

Re-Inspecting the Classics: Different Approaches to The Government Inspector

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I. Introduction

Listen to this.

[Story of the bad *West Side Story* ending]

A good story, I think, can be retold again and again. A good joke is worth telling more than once.

Sometimes to the same people, if you're like me. The story and the joke provide definition to yourself in the moment. It's taking a bit of your past and bringing it to the present.

And such it is with this process and art form that we call The Theatre.

II. Why revivable?

A. Asserts itself in the present

On the first day of my Introduction to Theatre classes, I always talk to students about the fundamentals of the theatre process. I like to begin with British director Peter Brook's opening from *The Empty Space*, in which he claims he can take any space and call it a stage. A person walks across it while one other person watches, and that's all he needs for the act of theatre to be engaged. For students I write out it as an equation (for the mathematically minded) of actor + audience = theatre.

Based on that fundamental equation, theatre exists in the live communication between the two, between the stage and the seats. So to retell a story – in the case of theatre, to produce a play once again, you have to necessarily bring it to the present moment, to make it current, to make it an event that is happening right now. So in the very core of the theatre process, there is this ongoing process of reinterpreting and retelling a story in the now.

For instance, the production that we saw here last night – *The Government Inspector* – may have been written 170 years ago, but it was retold in the now.

I always tell my students that the basic difference between theatre and film is that film is THEN, theatre is NOW. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, but what I'm interested in here is the live interaction, the now-ness, of the theatre process. Peter Brook writes in *The Empty Space* that film flashes images from the past, while theatre asserts itself in the present. This is what makes it more real and what can make it more disturbing. Neil LaBute, the American playwright and director, said that "Movies require a technology, a screen, a bucket of popcorn. Theatre only needs someone to stand up and say, 'Listen to this.'"

It's true that the play texts themselves are products of their time and place, with specific references, quotations, characters, locations, and even original staging conventions that they take with them. But play performances are a product of their time and place as well, with new spaces, technology, actors, audiences, and associations. And the tension in theatre comes from the past and the present colliding, where original meaning meets new meaning, where jokes and characters and tragedies and comedies speak across time to the contemporary moment.

B. Universal themes

It's at this point that we start using the phrase "universal themes." How many times have you heard that used to describe a play? "The universal themes of love and loss." "The universal themes of family and friendship." As hokey as that phrase has come to sound, there's still something true about it. Something recognizable. The characters, situations, and ideas still draw us in, still interest us – they are still familiar, in some way.

I once attended a week-long intensive playwriting workshop led by the British playwright Simon Stephens. Mr. Stephens, an award-winning playwright, is known for intimate portrayals of families and the generations. On the first day, he asked us the question, "What do you think all plays must be about?" We discussed it as a group, and had a variety of ideas: a play must be about conflict, a play must be about someone making a decision, a play must be about someone making a sacrifice. But he kept pushing us until we had boiled it down to the simple fact that all plays must be about human beings. In other words, all plays tell a human story. Even if the characters are objects or animals, they are still humanized to tell a story in a recognizable way.

It's in these human stories that we find something common and something to be rediscovered time and again.

C. Examples

It's this universality and continuing rediscovery that allows a play to speak to different places and times depending on its needs. We can ask, What can this play specifically say to us? In other words, this sense allows a play or musical to become a classic. The story is familiar and true to us, so we return to again and again.

It's how a play like Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, which debuted in the 1920's, can be revived and adapted as a successful musical on Broadway in 2008.

Or how Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, which had a successful run on Broadway in 1928, can disappear from the radar for 60 years and be rediscovered in the early 1990's. The story of a young woman who feels forced into a marriage and a family and eventually retaliates violently, of a woman who is crushed by the machinery of society, can still have relevance today. In fact, my department has a production of it opening next week.

It's how a 19th century German play about teenage sexual discovery like *Spring Awakening*, can be turned into a Tony Award-winning musical on Broadway.

Or with Shakespeare, whose stories have told and retold probably more than any other playwright's. It's the human connection to his stories that allows Mark Rylance to stage *The Tempest* at the Globe with only three actors. Or that allows Ethan Hawke to think "To be or not to be" while wandering through a Blockbuster, as he contemplates the future of the Denmark Corporation. A play like *Hamlet* can be adapted in different forms from Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* to *The Lion King* on Broadway.

Similarly, Moliere's *Tartuffe* will always be relevant in some way, as long as there is religious and political hypocrisy.

The things that we laugh at on stage today, are the exact same things the Greeks laughed at 2500 years ago. It always amazes my students that the same fart joke they just heard on *Family Guy* can be found in any of Aristophanes' work.

And so it is with Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, first published in the 1830's that has seen constant re-inspection for past 170 years.

It's these stories that become classics.

Quick side note: how we define a classic is a much larger issue that I'm not going to cover here.

Questions of how a play becomes a classic, who decides, etc. is a valuable discussion, but one I'm not interested in here. Instead, I'm interested in looking at the overall question of why we keep coming back to these stories, and how one particular story – *The Government Inspector* – has been revisited over time.

III. *The Government Inspector*

Corruption. Greed. Disguise. Mistakes. Bribery. Mayhem. Is there a time period or a country in this world that's not familiar with these things? If you set out to write a farce about these things, the question isn't where or when could you set it, the question is where or when *couldn't* you?

A. Why *Government Inspector*?

I think there are a number of reasons why Gogol's play continues to be revived. First, it's just a fun play. It uses the basic elements of comedy: mistaken identity, repetition, exaggeration, violence, and scatological humor. Anyone who saw the production last night knows that.

I think the play also has appeal in that Khlestakov is an anti-hero. We sympathize with him, but we don't. We want him to be found out, but in some ways we don't. The ambiguity of this character lends itself to re-interpretation.

And again, the play incorporates perennial themes such as the exposure of hypocrisy and vice. Despite Khlestakov's behavior, despite the under-handed doings of the Mayor and his minions, there is a sense of justice to the play. Khlestakov unintentionally exposes all of their corruption and power-mongering. And in the end, just when they are rid of him, the real inspector shows up, and everyone freezes, caught by the fact that they cannot hide the extent of their wrong-doing.

There is something recognizable in this play. Something adaptable. Which is why, when the Mayor turns to the audience and bellows "You're laughing at yourselves," it has the ring of truth to it, no matter where or when it is spoken.

B. Examples

The interesting thing about studying the classics and how they have moved throughout time, is to see how each production says something about the world in which it was set. This is one of the reasons I love studying theatre history: to learn about a performance of a play is to learn about the ideas and issues and trends and techniques of a time period.

And different time periods and countries have adapted *The Government Inspector* to their needs. The play has been used as a testing ground for some new techniques, or a palette on which to paint ideas.

I want to highlight two major productions of *The Government Inspector* from the 20th century, as well as a handful of lesser ones, and take a brief look at how these productions were products of their time and place.

1. Vsevolod Meyerhold (1926)

Vsevolod Meyerhold was a Russian director, actor, and theorist who originally trained with Constantin Stanislavski (the father of modern acting). He agreed with Stanislavski on some approaches to the theatre, but soon forged his own career path. Meyerhold reacted against the ideas of realist acting and staging, and developed a style of acting he called “biomechanics.” This style, modeled on acrobatic and mime techniques, focused on learning gestures as a method of outwardly expressing emotion. The emotional and physical states of an actor, he argued, were connected. By using certain gestures or poses, actors could conjure up related emotions, and vice versa. There’s something almost classical about his movement. Actors’ bodies are made into icons, signifying emotional states.

Meyerhold wrote about the play: "What is most amazing about *The Government Inspector* is that although it contains all the elements of... plays written before it, although it was constructed according to various established dramatic premises, there can be no doubt — at least for me — that far from being the culmination of a tradition, it is the start of a new one. Although Gogol employs a number of familiar devices in the play, we suddenly realize that his treatment of them is new.”

New, indeed. Meyerhold sought to throw off decades of interpretation and, like Gogol himself, create something new.

A number of terms have been used to describe Meyerhold’s production of *The Government Inspector*: expressionistic, surrealist, dreamlike, symbolistic, constructivistic, mechanical, circus-like.

Meyerhold took a classic Russian play, already made old hat by decades of traditional comic playing, and sought to remake it into a new tragicomedy. Meyerhold rewrote the play from five acts into fifteen separate episodes. He added characters and deleted some, inserted text from some of Gogol’s other works while removing entire scenes from the play, and incorporated various tableaux, or frozen stage pictures.

He turned the play in a visual circus. Actor Igor Ilyinsky, then Erast Garin played Khlestakov, who was initially dressed in black, with a tall hat and thick glasses. His costume changed from shabby to refined; even his glasses changed shape. Khlestakov went from being a comic swindler to a shifty, awkward, frightening figure.

The set was built, according to Meyerhold's ideas, as a machine for acting. The already frenetic physical pace of the play was hurried and embellished; characters often spoke and moved in unison. The most famous scene included eleven hands reaching simultaneously from eleven doors to offer bribes to Khlestakov. Rather than a slow series of bribes, the politicians offered him money mechanically, all at once.

In the finale, Meyerhold replaced the actors on stage with nearly 60 dolls. The actors, after reading the letter revealing that Khlestakov was indeed not a government inspector, and with the realization that the arrival of the true government inspector was imminent, the actors panicked and fled the stage, leaving the army of dummies – each of which was modeled on a character from the play and posed accordingly – frozen in shock at the news.

Meyerhold recognized the elements that could be newly discovered in the play, even though by the time of his production, the play was nearly 100 years old. He took a farce about hypocritical behavior and infused it with his techniques through and through. His productions were at odds with the “socialist realism” of the day – he sought to discover something more spiritually or emotionally true about Gogol's satire.

Ironic, then, that 14 years after staging this critique of a corrupt government, Meyerhold was imprisoned, tortured, and eventually executed under Stalin's regime. Stalin had shut down Meyerhold's theatre in 1938, proclaiming that avant-garde artists were a detriment to the Soviet Union.

2. *U.N. Inspector* (2005)

In 2005, the Royal National Theatre in London staged a free adaptation of the play as *The U.N. Inspector*, in the Olivier Theatre. Adapted and directed by David Farr, this production took modern-day Russia and the Ukraine as its cue. The production starred Michael Sheen as Michael Gammon (aka Khlestakov) and Kenneth Cranham as the President. [Michael Sheen in *Frost/Nixon*] The characters are updated to the President a fictional, former Russian commonwealth and his Ministers of Justice, Health, Education, and Finance, as well as his Head of Intelligence. In this version, Gammon is an errant businessman staying at the local Marriott, mistaken for a United Nations inspector, and the President and his cabinet scramble to cover up human rights violations, nonexistent health care, inadequate education, and the silencing of the media. During this production, which retained much of the comic business of Gogol's original, protestors are heard being shot outside the palace, the Head of Intelligence cuts out the tongue of an investigative reporter (off-stage) and the President covers up the country's terrible health care by showing Gammon around the set of a television soap opera set in a hospital.

In one example of how this modern staging connected to its time and place, the Head of Intelligence offers, upon Gammon's initial mistaken identity, to poison him. In fact, she keeps a syringe of poison in her pocket at all times, leftover, as she says, from the Cold War, and when she shows it off, the President rushes to silence her. The moment was comical, but when paired with program notes that discuss Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who was poisoned with dioxin, the moment becomes rather solemn. Yushchenko, who survived the poisoning but was left with facial scarring, called his face

the “face of Ukraine today,” trying to break out of corrupt business and political practices to establish its own democracy.

A majority of David Farr’s adjustments were textual references; by and large the story remained the same. Gammon unwittingly uncovers the extreme corruption of the town (“Shitskiburg,” he kept calling it), all the while taking bribes, swilling vodka, and wooing the President’s wife and daughter.

One notable change, however, shifted the final tone of the play. In the final moments, Gammon absconds with the President’s daughter. The two of them steal one of the President’s helicopters in order to leave the country. The President is informed of this, and torn between the decision of saving his daughter’s life and allowing the world to learn of his corruption (since Gammon had learned everything), he orders that the helicopter be shot down.

What did remain of the ending, however, was the announcement that the real inspector had arrived. As per the play, the cast gasped and froze on stage, except for the President, who clutched his chest, apparently suffering a heart attack.

Farr’s adaptation updated the play to the 21st century. Everything about the design spoke of a contemporary, post-Soviet setting, and the story of a provincial town thrown into chaos by a mistaken identity became an international story of politics. Interesting that, according to the play, these lesser Mayors or Presidents still have something to fear from a larger governing body.

3. Ohio State University (2005)

One final production I want to highlight, if only for the visual references, is from The Ohio State University Department of Theatre in 2005. This production used Adrian Mitchell’s adaptation of the

play, and played up the farcical and exaggerated nature of the story. The director's overall concept was to show the town to be so corrupt that the physical world surrounding the characters was exaggerated and out of proportion.

The characters themselves were exaggerated, too. The Mayor wore an oversized major general hat. Bob- and Dobchinsky were the classic buffoons. The Mayor's wife sported a gigantic bosom, with which she knocked Khlestakov over. His daughter had rosy, painted cheeks like a porcelain doll. And the Superintendent of Schools was so high-strung that she shuffled and positively quivered the entire time she stood onstage. Many of the costumes looked like they were drawn straight out of Dr. Seuss.

One striking set of images shows the Mayor standing next to a painting of himself. The painting, like the surrounding set, is bent and distorted, like a Cubist painting. As the Mayor leans forward, like the painting, the world seems to be bending around him. Stairs, railings, doorways, platforms were all awkwardly proportioned. The painting itself curved with corner in which it was hung.

4. Other productions

a. *Inspecting Carol* at Seattle Repertory Company (1992)

Consider this production, which premiered in 1992, went on national tour, and has been revived since. It was directed by Daniel Sullivan working with Seattle Repertory Company. They rewrote story of *The Government Inspector* into the story of a man auditioning for *A Christmas Carol* who is mistaken for an informant from the National Endowment for the Arts. One review called it "*A Christmas Carol* meets *Noises Off* meets *Waiting for Guffman*."

b. Greene Shoots Theatre (2006)

Or Greene Shoots Theatres version that played at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, focused on Commedia dell'Arte-style movement. The production employed ensemble-style acting with a heavy use of physical theatre, including mime and the use of a chorus.

c. Guthrie Theater (2008)

Or a recent successful summer production of *The Government Inspector* at the Guthrie Theater.

Visually it was very similar to the Ohio State production, complete with loud, garish colors, and over-the-top costumes.

IV. Conclusion

The Government Inspector is just one of many examples of classic plays that are and have been revived repeatedly. Always, always – directors are finding new ways to interpret the plays. Even the plays themselves may be ignored for some time, then re-discovered with something new to say.

Similar to my story about *West Side Story*, which I will continue to tell again and again, probably to the same people, *The Government Inspector* will continue to be shared. Each new cast, each new director, each new designer will find something about that play that speaks to them, and will find a new audience with which to share it.

A final thought about why we return to these fleeting retellings. The scholar David E. R. George published an article in 1986 called “Quantum Theatre – Potential Theatre,” and in it he offered a new way of looking at the theatre process. He likened it to a physicist attempting to photograph the movement of an electron. One flash of gamma rays, he says, and we see one version of the electron. Absolutely true, but not the whole picture. Another flash, and we see it in a different position. And so on and so forth.

George offers a similar view on the theatre process. One production of a play, he says, is a snapshot of its potential. An accurate representation, one we can learn and explore, but not the whole picture.

Another production offers another snapshot, and we see another realization of the potential in the play.

It's a fascinating comparison – one that offers a reason, I think, of why plays become classics, and why Nikolai Gogol, Vsevolod Meyerhold, David Farr, and Kirsten Kelly – why they approach *The Government Inspector*. It's because they see a new way – informed by their training, their intuition, their collaborators – of unlocking the potential in the play.

The potential is the human story. The story about our triumphs and mistakes, our highest and lowest moments, our tragic consequences and comic happenstances – and these are stories, as we all know, that will always be worth retelling. [And their telling tells us as much about teller as it does about us.]

Thank you.

SOURCES

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