobchinsky, and Dobchinsky enter. Cautiously, they discuss the most tactful way of bribing Khlestakov.

Khlestakov comes in and the officials flee, returning one at a time to awkwardly extend bribes to him. Khlestakov makes the most of the opportunity—especially once he catches on—and professes to “refuse bribes” while forcefully suggesting that the officials “lend him” money. When the officials ask him whether he has any “wishes or commands” for their civil institutions, he offers only disinterest. With each succeeding official, Khlestakov
becomes more direct, taking full advantage of his mistaken identity, as it finally dawns on him that he is being mistaken for someone else.

After the last of the officials have left, Khlestakov orders Osip to bring him paper and ink and writes a letter to his friend Tryapichkin in St. Petersburg, telling him all about the stupidity of the townspeople and his adventures as the supposed Government Inspector. Osip urges Khlestakov to get out while the going is good. Khlestakov at first resists, but he eventually admits that Osip is right and agrees to leave as soon as he has sent his letter. Osip goes off to send the letter and order the horses for their escape.

Before he leaves, Osip lets in a horde of shopkeepers bearing petitions, who beg Khlestakov to save them from the Mayor’s oppressive ways. They offer him gifts of wine and sugar, which he refuses, saying that he cannot be bribed. He will, however, accept a gift of three hundred rubles. The shopkeepers give him five hundred, and he promises to take the petitions and show them to the czar. After they are gone, he tears up the petitions. Next, several women enter. They are also angry about their treatment at the hands of the Mayor and plead for Khlestakov’s aid. He agrees to “make the Mayor pay.” After they are gone, a huge, mournful noise is heard, and “The Poor of Mother Russia” appear, begging for relief. Horrified and exhausted, Khlestakov demands to be left alone.

Marya comes in, and Khlestakov flirts with her aggressively. While first interested, Marya becomes confused and resistant as his flirting grows increasingly intense. Khlestakov proposes to Marya as Anna comes in; Anna sends Marya out of the room, and as soon as she is gone Khlestakov begins flirting with Anna. Anna

(1 to r) Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky, by costume designer Beaver Bauer
points out that he was just proposing to her daughter and that she is “fairly married,” but Khlestakov persists until Marya bursts back in, whereupon he transfers his attentions back to Marya. The Mayor at first refuses to believe that Khlestakov has asked for his daughter’s hand in marriage, but eventually he accepts the “honor” and gives Marya and Khlestakov his blessing.

Osip enters and informs Khlestakov that the horses are ready for their departure. The Mayor is surprised and concerned, but Khlestakov assures him—and Anna and Marya—that he is only going to seek his father’s consent to the marriage. Osip and Khlestakov leave, and the Mayor and Anna begin to fantasize about their lives in St. Petersburg as the in-laws of a major government official. The shopkeepers come in and the Mayor berates them for bothering the Government Inspector—who is, he points out, now engaged to his daughter. As the shopkeepers leave, the town officials enter, congratulating the Mayor and Marya on the advantageous match. As everyone rejoices, however, the Postmaster arrives with Khlestakov’s letter, in which he describes how he has deceived and cheated the townspeople. Everyone is horrified, the Mayor most of all: “I’ve lied to the liars, I’ve cheated the cheats,” he says. “Never once has anyone made a fool of me. Until now.” The Mayor is furious at himself for being such a fool; he blames Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky for first suggesting that Khlestakov could be the Government Inspector, and demands of the audience, “What are you laughing at? You’re laughing at yourselves!”

Just then, a gendarme enters and informs everyone that they are ordered, by imperial decree, “to come to the inn, where a Government Inspector awaits you.” The play ends with a famous tableau: each character frozen in a posture of surprise and fear at the announcement that the real government inspector has arrived.
I thought we ought to start with the Russian folk saying that Gogol uses to preface this play: “Don't blame the mirror; it's your face that’s the problem.” That phrase kind of sums up the play in a nutshell. I'll tell you a few things about this insane adventure, starting with why we're doing it. Every year I do a winter project with A.C.T.’s second-year M.F.A. Program students of a classic I’m interested in. Last year, with Amanda Sykes, Raife Baker, Alex Morf, and Shannon Taing’s class, we did a workshop of this play, in part because they’re a really funny class and I thought they’d have fun with it. It was also in part because, you may recall, it was about this time last year, maybe a little earlier, when we were rehearsing this play, that it was disclosed that San Francisco’s mayor had had an affair with the wife of his close friend and campaign manager. At the same time, he announced that he had an alcohol problem and was going to Delancey Street for rehabilitation. And the most amazing thing about all of this is that none of this seems to have had any long-term political ramifications.

It was one of those amazing moments in politics that I thought, I guess it’s time to do Gogol because it’s realism at this point. As Alistair Beaton, the British satirist who did the translation we’re using, says, this play is about characters perpetually engaged in highly “skilled sycophancy.” That’s why it has this incredible universal quality, and I guess that’s why it never goes out of fashion. In his introduction to the play, Beaton describes the highly stratified Russian society in which these characters exist, which was based on 14 grades of class hierarchy to which everyone in military or civil service belonged. Everyone in this play is always trying to figure out how important other people are, how much more power they have, and the attitudes of the characters are shaped by the assumption that the only way to advance is not by merit but by performing favors for people higher in rank.

When Gogol wrote this play, he claimed to be shocked at its reception as a political satire. He said it was meant to be a play about morality, or the lack of spiritual values in his culture. The fact is he reveals a couple of things that are particularly germane to his own culture, but appear to be universally true. You have to imagine, this is 1830s Russia, the height of the rule of Czar Nicholas I. He was exceptionally paranoid after the [1825] Decembrist Revolution, and dedicated himself to creating what would become his main accomplishment, which was his spy network, and which he personally oversaw. He loved to
mete out punishments to people he had barely heard of for crimes he didn’t know anything about. He felt this was his way of exercising supreme authority.

Having been to Russia, the thing that blows my mind is that it’s so big; you can go 12 hours on a train without seeing any sign of human habitation. Moscow and Petersburg are clustered at one corner, but there is the vast hinterland of Russia out there. Yet the network of rumor and espionage was so intricate that people really did believe that if something went wrong in the provinces, mustaches would twitch in Petersburg. There was a kind of connective tissue binding them to a frightening authority figure of such absolute power that we can only imagine. And the further away that authority was, the more monumental it became. The paranoia in the provinces was so extreme that they really believed somebody was watching them all the time. This is why the Soviets had such an easy time instilling their own m.o.—it had been like that in Russia forever. If ever anybody who looked remotely official turned up in a town, people panicked. And of course they panicked, because the level of corruption was enormous.

The corruption was like nothing we’ve ever seen, because there was no legal system to regulate it. This is for the actors playing the shopkeepers and the women and the widows to remember: there was no legal redress. If you lived in a town where the mayor came into your shop and took all of your goods and decided to decorate his house with them, too bad. You couldn’t say, “It’s my private property, I paid for it.” You get raped, too bad. There is no legal redress. But there is this belief that, if only you could get to Petersburg and have your petition heard by somebody high enough up in the food chain, then maybe something would turn around.

People basically assumed that a) corruption was a given, and b) spying was a given. For example, the mail was always opened. It was standard operating procedure. You sent a letter: it might get there; some things might get cut out of it or crossed out or looked at. You never knew whether what you had put in it was subversive or not. So bribery was a fantastically effective means of getting things done. You bribe the postmaster to send your letter. You bribe the magistrate to hear your case. It goes on and on. Corruption is still a huge problem in Russia.

Even if you go now to Russia, if you aren’t staying in a hotel, you’re supposed to register with the police. So you go to the police station, and the sign on the door says, “Back on Tuesday.” But it’s Wednesday. So you stand there until somebody walks by, and they kind of look at you, and you reach for your back pocket, and they look back again, and then some door opens, and some money is exchanged, and somehow your visa gets stamped and you go on. And you think, “This is how the place runs?” But it’s assumed that that is how it goes.
So the tricky thing about this material is that, to the Russians anyway, this play was realism. It isn’t French farce, but it is grotesque. It’s a completely specific world that Gogol invented. The best way to figure out the world of it is to read his stories. They’re just fantastic. He went to St. Petersburg, like Khlestakho, to try and be a civil servant and achieve some rank. It didn’t work at all and he was outraged that nobody noticed his charm. He was very ugly, Gogol. Extremely ugly. He had pockmarked skin and this pointy nose; they called him the birdman. He had a hard time advancing in Moscow society, and he started to write. He was from the Ukraine, so he wrote to his mother and said, “It’s fashionable now to write trendy folk stories about odd people in provincial places. Send me everything you know, everything your mother told you.” And he collected all these things and started writing. The first collection of stories he published were these folk stories from the Ukraine that were suddenly very popular. Then he wrote these surreal, wonderful stories. One of the most famous ones is actually called “The Nose.”

When we decided that we wanted to do this play, we read many different translations. The reason we chose this one is, first of all, Alistair Beaton is a real Russian scholar, and he goes back to the Russian often. He describes the Russian language as very jagged and unpredictable, and that’s what makes it funny. Beaton says very often people try to explain away Gogol’s jokes or make sense of them, but in fact there is something wonderfully surreal about them and you have to allow those things to just be. Beaton is also really good at stripping away things that don’t compute. I’ve stripped away somewhat more, because by Act iv Gogol introduces 20 more characters who come in at the zero hour to congratulate the Mayor. I cut a lot of those out. Beaton is also a satire writer for the BBC, so he writes these nasty things about

(l to r) Magistrate and Director of Education, by costume designer Beaver Bauer
Tony Blair and outrageous political comedies. That’s what he’s known for—he’s very funny himself. We’ve also Americanized some of the Britishisms, but Beaton has been great about allowing us to do what we need to do. He’ll be here later during rehearsal, working with us and with the conservatory. We’re emailing each other all the time; he’s really been great fun to work with.

**ON THE DESIGN**

This is a very physical world. Every one of these characters has odd physical characteristics. I leave it to you to begin to decide what you want these things to be, but [costume designer] Beaver [Bauer] has already begun to picture these people. They’re wild, anthropomorphic creations that she’s done. She’s interested in what you all find physically about each of these characters that she can then incorporate into the clothes.

In terms of the set, [scenic designer] Erik [Flatmo] and I have tried to create a world with many physical obstacles and things to play on. The idea is that this is a really shitty town. It’s like a small town shithole, covered with mud, except the mud is covered with snow that’s dirty and the snow doesn’t melt until May, or June, or July. It begins in the Mayor’s house. The whole thing is a façade; the wallpaper is peeling away and you see behind the façade that there is garbage stuffed behind the walls and under the platform, because, why would you throw the garbage away when you could just stick it behind something? I don’t know why this kept occurring to me, but when I used to take the train north out of Manhattan, we’d go through the Bronx and past those crumbling tenements. Instead of tearing those tenements down or doing anything with them, they just put that wallpaper up on them that had geraniums on it, so it looked like there were flowers in
the window. If you went by fast enough on the train, it looked like the buildings were intact and there were flowers in the windows, but the train always broke down, and as it slowed down you would realize it was contact paper stuck on the outside of the tenement. It was so pathetic. I thought, who do they think they’re kidding? We sort of took that as our jumping off point. And Erik had fun imbuing the whole thing with flourishes from Russian folk architecture.

The set does many things. It has this giant table that rises up from the floor. The floor is all wood, everything is rough-cut wood—that’s all they had, out there in provinces. A lot of trees, and nothing else. There’s a hydraulic in the middle and the table rises up. The play will start with the Mayor under the set, and it rises up from the pit with the Mayor on top of it. It’s raked in a hierarchy, so there are little tiny chairs at the bottom and very big chairs at the top, with a lifeguard chair at the head where the Mayor sits.

It’s important that you remember that rank was meticulously analyzed in this culture. The ranks of civil servants that Khlestakov and Osip talk about, everybody would have known. The order of sycophancy is specifically defined. You look at who you’re kowtowing to and who you shit upon. Those are the two things you have to know; who’s behind you and who’s ahead of you and how you move forward in the sycophancy rank. So the table has the order of sycophancy in where they sit on their stools.

As for the costumes: You all who have been hastily assembled in Act i in your soup-covered disgusting pajamas and slippers, you’ve just gotten out of bed. It should be pathetic looking. But you have gotten it together by Act iii, so you’re wearing your medals.

Everybody has their own physical quirk, and it’s up to you to decide how far you want to go with these ideas and what you want to do. The Doctor has his lederhosen and a white lab coat. The Director of Education we wanted in black, so she has chalk all over her. People write things on her. I’d like there to be nasty things on her back that students have written, something horrible like students do. She cries a lot. It’s a really terrible thing to be a teacher and people are always making fun of her, so she has some huge outfit that gets written on. We thought it might be nice if the Health Commissioner had a neck brace. You might want a leg brace instead. The Magistrate sleeps with everyone else’s wives and breeds geese, so every time he moves feathers appear, and he steps in goose shit all the time. The Constable steals silver spoons regularly, so he has these boots that rattle because he has to figure out how to walk so that the cutlery is not revealed. Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky are the classic Mutt and Jeff. One has stripes below and checks above, the other has checks below and stripes above. We like the idea that Bobchinsky is sort of an androgyne. I just want to say don’t worry about the fact that Bobchinsky is played by a woman. It’s just Bobchinsky. You just don’t know what this creature is. It’s just a creature. They both have
very specific little tummies that are built in. You are hungry all the time. This is one of Dobchinsky’s problems; he gets in trouble all the time because he’s always stopping for food.

When everyone comes back in Act III, they’re in their medals and things, and Khlestakho is unbelievably drunk. I’m trying to figure out in that scene what to do. I’m trying to get him to wheel around in the wheelbarrow with the turnips, but the set has very steep ramps and we can’t figure out how to get the wheelbarrow up the ramps, so maybe he gets carried or rolled, but we’ll figure it out. He’s so drunk he can barely stand, which is why they can persuade him that they’re really good people and he overlooks the fact that there are people chained to the beds in the hospital and there are no students in the school. It’s that kind of town. When he finally gets persuaded to go up to bed and we hear him snoring, that’s the end of our first act. I know it sounds like a lot, but in the Gogol it’s actually three short acts, so we’ll take the intermission after Gogol’s Act III. Act IV is the big complicated act. It’s also where Marya and Anna have to put on their big poufy gowns for the ball. They think there is going to be a ball, but there isn’t because Khlestakho leaves.

This act is grotesque, mainly because what you see is the pathetic underbelly of this culture trying to find redress. There will be four shopkeepers plus Abdulin plus four women. There is a long speech written for one widow that I’m going to divide up among all the
women; I’ll do it with you as we go. We might fill in a couple of extra shopkeepers, but one of the challenges is how we’re doing on the quick-change front. For people who go from being bureaucrats to shopkeepers right back to bureaucrats, for people who have facial hair that has to come on and off, it’s a bit of a challenge. All of the shopkeepers and all of the widows are also playing the poor of Russia. That moment when the doors are flung open and there is that horrifying tableau of the poor of Russia, with screams and chains, that’s all of you. They’re in these outfits that are like piano blankets, or packing blankets. That’s what they’re made out of. It should really be disturbing, because it’s funny, but it’s also awful when you realize that they gravitate toward anyone who comes along at any time who might for a moment be able to save them. But Khlestakhov takes complete advantage of it, gets seduced by his own power, and is willing to dispense favors. They believe they’ve been saved, and the most chilling part of the play is when the Mayor calls them back in and says, “I know what you did. I know behind my back you were at it, just you wait.” We end with the same image that we started with, all the bureaucrats ranked, and the Postmaster brings the letter [exposing Khlestakov as a fraud] and they realize they’ve been duped and they’re caught in the headlights and it all starts over again.

There is a lot of music in this play. [Sound designer] Darron [West] has found some great things. Most of the music is fabulous 19th-century opera music, so a lot of Glinka’s Ruslan and Lyudmila, but we’re also going to use this Schnittke piece called “Gogol Suite,” which has this weird harpsichord waltz that we’re going to use for the bribes. There is also a contemporary group called Slavic Soul Party that I really like; it’s like sick klezmer music. I want you all to be aware of this, because [choreographer] Julia [Adam], who worked with us on Travesties, is here to help us with this. The opening is going to be this 90-second bureaucrats’ ballet, where we introduce them one at a time. And then there is the bribing ballet, and the widows. There are little dance moments along the way. Khlestakhov has a little waltz with the two women. Some of it will be very shaped. You have to come ready to climb around and do crazy things. There is also some very beautiful Russian choral music. The shopkeepers and women have their own musical score. Osip has a tenor theme, which is very mournful and fabulous.

Alex Nichols is lighting this. There are footlights along the edge of the stage, so there are very creepy moments in this play, for example when Khlestakov, who seems like such an innocent, starts to fantasize about power in St. Petersburg. As he imagines his role there and his fantasies get more and more sinister, suddenly we’re in this awful footlit world of exaggeration, which then drops out again. A good image to look at is Eisenstein’s film Ivan the Terrible. Every time Ivan cuts off somebody’s head, there are these huge shadows thrown up on the wall and the music is wonderful, so we’re going to use some of that.
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-
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 Zhukovsky, 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 props and costumes in these comedies belong to an older time; foods are spoken of whose taste we no longer know. But once we strip away the historical costumes, the facial expressions and grimaces are revealed as our own. The sadness and the stubborn relevance of old comedy resides in unceasing repetition of the same enforced roles—the terrible and the preordained roles that are foisted upon each of us by family, authority, property, gender, youth, or old age. . . .

Some anecdotes suddenly reveal the real in the absurd, and the absurd in the real, the comedy in the nightmare and the nightmare in the comedy. Gogol’s *The Inspector General* founds a new dramatic genre: the tragic farce. . . .

In this masqueraded and disguised dread—in medals, galloons, epaulets, toppers, the three-cornered hats of civil servants and round officer hats with bands—as in a closed structure, all signs are interconnected (a boot implies a rank, a rank implies a boot); in this *écriture* of bureaucracy, as in Chinese characters, all hierarchies and distinctions are enclosed—there were nine ranks of titular councillors alone! Different cuts of coats, height of bows, and size of bribes were prescribed for each of the ranks: “You are not taking according to your rank.” The horror of Gogol’s world is all in gestures, therefore it is theatrical; this horror is concrete and material, like the whole length of cloth which the policeman takes from the shopkeeper Abdulin instead of the customary two measures. . . .

In Gogol’s world everything is blown up, as if looked at through enlarging lenses; graphic, shadelessly linear, almost colorless. Noses, bellies, foxy smiles become bigger and bigger and more cartoonlike. Gogol should have been illustrated by Daumier. “The world is both funny and dreadful,” he used to write to friends. In *The Inspector General*, everybody is scared all the time. “I almost died of fear,” Bobchinsky tells Dobchinsky. “You feel so scared . . . and you don’t know why,” the Director of Charities says to the Superintendent of Schools. “I still can’t shake off the fear,” the Mayor whispers in his wife’s ear in their bedroom. A corporal’s widow “was found whipped, by herself.” She was beaten up by policemen on the Mayor’s orders. In this image of the widow who “whipped herself,” we glimpse one of George Orwell’s visions. At the end of the comedy the word “Siberia” is twice mentioned. This farce begins and ends with fear.
GOGOL AND THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

BY MICHAEL PALLER

The play begins with a blinding flash of lightning and ends in a thunderclap. In fact it is wholly placed in the tense gap between the flash and the crash. There is no so-called “exposition.” Thunderbolts do not lose time explaining meteorological conditions. The whole world is one ozone-blue shiver and we are in the middle of it.

—Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol

RECEPTION OF THE FIRST PRODUCTION

Czar Nicholas I attended the rapturously received opening night performance (at the St. Petersburg State Theater on April 19, 1836) and is said to have remarked afterward, “Well, that’s quite a little piece! Everyone got theirs, and I most of all!” He sent his family to see the play and ordered his ministers to do the same. Although the czar was sanguine, a great number of Nicholas’s ministers were not. Some were recorded by a noble close to the czar as saying, “As if there were such a city in Russia!” and “How is it possible not to present one decent, honorable man? As if there aren’t any in Russia!”

Although the play was an instant, if controversial, success, Gogol hated the production and much of the public response. The play was acted, far from his wishes, as a farce, in the tradition of the vaudevilles that had been popular in Europe and Russia for much of the century. One of Gogol’s biographers, Vsevolod Setchkarev, explains:

This kind of comedy was completely new to the actors and to the director. It fitted neither into the canon of the neoclassical comedy of Molière nor into the current type of vaudeville which dominated the stage at that time. The lifelike quality of the characters, which were not actually lifelike, but had all the outward signs of life and were not meant to be overplayed, brought the whole company to their wits’ end. Only the great actor Sosnitsky . . . was enthusiastic and immediately struck the right tone. All the rest exaggerated and, to Gogol’s horror, fell into the style of farce and tried to dazzle the audience with cheap effects.

Gogol was appalled by the depiction of Khlestakov as “music-hall rogue.” He insisted that Khlestakov “is not a villain, he is not a professional liar: he forgets he is lying, he almost believes what he says.” It’s hard to tell what made Gogol more furious: the produc-
tion, the fact that it was taken as satire, or its success. Two months after the play’s debut he wrote a friend:

The older and honorable officials shout that for me nothing is sacred, since I dared speak thus about public officials; the policemen are against me, the merchants are against me, the literary people are against me. They abuse me and go to the play; the fourth performance is already sold out... I see now what it means to be a writer of comedies. The smallest trace of truth, and they are up in arms against you, and not just one person, but whole classes... It is annoying for one who loves men with brotherly love, to see them turn against him.

THE PLAY’S REPUTATION AS REALISM

Almost immediately, the play acquired the reputation of being a stinging satirical attack on government institutions in the realist mode, and that reputation has clung to it since. This misleading reputation is due to Gogol’s having been taken up by the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky. Belinsky was Russia’s first important literary and social critic, of the same generation as Alexander Herzen and Michael Bakunin, and believed that literature must first and foremost serve social ends. He championed Gogol as Russia’s first great realist, and blind and wrongheaded as his judgment was, it has proved stubborn. In part this is because a true Russian literature was just beginning to emerge, and Gogol’s two great contemporaries, Pushkin and Lermontov, were Byronesque Romantics. Next to their characters, those who populate Gogol’s work seem pretty ordinary. However, Gogol actually had very little experience of provincial Russian life. He grew up in a small Ukrainian town in the Mirgorod district, but when he came to write his volumes of Ukrainian tales he had to ask his mother to provide him with details of daily life there. Although many of his characters tended to be drawn from average people (when their noses weren’t disappearing from their faces and riding around in carriages), one of his favorite authors was Sir Walter Scott, and it seems that although Gogol might start with the mundane details of everyday life, his imagination soon pulled him toward Romanticism and then past it, warping any vision of the real world into the grotesque and the surreal. Even in the early Ukrainian tales, these ordinary people find themselves in extraordinary circumstances, facing ghosts, demons, powerful wizards, and other unsettling, otherworldly creatures. Perhaps Gogol’s relationship to realism is captured in a sentence from a story in the St. Petersburg Tales, “The Nevsky Prospect.” On that great boulevard, Gogol wrote, “the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks,” but as it appeared to his unique imagination.
GOGOL’S INNATE CONSERVATISM AND RELIGIOSITY

With the success of The Government Inspector, Gogol’s deep conservatism and mystic religiosity fully emerged. He had always wished to be, and always seen himself as, a moral guide to others, and the response to the play suggested to him that through his writing he could influence people’s attitudes and behaviors. Until this point, he had been ambivalent about being a writer—it seemed somehow trivial when there was important work of reformation to be done in Russia. He was elated that The Government Inspector appealed to audiences’ sense of morality (when he wasn’t angry about other aspects of its success). He wrote a friend in May 1836:

Everything that happened to me, it was all salutary for me. All the insults, all the unpleasantness were sent to me by divine providence for my education, and today I feel that it is not an earthly will that directs my path. This path must be necessary for me.

After the fact, Gogol came to see the play as a didactic and moralistic work that had specific religious content. The Mayor and his cronies would be punished for their crimes, and the hand of retribution would be that of the czar’s representative, the real government inspector. He had come to believe that literary art—especially his own—“had the power to transform the world,” as Simon Karlinsky has written. Gogol was already at work on Dead Souls, the novel that he also saw as explicitly religious, and he was on the fatal path that led him to religious fanaticism and death by voluntary starvation in 1852. As the historian Michael Florinsky writes, Gogol began to see himself as a moralist and a religious mystic. He conceived his mission to be that of a divinely inspired teacher of mankind, but he was not interested in political or social reforms; moral betterment, he believed, was the source from which was to spring the glorious world of the future.

The scales finally fell from the liberal critic Belinsky’s eyes when he read Gogol’s Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends, an 1847 collection of reactionary essays that was intended to serve as a kind of preface to the unfinished second and third volumes of Dead Souls. The critic Orlando Figes describes Selected Passages:

Gogol preached that Russia’s salvation lay in the spiritual reform of every individual citizen. He left untouched the social institutions. He neglected the questions of serfdom and the autocratic state, ludicrously claiming that both were perfectly acceptable so long as they were combined with Christian principles. The very institutions he ridiculed in The Government Inspector he now
claimed to be of divine origin. “God,” he wrote, “had invisibly guided the hand
of the czars.”

Belinsky responded to the book with a furious open letter, writing, in part:

Russia sees her salvation not in mysticism, asceticism, or piety, as you suggest,
but in education, civilization, and culture. She has no need of sermons (she
has heard too many), nor prayers (she has mumbled them too often), but of
the awakening in the people of human dignity, a sense lost for centuries in the
mud and filth.

(It was at an 1849 meeting of the Petrashevsky Circle, a secret revolutionary society, that
Dostoyevsky was arrested for reading this letter aloud.)

GOGOL THE FANTASIST AND ACTOR
If the play isn’t realism, then what is it? One way of thinking about The Government
Inspector is as surrealism or a dream. In his book on Gogol, Vladimir Nabokov writes,

The characters are nightmare people in one of those dreams when you think
you have waked up while all you have done is enter the most dreadful (most
dreadful in all its sham reality) region of dreams. . . . Gogol’s play is poetry
in action, and by poetry I mean the mysteries of the irrational as perceived
through rational words.

The irrational crops up continually: in the explanation that the court clerk smells of
vodka because his nanny dropped him on his head when he was a baby; in the person of the
history teacher who gets so passionate about Alexander the Great that he smashes chairs
into walls; when Khlestakov asks the Health Commissioner, “Forgive me, but weren’t you
a little shorter yesterday?” and the answer comes back, “Very possibly”; in the huge black
rats in the Mayor’s dream; in the appearance in Act iv, accompanied by sounds of chains
and whips, of all the poor of Mother Russia to beg Khlestakov for relief from the brutality
of their lives; in the bribes that Khlestakov takes, beginning with money, then a silver tray,
then lumps of sugar, and finally, in some translations, a worthless piece of string. We hear
it in the fantastic details of his life in St. Petersburg that Khlestakov describes at the end
of Act 1, scene iii (Act iii in most versions). All of these bizarre moments simply occur or
are mentioned without explanation or the need for one.

Indeed, more than anything else, Khlestakov is a fantasist. In this, he resembles Gogol.
This is demonstrated perhaps nowhere with more clarity than in Gogol’s brief and decid-
edly surrealistic career as a professor of world history at the University of St. Petersburg in 1834. His preparation for the course consisted of a history course he’d taken as a student some years earlier and the perusal of a few books by German historians translated into Russian. He had no other background in history or teaching, and was able to get the job on the strength of his reputation as a successful young writer. As Karlinsky notes,

Humanity’s past was for Gogol essentially a magical, fairytale world. Factual accuracy, written sources, precise information, all these things interested Gogol very little. . . . What he wanted to achieve was a brilliant synthesis, ablaze with sparkling rhetoric and as unencumbered by facts as possible. History, as it emerges from . . . the lectures . . . was for Gogol a wide-screen, technicolor spectacle with a cast of millions, starring bloody conquerors [such as Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun] . . . seen as evil magicians who occasionally get their comeuppance at the hands of medieval popes and saints depicted as kindly wizards. . . . Everything is colorful and swirling and constantly exciting. As for the possible causes or results of all this vividly depicted turmoil, there is no evidence that Gogol thought there might be any, other than Divine Providence.

Not surprisingly, Gogol’s turn as a history professor was disastrous. After three impressive lectures he either cancelled his classes or showed up with a bandage tied around his jaw and claimed to have a toothache, after which he would mumble a few words and declare the class over. After 18 months of this, he was asked to resign.

It’s possible that Gogol got his distaste for facts, or his love of fantasy, from his mother, Maria. During his lifetime, she credited him not only with his own work but also with that of a number of his Russian and French contemporaries, including, according to Karlinsky, “several utterly trashy pulp novels.” (We can see the same instinct at work in Khlestakov, when he takes credit for Ivanhoe, The Barber of Seville, and Ode to a Nightingale). After Gogol died, Maria claimed he had invented the steam engine and laid out the vast network of railroads that the state began to build in the 1850s.

As a young man, he had ambitions to be an actor. He arranged an audition at the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, but turned up (just as he would later for his history lectures) with a bandaged jaw, claiming to have a toothache. He was asked to read for comic roles but insisted on the tragic ones, and read some scenes from Corneille. He was told he had no talent for the stage and was dismissed.

Although he may have lacked talent as an actor, he had a knack for self-dramatization. Once he had money, he maintained a fashionable wardrobe; his interest in the newest styles and fabrics was lifelong.
One of the actors in the first production of *The Government Inspector* described Gogol this way:

Of medium height, blond, with a huge wig, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles on his long, birdlike nose, with squinting little eyes, and firmly compressed, as if bit together, lips. The green frock coat with long tails and little mother-of-pearl buttons, brown trousers, and the high top-hat which Gogol took off with a jerk one moment, while digging his fingers into his wig, and which in the next moment he turned around in his hands—all of this gave his figure the appearance of a caricature.

Shortly before *The Government Inspector* premiered, he tried out the play’s scenario for himself as he traveled by train to Moscow. He sent one of his traveling companions ahead to announce to the supervisors of all of the mail depots that a government inspector was on the way, traveling incognito. Vsevolod Setchkarev tells the story:

Gogol, whose travel passport gave “adjunct professor” as his profession, was thought to be an adjutant of his majesty by the well-meaning and anxious station superintendents at the mail coach stations, and since he played his role so brilliantly and asked apparently innocent but yet embarrassing questions and requested to see various institutions, the journey proceeded very smoothly and comfortably, something extremely unusual for Russia at that time.

Vladimir Nabokov writes in *Nikolai Gogol*:

The epigraph of the play is a Russian proverb which says, “Do not chafe at the looking glass if your mug is awry.” Gogol, of course, never drew portraits—he used looking glasses and as a writer lived in his own looking-glass world. Whether the reader’s face was a fright or a beauty did not matter a jot, for not only was the mirror of Gogol’s own making and with a special refraction of its own, but also the reader to whom the proverb was addressed belonged to the same Gogolian world of gooselike, piglike, pielike, nothing-on-earth-like facial phenomena. . . . The characters of *The Government Inspector*, whether subject or not to imitation by flesh and blood, were true only in the sense that they were true creatures of Gogol’s fancy.
Nabokov captures elements of Gogol in his description of Khlestakov:

Khlestakov’s very name is a stroke of genius, for it conveys to the Russian reader an effect of lightness and rashness, a prattling tongue, the swish of a slim walking cane, the slapping sound of playing cards, the braggadocio of a nincompoop and the dashing ways of a lady killer (minus the capacity for completing this or any other action).

The Russian poet Yuri Ivask finds something similar about Khlestakov in this poem:

A phantom, a fop, Khlestakov,
I levitate, holding on to my coat tails,
I wave my greetings to the cows,
I’m a playful boy, not scum.
I have no wish for wintry satire,
I’m rococo, I’m March and April,
I’m a rake, not a troublemaker,
A darling cupid from St. Petersburg!
**POSHLUST**

In his writings on Gogol, specifically about *The Government Inspector* and *Dead Souls*, Vladimir Nabokov refers to a Russian word, *poshlost*, which he then fashions as *poshlust*. This word, he says, is at the heart of the world of both these works. What is it?

First he lists some English words that approximate the qualities of *poshlust*: cheap, sham, common, smutty, high falutin’, and “in bad taste.” Then he gives an example from the type of ad we’d see in any American magazine at the time he was writing (1944 and 1961):

Open the first magazine at hand and you are sure to find something of the following kind: radio set (or a car, or a refrigerator, or table silver—anything will do) has just come to the family: mother clasps her hands in dazed delight, the children crowd around, all agog, Junior and the dog strain up to the edge of the table where the Idol is enthroned; even Grandma of the beaming wrinkles peeps out somewhere in the background (forgetful, we presume, of the terrific row she has had that very morning with her daughter-in-law); and somewhat apart, his thumbs gleefully inserted in the armpits of his waistcoat, legs a-straddle and eyes a-twinkle, stands triumphant Pop, the Proud Donor.

The rich *poshlust* emanating from advertisements of this kind is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchaseable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser. . . . The amusing part is not that [this] is a world where nothing spiritual remains except the ecstatic smiles of people serving or eating celestial cereals or a world where the game of the senses is played according to bourgeois rules . . . but that it is a kind of satellite shadow world in the actual existence of which neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts.

. . . *Poshlust* . . . is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham *is not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought, or emotion.
The Russia of the 1830s teemed with contradictions. It was a place of great wealth concentrated in the hands of a very few and of widespread crushing poverty. It was a time of extreme political and cultural repression; yet it was also a time of enormous intellectual activity that, as historian Michael Florinsky writes, produced the first masterpieces of Russian literature, including *The Government Inspector*, as well as the works of Pushkin and Lermontov. It was a country of vast distances, where people felt the far-off eye of authority on them. When *The Government Inspector*’s Mayor says, “You could gallop nonstop from here for three years and still be in Russia,” he was hardly exaggerating—most Russians lived thousands of miles from either St. Petersburg, the modern capital, or Moscow, the center of Russian Orthodoxy, and never saw either of them. At the same time, such was the reach of the czar’s police force (or such, at least, was the belief of its reach) that there was good reason for provincial officials to believe that, if they sneezed at home, someone would say, “God bless you” in St. Petersburg. Or, as the Magistrate says in *The Government Inspector*, “The authorities are clever. We may be far away, but they have their eye on us. One hint of treason here, and in Petersburg, their moustaches twitch.”

Russia had always been an autocracy, but under Nicholas I, who reigned 1825–55, the imperial desire for information and control expanded, through the use of the police and censorship, to an unprecedented degree. To see why, let’s step back a few years to Nicholas’s ascension to the throne.

**THE 1825 DECEMBRIST REVOLUTION**

This short-lived coup d’état was a complicated affair, long in the planning but of short and sorry duration. In brief, members of various secret societies, comprised mostly of officers from the aristocracy in the northern and southern Russian armies, determined to overthrow the czar, Alexander I, and introduce a constitutional government. Alexander died on November 19, 1825; on the imminent ascension of his brother, Nicholas, known to the army as cruel and authoritarian (even for a czar), the plotters determined to act at once. The plan was to prevent the main two governing bodies of Russia, the state council and state senate, from taking the required oath of allegiance to Nicholas, and then to install a government headed by two or three prominent statesmen and a constituent assembly. Although the conspirators had a kind of constitutional government in mind, it would be without, in the words of Prince Serge Trubetskoy, “the dangerous participation of the populace.”
The attempted coup took place on December 14. It failed immediately, in no small part because the plot was revealed to Nicholas on December 12. Those who were arrested or who surrendered were quickly tried; five were executed, and more than 100 others were sentenced to penal servitude and deportation to Siberia.

Although the plot failed, the aspirations it represented for a western-style constitutional government did not disappear with the plotters. To later generations, the Decembrists became symbols, as Florinsky writes, “for self-sacrificing struggle against autocracy and serfdom, and the founders of the 19th-century revolutionary tradition.”

To assure himself that no such uprising would occur again, Nicholas established in His Majesty's Own Chancery (which was meant to bring many functions of the government under his personal control) Section III, in charge of state police. Section III’s official function was the collection of information on counterfeiting, religious sects, dissenters, and, according to Florinsky, “all happenings without exception.” He writes:

[Section III’s] portfolio also included “control of foreigners and persons under police supervision; administration of places of detention for state prisoners; and deportation of ‘suspicious or undesirable’ persons.” Actually, the jurisdiction of Section III was far more comprehensive than is suggested by this list. A contemporary observer, N. M. Kolmakov, relates in his memoirs that Section III “very often assumed judicial functions and determined the guilt of persons in matters which had nothing to do with public safety.” M. Lemke, author of an admirable and well-documented study on Section III, holds that “there was no aspect of Russian life that would escape its control.” The creators of this all-powerful police regime imagined that it would not only ensure public safety but would eradicate corruption and maladministration and bring reward and happiness to the law-abiding subjects of the tsar. The chief aim, however, was to avoid the repetition of the events of December 14, 1825, and by nipping in the bud subversive activities, to prevent well-meaning people from being led astray. To achieve this object, according to the conservative historian Shilder, the government “had to know what was going on among the people, what were their thoughts, what they talked about, what occupied them. . . . It became necessary to penetrate into men’s hearts and most secret thoughts.”

Section III sent two sorts of police into the field: the gendarmery (uniformed military police) and secret informers. We don’t have a lot of information about the informers, but the force was understood to be quite large, penetrating every stratum of society, and chil-
dren were included in its ranks. From the point of view of a provincial government official, anyone could be a spy from Section III.

Unlike other arms of the state bureaucracy, Section III was a potent force within the government because of the close friendship between its head, Count Alexander Benckendorff, and Nicholas. Benckendorff functioned more as a prime minister than a department chief, and, in the words of the revolutionary Alexander Herzen, the institution existed “outside and above the law.” Nicholas himself took special interest in the doings of Section III, and he would pore over police reports even on purely private matters and order punishments and verdicts that would strike the offenders out of the blue.

Russian absolutism reached its peak during Nicholas’s reign. That absolutism is expressed in the words of Count s.s. Uvarov, Nicholas’s minister of education: “Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.” “Orthodoxy” meant church control over the spiritual life of the Russian people. “Autocracy” meant the subservience of every Russian person and institution (including the church) to the conservative political program of the government. “Nationality” referred to instilling in the people a belief in the greatness of Russia’s past, and its continuity into the future. All three were meant to purge Russia of any western, democratic influences.

**Censorship**
The critic Edmond Wilson wrote, “The Russia of Pushkin and the Decembrists, of the dawn of the great culture of modern Russia, was extinguished by the 30 years of Nicholas, who aborted the intellectual movement by a terrible censorship of the press and did his best to make it difficult for Russians to circulate between Russia and Western Europe.”

Censorship was an official activity of the government under Nicholas, and it was ubiquitous after the passage of the censorship law of 1826. The purpose of the law was to monitor education and science and the behavior of citizens and to direct public opinion “according to the existing conditions and the views of the government.” Censorship was ubiquitous, and practiced by even the most unlikely government departments, including the committee for the building of the Cathedral of St. Isaac, the committee on archaeology, and the department of horse breeding. The post office was an important participant in official censorship, and The Government Inspector’s Shpyokin would be well practiced in the habit of reading other people’s mail, not only for his own amusement, but possibly also on behalf of the government. Indeed, “Shpyokin” is a conflation of two Russian words, *shpion*, meaning spy, and *shpik*, or secret agent. The scope of the endeavor was so vast that, according to one of the censors, “if one were to count all officials in charge of censorship
their numbers would greatly exceed the number of books published annually.” Even the czar acted as a censor, in the cases of both of Pushkin and Gogol.

No journal, literary or otherwise, could publish without permission, which was often denied. The closing down of journals that published materials that had not been approved by the censors, and the deportation or jailing of their editors and writers, was common. Even works circulating in manuscript form were subject to censorship, and Pushkin, Russia’s leading man of letters, was severely reprimanded for reading his drama *Boris Godunov* in Moscow salons before submitting it to the czar, his own personal censor.

One example will suffice. An army officer and member of the aristocracy, Peter Chaadaev, wrote a series of “philosophical letters” about the state of culture, religion, and philosophy in Russia and Russia’s place in the world. The letters circulated privately among aristocratic circles; one was published in the literary journal *The Telescope* in 1836 (the year in which the first performances of *The Government Inspector* occurred). That letter compared Russia unfavorably with the countries of Western Europe. Chaadev wrote: “Hermits in the world, we gave it nothing and have received nothing from it; we contributed not a single thought to the sum total of the ideas of mankind; we have not assisted in perfecting human understanding, and we have distorted whatever we have borrowed from it. During our entire existence as a society we have done nothing for the common good of man; not one useful thought has been born on our arid soil.”

Government retribution was swift. *The Telescope* was shut down, its editor Nadezhdin exiled, the censor who passed it fired, and Chaadev declared insane.

The censor first refused to authorize the performance or publication of *The Government Inspector*. When Gogol read it to Pushkin and Vasily Zhukovsky (a predecessor and teacher of Pushkin), both laughed uproariously, and when Gogol told Zhukovsky of the censor’s decision, the older man went into action. He enlisted the aid of several powerful and artistically inclined nobles and appealed directly to the czar. Nicholas himself read the play and approved it (after all, he declared himself opposed to corruption); so, then, did the censor.

**Provincial Government**

Although he felt the need to control every effort of his government from the top down, and to discourage, by any means necessary, attempts at reform that came from anywhere else, Nicholas also believed that change was necessary. He decided that it would come imperceptibly, while outwardly little would appear to alter. Thus, one of his more extraordinary innovations was the creation of dozens of secret committees supposed to be working on various social reforms without the knowledge of department ministers. The purpose was to
discourage leaks and rumors and “unwarranted expectations.” The result was an attempt to
create reform while at the same time changing nothing: an undertaking that would seem
to be very much at home in the world of Gogol and The Government Inspector.

Local government was one sector where reform, in any degree, refused to take hold. As Florinsky writes, “Local government . . . was at the mercy of notoriously corrupt petty bureaucrats.” Most small towns and larger provincial ones were ruled by a centralized govern-
ment, in the person of the Mayor in The Government Inspector, and a bureaucracy, as
represented in the play by the Magistrate, Commissioner of Health, Police Superintendent,
Postmaster, and Director of Education. The Mayor was elected by local nobility. By the
mid 1830s, there also had evolved local commissions comprised of government officials and
community representatives to deal with issues such as roads and taxes. Their role, however,
was perfunctory, and local central governments tended to ignore them.

THE JUDICIARY

One of the authors of Russia’s massive judicial system reform of 1861, s. i. Zarudnoy,
wrote:

The statutes of the judiciary would never have been enacted if it were not
for the emancipation [of the serfs] in 1861. No real need for equitable courts
existed under serfdom. The only true judges then were the noble landowners
over whom ruled a supreme and arbitrary authority [i.e., the czar]. They had
to accept its decision; but in their hands was concentrated the power over the
immense majority of the people!

Before the mid-century reforms, Russian courts were notoriously corrupt and inequitable. Florinsky paints a frightening picture of them:

Their chief characteristics were the inhuman severity of punishments; mul-
tiplicity of judicial agencies; complexity of the procedure which allowed cases
to drag on for decades; secrecy and arbitrariness equal to that of the Star
Chamber; heartless formalism; centering of preliminary investigations—often
a determining factor in the issue of the case—in the “unskilled and unclean
hands” of the police (to quote the eminent jurist A. F. Koni); hopeless confu-
sion of judicial and executive powers; subservience of judges not only to the
bureaucracy but also to wealth and birth; low moral and educational standards
of even high judicial officers (in the middle of the 19th century, according to
M. P. Chubinsky, most of the judges of the lower courts were illiterate or half-
literate, and some of the members of the highest court, the senate, could barely sign their names). Casuistry, procrastination, and bribery were so prevalent as to make a lawsuit synonymous with disaster. Thousands of innocent people suffered ruinous and degrading punishment and lingered in prisons and in Siberia, while notable, well-born, and wealthy lawbreakers escaped retribution.

**SCHOOLS**

By 1836, there were four types of schools across Russia: universities, provincial schools (gymnasiums), county schools, and parish schools. Each of the six school regions had a university; there was a provincial school in the capital of each province, a county school in the chief town of each county, and at least one parish school for every two parishes. There were also a few military academies and a limited number of boarding schools for the sons of the nobility, where, in addition to the general curriculum offered at the gymnasiums, they also studied “arts befitting the upper class,” such as French, music, dancing, fencing, and riding. (The language of the upper and even upper-middle classes tended to be French, Russian being considered uncivilized. It was the work of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol that began to change this attitude.) The government provided the funds for the universities and the provincial and county schools; it was up to each locality to fund its parish school. Schools in each region were supervised from the university town, although one can imagine that, thanks to great distances, difficulty of communication, and bureaucracy, not a lot of direct supervision reached down effectively to the parish level.

Instruction lasted one year in the parish school, and the curriculum consisted of (at least in theory) reading, writing, and the basics of math and religion. The county schools had more advanced courses in math and religion, as well as geometry, grammar, geography, history, elementary physics, natural history, and technology, over a course of three years. Instruction in the provincial schools also lasted three years, and the curriculum included logic, psychology, ethics, aesthetics, law, math, psychology, physics, commerce, and technology. The graduates of the provincial schools were expected to go on to university.

When the school system was begun in 1803, the curricula of the various levels were designed (again, in theory) to encourage the advancement of students from parish to county to provincial schools and then to university. This changed in 1828. Ministers had noticed that only about one out of a hundred graduates of county schools made it to university, so they decided that, from then on, the aim of the schools would be to provide an education considered practical for the needs of the social group from which its students came and no more. Parish schools would educate mostly the children of “peasants, bur-
ghers, and artisans,” according to Florinsky; county schools the children of merchants, minor officials, and lesser nobility; and provincial schools the children of nobility. The reason for these restrictions was largely to keep students from the lower classes from attending university, the principal task of which was the training of state employees (the restrictions weren’t entirely successful, however, and some children from the lower classes did enroll in and graduate from university).

Despite the ambitious curricula, the standard of instruction in many schools was appallingly low, especially in the parish schools. Florinsky:

Whatever smattering of literacy the peasant children succeeded in gaining was obtained largely from informal classes where the rudiments of reading and writing were taught by unqualified teachers, often retired soldiers. No wonder that on the eve of emancipation [of the serfs], a literate peasant was a rare exception.

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION
Unlike western countries, where the practice of medicine was an autonomous profession, in Russia, beginning in the 18th century, medicine was run by the government bureaucracy. The state provided all medical education, awarded licenses, and was the main provider of employment. Once a graduate was given his degree, he entered what was likely to be lifetime service not only as a doctor but as a government bureaucrat. To make the profession attractive, the state offered large scholarships, bringing a medical career within reach of many who otherwise could not have afforded it. There would be a heavy price to pay, however, for the recipient of such generosity. For one or two years for each year of the five-year course, graduates had to serve in a government position, usually in a hardship post, according to the scholar Nancy Freidan. “Ten years as a prison physician in Siberia or as a medical inspector in a desolate backwoods town might be the price the physician paid for his medical diploma,” she writes. Such a life at least guaranteed an income, however small. Doctors who quit government service were scarcely able to make a living on their own.

It didn’t help that the profession was scorned by the upper classes. So it generally attracted, at least until the middle of the 19th century, clergy students, who had limited social status, and others whose general education was likely to be poor. Doctors were also drawn from, according to Freidan, “families of pharmacists, barber surgeons, physicians, lowly bureaucrats, soldiers, and even from the Moscow foundling home and the peasantry.”

OPPOSITE A musician entertains a provincial Russian family, c. 1850. Image courtesy New York Public Library.
Indeed, the St. Petersburg census of 1864 grouped doctors with artisans, “listing them midway between porters, piano tuners, and pianists on one side, and typesetters on the other.”

The Russian policy of state control over health care looked good on paper, but, as was the case with the postal system (but not, significantly, with the secret police), the bureaucracy’s day-to-day efficiency and control over supervision and delivery of medicines and care was shaky. Medical practice in the first part of the 19th century wasn’t especially advanced anywhere in the West, and innovations and discoveries in Paris or London (the stethoscope was invented in Paris in 1819) didn’t easily make their way through the vast, sclerotic bureaucracy into the hands of doctors in villages and small towns in Russia. In many places, bleeding and leeches were still the most popular treatment, and anesthesia (introduced in 1846) and sanitation were hardly the words of the day. Doctors were largely helpless against the cholera epidemic that swept Europe and Russia in 1830.

THE POSTAL SYSTEM
By 1800, there were about 450 post offices in all of Russia (although the bureaucracy in charge of the postal system had about 5,000 employees). Toward the end of the 18th century, the government assumed responsibility for mail delivery, but given the vast distances between cities (and the lack of railroads before the 1850s), it was difficult to maintain any kind of quality control. Eventually, the government privatized mail service in many local districts, and these companies provided their own post offices and personnel. Before the advent of a national network of railroads, mail moved by coach over roads that were wet and muddy in fall and spring, and impossibly dusty in the summer. In the winter, mail was often moved by sleigh. Until the introduction of the postage stamp in 1857, the cost of a letter was paid for by the recipient (this was true in most of Europe, as well).
In 1839 the French marquis Astolphe de Custine toured Russia. This is what he recorded in his journals.

Hierarchy

Peter the Great took it into his head that the aristocracy thought too much and were too independent. This great master of arbitrariness could think of nothing better than to divide the people into different classes, irrespective of the name, of the birth of individuals, or of the illustriousness of families. Thus, the son of the greatest Lord of the Empire could be a member of an inferior class while the son of one of his peasants could rise to the top classes, according to the good pleasure of the Tsar. This is how Russia became a regiment of 60 million men; it is called the tchin and is composed of 14 classes, each of which has privileges which pertain only to it.

The 14th class is the lowest. It is placed immediately above the serfs and gives its members the sole advantage of being called free. This freedom means only that no one can strike a member of this class without incurring criminal proceedings.

In return, every individual who forms a part of this class must write the number of his class on his door, so that no superior can be led into temptation of error. This 14th class is made up of the most menial employees of the government: postal clerks, letter carriers, and other subordinates charged with carrying or executing the orders of superior administrators. It corresponds to the grade of noncommissioned officer in the imperial army. The men who
compose it are servants of the Tsar, not serfs of an individual, and they have the feeling of their social dignity; as for human dignity it is not yet known in Russia.

All the classes of the tchin correspond to equivalent military ranks. Thus the hierarchy of the army is found, so to speak, in parallel with the hierarchy which reigns in the entire state. The first class is the peak of the pyramid and is composed today of a single man: Marshal Paskievitch, Viceroy of Warsaw. Since it is solely the will of the Tsar that brings about advancement of the individual in the tchin, a man may rise step by step to the highest military honours without having served in any army. The favour of advancement is never asked for, but is always manoeuvred.

There is in this social organisation an immense power of fermentation which is put at the disposal of the chief of State, a fever of envy so violent, a straining of minds toward ambition so constant, that by now the Russian people must be inept in everything except the conquest of the world.

VIOLENCE

The Russian People impress me as men of agreeable talents who believe themselves born exclusively for physical strength. Together with the indifference of the Orientals, they possess a feeling for the arts, which is equivalent to saying that Nature has endowed them with the need for freedom; but instead of giving them freedom, their masters turn them into instruments of oppression. A man raised so little above the level of the mob, immediately acquires the right—even more, he contracts the obligation—to maltreat other men, to whom he is charged to transmit the blows that he himself receives from above; he is free to seek some recompense in the ills he inflicts for those to which he submits. Thus the spirit of iniquity descends from rank to rank into the very foundations of this unfortunate society which subsists only through violence—the kind of violence that forces the slave to lie to himself in order to give thanks to the tyrant.

A Russian of the low class is beaten as much as he is greeted in his life. The blows of the stick and the tipping of the hat, distributed in equal doses, are efficaciously employed in the social education of this people. One can be beaten only in a certain class and by a man of a certain other class. Here, ill treatment is as formally regulated as a customs duty.

I have seen a dispatch courier, a courier of some minister or the glorified flunkey of some aide-de-camp of the Tsar pull a young coachman from his seat and beat him ceaselessly until his face was covered with blood. The victim submitted to this assault in veritable agony but without the least resistance, as one obeys a supreme decree. Meanwhile, the passers-by were not in the least moved by such cruelty; even one of the victim's comrades, watering his horses nearby, ran at a sign from the irate courier to hold the horses of this
public personage during the entire time that it pleases him to prolong the attack. Thanks to the terror which hovers over all heads, submission serves everyone: victims and executioners—all believe they have need of the obedience which perpetuates the injustice they inflict and the injustice they suffer.

DECEIT
It must be said that the Russians of all classes conspire with miraculous harmony to make duplicity prevail in their country. They have a dexterity in lying, a naturalness in falsehood, the success of which is as revolting to my candour as it is appalling to me. Everything that gives a meaning and a goal to political institutions reduces itself here to one lone sentiment—fear. In Russia, fear replaces, that is to say, paralyses thought. We are not happy in France, but we believe that happiness depends on us; in Russia happiness is impossible.

Actually, this country lends itself marvelously to all kinds of fraud. Russia is always governed by deceit—here admitted tyranny would be a step forward.

If you had accompanied me on this journey, you would have discovered with me, in the depths of the souls of the Russian people, the inevitable ravages of arbitrary power pushed to its utmost consequences. The first result is a savage indifference toward sanctity of the word, sincerity of sentiment, justice of deed; the second result is deceit triumphant in all the actions and transactions of life—the absence of probity, bad faith, fraud in all its forms; in a word, a deadened moral sense. Other nations have tolerated oppression; the Russian nation has loved it.

For almost two centuries, the social and professional life of every Russian who was not a serf was regimented by the Table of Ranks (or tchin) instituted by Peter the Great in 1722. Based on the civil service ranks model employed in Germany, the system allowed nonnobles—sons of secretaries and scribes, for example—through adroit maneuvering to achieve promotions through the ranks. A person had to pass through each rank on the way up, typically spending three to four years at each level. Originally, membership of the 14th class gave personal gentry status and of the 8th class hereditary gentry status. Civilian officials could use the corresponding military title, even if they were not members of the military. A proper system of addressing the ranks was also established.

The correspondence between the civilian and military ranks changed as reforms were carried out in the respective services. The table below reflects the situation prevailing during the 1830s, when Gogol was writing. The Table of Ranks remained in effect until abolished by the Bolshevik government in 1917.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Civilian Rank</th>
<th>Military Rank (Land; Naval)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chancellor</td>
<td>Field Marshal; Admiral of the Fleet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Actual Privy Councillor</td>
<td>General; Admiral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Privy Councillor</td>
<td>Lieutenant-General; Vice-Admiral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Actual State Councillor</td>
<td>Major-General; Rear-Admiral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>State Councillor</td>
<td>Brigadier; Commodore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Collegiate Councillor</td>
<td>Colonel; Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Aulic (Court) Councillor</td>
<td>Lieutenant-Colonel; Commander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Collegiate Assessor</td>
<td>Major; Lieutenant-Commander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Titular Councillor</td>
<td>Captain; Senior Lieutenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Collegiate Secretary</td>
<td>Staff-Captain; Lieutenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Naval Secretary</td>
<td>Lieutenant; ——</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gubernia Secretary</td>
<td>Second-Lieutenant; Midshipman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Provincial Secretary</td>
<td>Ensign; ——</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Senate Registrar, Synodal Registrar, Cabinet Registrar</td>
<td>——; ——</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR MISCELLANY

A NOTE ON CHARACTERS’ NAMES
From The World’s Classics edition of The Government Inspector, edited by Christopher English:

The names of the characters in The Government Inspector are, almost without exception, motivated to some degree or other. . . . [T]he denotation of the characters’ names is not always significant: the intention may merely be to ridicule a pompous character by giving him a preposterous handle, and we should not attach too much importance to the exact “meaning” of the name. Sometimes the name sounds as absurd in English as in Russian; that, alas, is the happy exception. Some names suggest a specific character trait. . . . This is true of most of the motivated names in the play. To illustrate, I give an indication of the meaning of these names and for some, the translation used in a production at the Oxford Playhouse in 1975.

skvoznik-dmukhanovsky (Mayor): skvoznik—a drought, or, figuratively, a sly customer, and dmukhati (Ukrainian)—to blow or to whack. The suggestion is one of a devious and voluble man, who is also a windbag, fond of blowing his own trumpet.

khlorov (Inspector of Schools): khlop—a serf, and khlopat’—to smack or make a loud bang or empty noise: Flogov.


zemlyanika (Warden of Charities): wild strawberry: Strawberry.

shpyokin (Postmaster): shpion—spy, and shpik—secret agent: Snoopin.

khlestakov: khlestat’—to lash.

huebner (Physician—in Russian this name is transliterated as Gibner): gibnut’—to perish.

lyulyukov (Retired Official): lyulyuka’—to lull to sleep.

svistunov (Constable): svistnut’—to whistle, also to clout: Fistikov.

ukhovvortov (Constable): ukho—ear, and vertet’—to twist.

poshlyopkina (Locksmith’s Wife): poshlyopat’—to slap: Slapcheekina.

tryapichkin (Khlestakov’s writer friend): tryapki—rags: Trashkin.

rastakovskiy (Retired Official): rastochitel’—usurer.

korobkin (Retired Official): korobka—box.
RUBLBS AND KOPEKS
The ruble has been the Russian unit of currency for about 500 years; it is divided into 100 kopecks.

“SOME OF THEM GRIMACE SO APPALLINGLY THAT YOU HAVE TO GET THE ICNS OUT OF THE ROOM.”
Russian religious icons are typically small paintings of Christian imagery—Mary, Jesus, etc.—on wood. The use of such icons entered what would later become the Russian empire in 988 A.D., after its conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Religious homes in Russia often have a specific room or corner for hanging icons on the walls; there is elaborate religious symbolism associated with these icons.

“NO, NOTHING ABOUT ANYONE FROM PETERSBURG. THOUGH QUITE A LOT ABOUT PEOPLE FROM KOSTROMA AND SARATOV.”
Kostroma is the administrative center of the Kostrama District. It is one of the “Golden Ring” of ancient cities northeast of Moscow best known for their medieval architecture and their role in the formation of the Russian Orthodox Church. Likewise, Saratov, located on the Volga in southeastern Russia, about 500 miles from Moscow, is the administrative center of Saratov province and the birthplace of Peter the Great, who built St. Petersburg and undertook to westernize Russia in the 18th century.

“MORE THAN A WEEK. HE ARRIVED ON SAINT BASIL’S DAY.”
St. Basil the Great’s feast day is celebrated in the Russian Orthodox Church on January 1; this indicates that the play is set in deep winter; however, as always with Gogol, the need to take facts such as dates literally is debatable.

“AND A DISH OF GHERKINS”
Gherkins are pickles, particularly small pickles made from young cucumbers.

Osip is referring to the Russian Table of Ranks, which classified the various levels of military and civil service. See page 40.
“UM . . . IVANHOE, THAT’S MINE. AND THE BARBER OF SEVILLE. OH, AND OF COURSE, ‘ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE’ . . . AND . . . AND . . . AND OTHERS. I WRITE SO MUCH I FORGET THE TITLES.”

Ivanhoe is a novel by Sir Walter Scott, who was a particular favorite of Gogol. Set in 12th-century England and published in 1819, it is often hailed as the first example of the historical novel. The Barber of Seville is an Italian opera by Gioachino Rossini, with a libretto by Cesare Sterbini. It is based on Beaumarchais’s comedy Le Barbier de Séville and premiered on February 20, 1816, at the Teatro Argentina in Rome. “Ode to a Nightingale” is a poem by John Keats, originally published in 1819.

“THERE’S NOBODY ELSE. SORRY. YOU HAVE THE GIFT OF THE GAB. YOU’RE OUR LOCAL CICERO.”

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) was a Roman lawyer, politician, and philosopher. He was a strong supporter of the Roman Republic and opposed Caesar’s dictatorship and Antony’s attempt to continue that dictatorship after Caesar’s death. He supported Octavian, thinking that Octavian would restore the republic, and attacked Antony in a series of famous—and famously insulting—speeches called the Philippics. When Antony and Octavian allied, however, they declared Cicero an enemy of the state and had him assassinated. His head and hands were displayed in the Forum, and Antony’s wife, Fulvia, reportedly pulled out Cicero’s tongue and jabbed it repeatedly with her hairpin, taking revenge on Cicero’s power of speech. Cicero is generally considered to be the greatest orator of ancient Rome.

“I WAS ONCE RECOMMENDED FOR THE ORDER OF VLADIMIR, FOURTH CLASS. . . . AH, YES. I’M VERY FOND OF THE VLADIMIR. SO MUCH BETTER THAN THE ORDER OF ST. ANNE.”

The Order of St. Vladimir, prince and equal of the Apostles, was a decoration of the fourth class in the Russian Table of Ranks, instituted in 1782 and awarded for state service; it took the form of a ribbon. The Order of St. Anne, instituted in 1797, was given to military officers for bravery, and took the form of a cross worn on the hilt of the sword.

“WHAT ABOUT THIS ONE: ‘I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD THAT FLOATS ON HIGH O’ER . . . PLACES.’ THAT ONE’S FROM ENGLAND.”

“I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud” is a poem by William Wordsworth (1770–1850). Also known as “The Daffodils,” it was written in 1804, first published in 1807, and revised in 1815.
I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in
glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little
thought
What wealth the show to me had
brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
And then my heart with pleasure
fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Marya, by costume designer Beaver Bauer
In any translation there is a natural and entirely healthy tension between a wish to respect the original and the need to create a fluent and credible version in another language. But when attempting to render Gogol into English, the translator soon finds a further tension intruding. How on earth is one to capture the essential oddness of Gogol’s world and Gogol’s language? When we learn, for example, that the court clerk has smelt of vodka all his life because as a baby he was dropped, or struck, by his nanny, should the translator try to “explain” this in some way, or should it be rendered faithfully, shorn of all clarifying syntax? And how should one deal with the wonderful moment when that opportunistic fraud Khlestakov casually says to Zyemlyanika, “Forgive me, but weren’t you a little shorter yesterday?” And Zyemlyanika replies, “Very possibly”? And what of the rats that appear to the Mayor in his dreams, the rats that according to Gogol simply “came, sniffed, and went away”? There is no explanation as to what the rats were doing, what made them come or what made them leave, just as there is no explanation as to why Zyemlyanika may have mysteriously grown in the space of 24 hours. I have left these oddities untouched, because to try to smooth out such absurdities, to try to let the language always make sense, is to soften the broken glass of Gogol’s Russian and thereby damage the original.

And yet, every translation is for today, for the here and now, and The Government Inspector being a comedy, audiences have to be allowed to laugh. For these reasons, and for the sake of clarity, I have taken liberties. I have made some cuts and I have added some lines. I have been brutal in dispensing with asides, even to the extent of adding a character to the scene in the inn, so that the asides can be rendered as a brief dialogue between Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky, who for the purpose become a little chorus, commenting on the action and passing judgements on the other characters. This is mainly because the play was first performed in the main auditorium of the Chichester Festival Theatre, where the thrust stage makes an aside virtually impossible. Yet even in a traditional proscenium arch theatre an aside can feel like a terribly dated convention that threatens to come between an audience and the action.

I have also, in common with some other versions, moved part of the action from the end of the original Act Two to the beginning of the original Act Three, so that the audience may go out at the interval on a high point. I have made other changes. For example, in Act One, I have pointed up the names and the occupations of the principal characters, because in this respect Gogol is not hugely helpful to his audience. I have also extended Osip's
speech at the beginning of Act Two, so that the basic idea of the Table of Ranks, so vital to understanding Russian society of the time, is more clearly introduced to the audience. In addition, since few non-Russian speakers find it easy to grapple with the complexities of Russian names and patronymics, I mainly use surnames instead. Some of these changes may displease the purist. My defence is that I have tried throughout to respect the spirit and intent of the original.

In *The Government Inspector* the line between sound and language is blurred. The characters frequently seem to be overwhelmed by their own words. Sentences tail off, noises intrude. This is why I have added a number of stage directions suggesting particular sound effects: to create an aural texture which reinforces the grotesque of language and of character. At points, words cease to be a means of communication altogether, becoming instead a jungle of obfuscation and deceit. This somehow feels appropriate for a society where all meaning is defined by status, all aspiration to human communication smothered by flattery and deceit.

The society of Nicholas I, with its secret police and its casual brutality, its contempt for human dignity and its destruction of hope, is apparently very far away from our own. After the first staging of the play, in 1836, Gogol was horrified to find it taken for a satire on the nature of Russian society. He had meant it to be a comedy commenting on mankind’s loss of spirituality. Thus began a debate which has raged to this day. As with many great plays, *The Government Inspector* can bear more than one interpretation. It is an enduring classic precisely because it refuses to be labelled. It may reflect a society profoundly different from our own, but it still has plenty to say about how we live today. The erosion of spirituality, the reduction of people to consumers, the banalisation of our culture, Gogol would have had something to say about all that. His bizarre and grotesque depiction of a small town in 19th-century Russia is also, perhaps, a depiction of the fate of any culture which sacrifices real human values in favour of avarice and self-advancement. His chosen weapon is comedy. But it is a comedy grounded in the grimmest of realities—what Gogol famously described as “laughter through tears.” At times it’s an uncomfortable laughter. To quote the same Russian proverb that Gogol quotes in the text: “Don’t blame the mirror—it’s your face that’s the problem.”

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GOGOLWHACK ADVENTURES

Two very different Government Inspectors opened in London in June 2005. The UN Inspector, adapted and directed by David Farr, at the National Theatre, was a modern-day production. The Government Inspector, translated and adapted by Alistair Beaton, at the Chichester Festival Theatre, wasn’t. Who got it right? Discuss.

BY DAVID FARR AND ALISTAIR BEATON (2005)

DAVID FARR: Because I know you from Feelgood, I assumed your version of The Government Inspector would be updated—a modern satire.

ALISTAIR BEATON: My first instinct was to try to do that, but I’m writing a film for Channel 4 featuring a number of ministers who are curiously similar to those in the cabinet, so it was a relief to be able to take a break from contemporary politics. How did you write your version?

DF: Mine is freely adapted from a literal translation. Structurally it’s the same, but it’s set in our time. What I find interesting is that Gogol was writing in the 19th century about government corruption and the desertion of the Russian people, and here we are at the beginning of the 21st century, and it’s all happening again: all the hope of the time between communism and now has dissipated; the ex-Soviet elite has basically carried on ruling; there are revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, Kurdistan. My version is set in a small, unnamed ex-Soviet republic, which is expecting a visit from a UN inspector. The man who is mistaken for him is an Englishman—a minor estate agent from London—who has arrived in the city and is staying in the Marriott Hotel.

AB: How do you cope with the fact that modern communications make the basic premise of the plot harder to sustain? Why can’t someone just pick up a mobile and find out if this man really is from the UN?

DF: Believability is a big problem, but Gogol gives you two things: there really is an inspector coming, and he is under cover. As soon as you’re told that, anything is possible. What’s tough is creating a level of complicity between the 20 people onstage, such that the modern audience believes their belief. The people in the town have to be either so desperate or so paranoid that they’ll believe anything. And because they know how corrupt they are, they will project on to anybody who comes into their vicinity the mirror of their own corruption: that person will be the one to find you out. The town I’ve set it in is fictitious, so The UN Inspector isn’t a direct satire—but then I don’t think Gogol is a satirist exactly either.
**AB:** That’s the great debate. When the play opened in 1836, Gogol was horrified that it was perceived as a satire. Tsar Nicholas I was at the opening night and at the end he said: “Well, everybody got it in the neck, including me.” Gogol spent several years after that rewriting and adding notes, desperately explaining that he didn’t mean the play as a satire of society but as a satire of human manners. But the power of the play is it can be both.

**DF:** Nabokov, in his book about Gogol, gets very angry about this satirical thing; for him, Gogol is a raging conservative.

**AB:** He increasingly became so, until he ended up mad. He was an odd character, a tortured character, and everything he wrote is tortured and in a way imperfect as well.

**DF:** To me, he was someone who lived before his time. He’s like Büchner, or Kafka possibly; the kind of person who is alienated from his own society, desperate to fit in but knows he never will. His late life—he died early—was utterly terrible. He was a fantasist; he seems to have invented all sorts of love affairs that he never really had.

**AB:** He may well have died a virgin.

**DF:** I think it’s very likely—there’s something monklike about him. So it’s as if he wrote this archetypal comedy almost by mistake.

**AB:** Everyone talks about the play as though it’s a great work of genius, and it is, but there are structural problems that have to be fixed. The fact that characters and their jobs are not readily identified, for instance. I’ve had to cheat to make that clearer.

**DF:** As soon as Khlestakov arrives and is mistaken for the inspector, the play goes whoosh! But the first act is hard to get into. Although it pays off millions by the end, Gogol spends so much time setting up the world, what’s wrong, why they’re so afraid. How did you deal with that?

**AB:** Where it gets boring I’ve taken the scalpel. But I do find that act funny. Gogol is painting a picture of a really weird, corrupt town, and the details are terrific. Someone asks where the constable is, and the answer is that he’s gone to buy a firehose. There’s no structural reason why he should have gone to do that; it’s just weird and it makes me laugh. The idea that there’s a hospital where the dominant problem is that everything smells of cabbage is so revolting that it’s funny. And when someone mentions to the guy who is running the hospital that there don’t seem to be many patients, he says: “Since I took over, they’ve all been recovering like flies.” It’s a terrific line. One of my obsessions—although I don’t get as angry about this as Nabokov—is that the language of Gogol is very badly translated. Gogol’s language is very fractured, like broken glass, and translators tend to iron that out.
But if the language is made logical, it makes no sense. Parts of this play are really strange: you get long descriptions of characters, for instance, who you think are going to play an important role, and then they don’t appear.

DF: Nabokov thinks this is the great evidence of a genius; Shakespeare does it, too. My theory about Gogol is that he might have been a cartoonist now: he’s like Robert Crumb, he has this complete world in his head. The difficulty of a modern version is that you are bound to lose a little bit of the play’s oddness because Gogol’s is fundamentally a 19th-century world. You can keep the innocence and the holiness and the strangeness, but you’re never quite going to convey the way so much in that society is about uniforms and medals and hierarchies. When I first read it, I found that strict hierarchy least interesting.

AB: It is a highly stratified society, based on 14 grades of class, to which everyone who was not a serf had to belong. But it isn’t the structure itself that’s interesting, it’s the consequences. Everyone is always trying to figure out how much more important other people are, how much more power they have. The attitudes of all the characters are shaped by the assumption that the only way of advancement is not by merit but favours from above. The play is about skilled sycophancy—that’s why it has this incredible universal quality. Look at the recent casting going on in 10 Downing St.: that isn’t necessarily a question of merit, it’s a question of how well you’ve served the prime minister.

Can satire change the world?
Nobody knows. But that doesn’t mean it’s unimportant. It’s a comic vent for outrage, and right now, we really need outrage. Satire can give heart to people who feel that their political protests have gone nowhere. At some point you have to make the leap of faith that art counts. I think that’s a more useful act of faith than believing in God.

What cause would you die for?
None. I’m a coward and because causes breed fanaticism and that scares me. But I’d go pretty far to get rid of dog shit.

Are we alone?
Writers often are. That’s why it’s nice to have a play in rehearsal. It gets you out of the house. As far as life on other planets goes, I hope we’re not alone. If there are aliens out there, I think we’re going to need them very soon to help save our planet.

DF: Gogol also comments very subtly on the way these provincial people aspire towards St. Petersburg; in my play that becomes a comment on the ex-Soviet desire to be more western. The man who arrives at the hotel isn’t a trickster or a conman, he’s just the ultimate westerner: a consumer who wants and needs things. He’s just following his desires. So *The UN Inspector* is about what happens when capitalism meets communism and a vacuum forms. It’s about trendy people from Notting Hill buying holiday homes in Bulgaria—people getting sucked into a place of opportunity with low prices. In a sense, this is nothing to do with the original play, it’s just set in that world. But where it is faithful to Gogol’s original vision is in the way the poor Bulgarians don’t get any of the benefits. What hasn’t changed between then and now is that the peasant poor in Ukraine or Belarus or any of those ex-Soviet republics are no richer.

AB: If anything, they’re worse off. I remember being in some of the Asiatic Soviet republics, and although there was poverty and oppression, at least they had a basic structure: health, education, water. What they have since the Soviet Union collapsed is much worse than under late communism—and it’s a more brutal capitalism than we’ve had here for 150 years.

DF: The vacuum created by the collapse of those structures has allowed in all kinds of entrepreneurial opportunists and an almost unbelievable level of corruption. A lobby group came to rehearsals and told us stories that made Gogol’s play seem entirely rational: mad stuff about oil being exchanged for £2 million Wellington boots.

AB: The unbridled greed of those in power is what unites 1836 and now: nothing much has changed. One privilege we have in common is that we’re working with terrifically huge casts: in Chichester we have 24 actors playing 31 characters.

DF: Although it’s a huge cheat to call this a new play, it is very exciting to be doing a piece of new writing in the Olivier with a big cast. I think that’s going to happen more, the political situation around the world is so volatile now that theatre has become much more relevant. Suddenly people are coming to the theatre asking questions; in the late 1990s I remember thinking there aren’t any questions to ask, so everyone, including me, was writing plays set in small rooms about relationships. For me to feel I can set a play in an ex-Soviet republic a bit similar to Ukraine and people won’t be completely bewildered by it is a mark of where we are.

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**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. What do you think of the design for this production of *The Government Inspector*? How do the design elements (sets, costumes, lighting) affect your perception of the story? If you were designing a production of this play, how would your design be different? Why?

2. How do the physical attributes of each character, including their costumes, props, sound effects, and physical behavior, reflect his or her internal thoughts, feelings, and attitudes and status in the world?

3. How does the world Gogol creates in *The Government Inspector* differ from ours? How is it similar? Do you think it is realistic? Why or why not?

4. What is Gogol satirizing in *The Government Inspector*? What do you think Gogol is saying about society, politics, and humanity? Do you agree? Why or why not?

5. What statement do you think Gogol was trying to make by having the Mayor address the audience and say, “What are you laughing at? You’re laughing at yourselves”? (It is said that Gogol added that line after the play’s first performance in St. Petersburg.)

6. Do you think Khlestakov is justified in taking advantage of the townspeople? What would you do in his position? Is he a hero or a villain? Who are other heroes and villains in the play? Are there any heroes?

7. What is the role of the music in the play? How does it further the story? What other stories does it tell?

8. Polish theater critic Jan Kott calls *The Government Inspector* a “tragic farce.” What do you think he means by that?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...


