Northern Broadsides

Education Resource Pack

A GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

About this pack

We hope that teachers and students will enjoy our production and use this education resource pack.

It may be used in advance of seeing the performance – to prepare and inform students about the play; and afterwards – to respond to the play and explore in more depth. Teachers may select, from the broad range of material, which is most suitable for their students.

The first section of this document is a detailed companion to our production: plot synopsis, character breakdown and interviews. It reveals the ways in which our company met with the many challenges of bringing ***A Government Inspector*** to the stage.

The second section looks at the life and work of Gogol in more detail, and sets him in a Russian literary context.

The third section examines the development of the Russian theatre through the work of three key individuals: Chekhov, Stanislavski and, in more detail, Vsevolod Meyerhold.

At the end of the second and third section are exercises and suggestions for study.

A Government Inspector, adapted by Deborah McAndrew, is published by Methuen and available to purchase from the Northern Broadsides website.

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INTRODUCTION

The play

In 1835, the famous Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, received a letter from his friend Nikolai Gogol.

Gogol was already a successful short story writer, but he wanted to write a play. He asked his friend for an *authentic Russian anecdote* to be the inspiration for a comedy. Pushkin duly obliged with a story about a man, mistaken for a high-ranking government official while travelling through a small rural town.

Gogol began writing in the autumn of that same year, and the resulting play, ***Revizor***, was performed for the first time the following spring. It was an instant hit.

Gogol was disappointed with that first production. The Russian theatre at the time did not have the strong unique identity it has today, and the acting was heavily influenced by western Europe's broad comedic style. Gogol thought this was too crude and called for a more detailed and complex reading of his characters.

What Gogol was asking for we would today call 'naturalism' – an approach to acting that was to be developed by the Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky, who was born 11 years after Gogol's death. Stanislavski's famous System has influenced actors worldwide ever since – but he developed his theories working on Gogol's play, ***Revizor***. More of him, and his contemporaries, later in the pack…

Revizor has been translated into countless languages, and regularly performed throughout the world. Despite its particular Russian context, its truly universal theme successfully transcends both time and geography to reach audiences today, almost 180 years after it was written.

The title of the play is usually translated into English as *The Government Inspector*, or *The Inspector General*. Ours has taken the indefinite article to call it *A Government Inspector*. For purposes of clarity in this document, the play will be referred to by its Russian title, ***Revizor***, unless reference is being made directly to our own production.

SECTION ONE

OUR PLAY

Plot Synopsis

A remote northern backwater, somewhere so far off the beaten track:
'nobody ever comes here, and nobody ever leaves…'

Act 1 – Civic Offices

The corrupt Leader of the Council (and conductor of the town brass band), runs things his way and has never had to worry about interference from central Government. However, this morning Councillor Belcher receives a letter, tipping him off that an Inspector is on his way from London, travelling incognito, with secret instructions to investigate the town.

Belcher gathers his cronies around him: Councillor Pippa Strawberry (Health), Councillor Luke Pickles (Education), and Amos Fudge (District Judge). While they are putting a cover-up plan together, local businessmen, Bob Sidebottom and Bob Longbottom, arrive with news that a mysterious stranger is lodged at *The Dog and Duck* and demanding everything on credit. This can only mean one thing – the Inspector is already in their midst!

Convinced that someone from the town has complained about him, Belcher instructs the Postmaster (Johnny Pepys) to open any letters addressed to London. The local police are firmly in his back pocket too, and they are drafted in on a town clean up.

Finally, Belcher sets out to attempt a damage limitation exercise with the stranger at *The Dog and Duck.*

Act 2 – Room 5, *The Dog and Duck*

At *The Dog and Duck* we find Frank who, for the price of a meal, poses as the Personal Assistant of Mr Jonathan Snapper Esq. Snapper is a narcissist, who thinks it's important to look important. In fact he's only a minor public servant, on his way to see his father to sort out his current insolvency – caused by profligacy and gambling.

Snapper and Frank are in a tight spot. They have no money to pay their bill at and the Landlord is refusing them any more food. When Councillor Belcher arrives Snapper is convinced he's about to be arrested and puts up a front of outrage at his treatment. Given that Belcher is already convinced he's a Government Inspector, the bluff is fantastically effective and the case of mistaken identity is complete.

Belcher offers Snapper a 'loan' to tide over his present embarrassment, and secretly congratulates himself that the Inspector has already accepted a bribe. They set off for a tour of the town, and a slap up lunch.

Act 3 – Home of Tony and Annie Belcher

Belcher's wife, Annie is waiting at home with their daughter, Mary, for news of the visitor from London. Annie is furious that she is being left out of such an exciting event; Mary is completely underwhelmed by the whole thing. Bob Sidebottom arrives with a note from Belcher, instructing Annie to prepare the spare room for the Inspector, who will now be staying with them. Thrilled at the prospect of such a glamorous houseguest, Annie and Mary rush off to get dressed up.

Belcher and Snapper arrive home from the tour of the town with the whole entourage, and soon the wine is flowing. Snapper's fantasist tendencies can't resist such an attentive and admiring crowd, and he wildly exaggerates his importance in Government, and his connections to showbiz glitterati and even… The Palace. He also claims to have a nose for sniffing out corruption, which ruffles everyone except Annie and Mary who are both captivated by him. When Snapper ultimately collapses into unconsciousness from a surfeit of self-aggrandizing and bilberry wine, everyone is convinced that they are in the presence of a Knight of the Realm, and probably the most powerful man in the country.

INTERVAL

Act 4 – Home of Tony and Annie Belcher

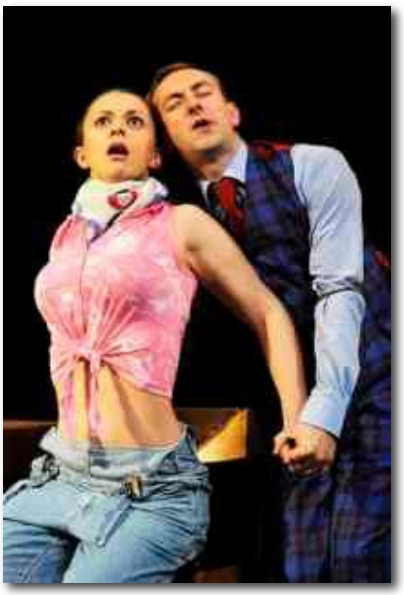
Belcher hasn't got where he is without knowing a thing or two about human nature. He senses that last night Snapper got a little carried away. Belcher doesn't believe his claim to have a keen desire to sniff out corruption. A man as powerful as *Sir* Jonathan couldn't possibly be that honest. Confident that he has slipped the Inspector one bribe already, Belcher is certain that as long as he can keep any complainants from the town away from their illustrious visitor he'll be home and dry.

Meanwhile Strawberry, Pickles, Fudge, Pepys, Sidebottom and Longbottom arrive to ensure that the Inspector overlooks their own particular 'indiscretions' – by bribing him. One by one they hold private conference with Snapper and slip him varying amounts of money – which he obligingly refers to as 'loans'.

Finally the penny drops with Snapper that they've mistaken him for someone else, and he writes an amusing letter to a London journalist friend, telling her about his adventures. Frank advises him to get out while he still can, but Snapper is enjoying himself too much. He sends Frank off to the post office with the letter and, when a contingent of local people arrives with petitions against Belcher, he continues to enjoy his impossibly high status in the town.

However, the mood gradually turns more sinister as the accusations against Councillor Belcher become more and more serious. From protectionism and fraud, to unlawful imprisonment and GBH. Snapper glimpses the darker side of his jovial, pompous host and his self-serving cronies. Perhaps Frank is right after all – time to go.

Frank is dispatched to arrange a car while Snapper passes the time flirting with Mary Belcher, then Annie, and then Mary again. Once again Snapper is carried away on a tide of fantasy and ends up threatening to kill himself if Mary won't consent to be his wife. The Belchers can't believe their luck. Their daughter is going to be married to the most powerful man in the country. They bid farewell to their prospective son-in-law as he sets out to tell his father the good news. Once Snapper has obtained his father's blessing, he'll be back of course…



Act 5 – The streets of the town, returning to the Civic Offices

Tony and Annie Belcher congratulate themselves on their good fortune, and immediately begin planning their move to London, where Belcher will surely get a Peerage at the very least. On a valedictory parade through the town, they encounter the local people who complained to Snapper. Despite his instincts to crush them, Belcher prefers to be magnanimous – providing they all cough up generous wedding gifts.

At the Civic Offices the Councillors, Judge and Businessmen are waiting to celebrate, but the Belchers have already moved on from this one-horse town. Annie is imagining decorating their fashionable London home, while Belcher is wondering what title to take when entering the Lords.

Suddenly Johnny Pepys the Postmaster arrives in a state of high excitement. As instructed, he has opened a letter addressed to London. It's the one Snapper wrote to his journalist friend. As the letter is read aloud, the true identity of Jonathan Snapper is revealed, and their ludicrous behaviour towards him exposed and ridiculed.

Belcher's own fantasy crumbles and the scene descends into fury and chaos.

At this moment it is announced that A Government Inspector has arrived, and will see them all **immediately…**

Characters

What's in a name?

Gogol's original is full of wordplay, much of which doesn't translate into English very well. Like Charles Dickens, he gives his characters names that evoke something of their character. These names are fun and add to the heightened reality of the whole play. In this section, in addition to notes on each character, there's a little on the original Russian name, and how our version translates them into English.

Tony Belcher
The Leader of the Council in our nameless northern town. He is a very successful politician, but controlling and corrupt. He is also the conductor of the town brass band – where everyone is forced to play his tune.

And in the original Russian: *Antonin Antonovich Skvoznik-Dmukhanovsky*
The name suggests a bag of wind, and also sharp practice and social climbing

Annie Belcher
Tony's wife. She's socially aspirational, but not very bright. She is easily flattered and flirtatious with Snapper; indicating that she's really very bored and desperate for a bit of excitement.

And in the original Russian: *Anna Andreyevna*
Obviously in our version her name is simply anglicized – though the use of the diminutive 'Annie' perhaps makes her feel a little rougher round the edges than the refined 'Anna'.

Mary Antonia Constance *Annie and Tony's daughter. She's just a typical bored, lazy teenager. She'd quite like a boyfriend, but the whole thing is probably too much effort. Having a fiancé offered on a plate is perfect for her – and she likes the idea of a flashy ring and a big white wedding. However, when it all falls apart she's not phased at all.*

And in the original Russian: *Marya Antonovna*
Again, Mary has simply been anglicized – though we have retained a nod to what is called the Patronymic, which gives an opportunity to say something about the structure of Russian names.

They are in three parts:

- A Christian name, or given name – eg Anna
- A Patronymic – that is a modified father's name – eg with Marya *Antonovna* we see that her patronymic is a version of her father's Christian name – *Antonin.* The patronymic is not a middle name as such; and the modification of the father's name depends on the gender of the child. Boys' patronymics end with *ich, vich, evich*: girls' with *ovna, evna, ichna.* Eg: *Ivanov* and *Ivanovna* are the male and female variants of the same family name – whose father's Christian name is *Ivan*.
- A Family name. More complicated than an English surname, as there are gender variants. Depending on whether you're male or female your family name will end differently: *ov, ev, öv, in, ih, yh* (male variant); *ova, eva, öva, ina, ih, yh* (female variant). The suffix means 'belong to the family, or clan of' (a bit like Mac / Mc in Scots and Irish names! - Ed) (You don't really need to know this; it's just interesting)

The 'Constance' in Mary's name is just an embellishment on the part of the writer!

Doctor Beattie
Khristiyan Ivanovich Gibner
In the original the gag is that he doesn't speak the same language as his patients. Our musical adaptation made room for a percussionist.

Philippa Strawberry
Artemy Filippovich Zemlyanika
Literally means 'a strawberry' and in the original this character is male. Deborah changed the gender of this character to reflect modern times, but also to break up the stage picture a little (which is otherwise full of men) and help the audience to identify the different characters more quickly.

Judge Amos Fudge
Ammos Fyodorovich Lyapkin-Tyapkin
The surname here implies 'slap-dash'. In one translation he's called 'Judge Slappencatchit'.

Luke Pickles
Luka Lukich Khlopov
In the Russian, Khlopov is derived from the verb meaning 'a dull thud' a kind of wallop – but it also says in the play that he reeks of onions, and the word Luk actually means 'onion' in Russian. So we've turned him into a fainting Pickles – a sound Yorkshire name, which completes our little set of 'edibles'.

Robert Longbottom / Robert Sidebottom
Pyotr Ivanovich Dobchinsky / Pyotr Ivanovic Bobchinsky
A sort of Tweedle-dee / Tweedle-dum thing. Deborah went for 'Bob' rather than 'Pete', and found an English Northern equivalent. (And 'bottoms' are funny – aren't they?)

Postmaster Johnny Pepys
Ivan Kuz'mich Shpyokin
Pry or snoop – nuff said.

Jonathan Alexander Snapper
Ivan Aleksandrovich Khlestakov
The primary verb here is 'to lash' – but as Nabokov observed, the Russian ear also picks up a wide range of echoes from the swish of a cane to the snap of a card. The character is most definitely an upstart too, so 'Snapper' seemed right for us.

Frank
Osip (Joseph)
The only name that has been changed completely. With everyone else having apt names it seemed a shame to just call this character Joe. So – he became 'Frank', because he is.

Chief Superintendent Steve Lugg
Stepan Ilyich Ukhovyortov
Related to words meaning 'to twist an ear'. Our vernacular word for ear has the useful double meaning of hefting something around. Perfect.

Whistler
Svistunov
This really does mean 'to whistle'

Snout
Derzhimorda

A word meaning 'to muzzle' – and suggesting a kind of attack dog.

Popper
Pugovitsyn
This word means 'a button'. Popper is also a fastener in our language, and fits in nicely with an anecdote told in the original about soldiers walking about the town with no trousers on. We don't have soldiers in our play, so the 'flashing' tendency has been transferred to one of the police officers. Hence 'Popper'.

Michael / Widdowson / Waiter
Mishka / A Sergeant's Widow / Waiter
Practicalities of doubling led to the creation of this line of 'honest men' parts. In the original the role of Widdowson is actually a woman who has been flogged following a street brawl. Our contemporary English version made this problematic. However, making the flogging a 'roughing up' seemed to make sense for our world - especially if the insubordination is expressed musically.

<u>Characters who are mentioned but do not appear</u>

Jackie Ragg (Snapper's journalist friend)
Tryapichkin
From the word meaning 'rags'. Very nice for us that a 'rag' is a slang word for newspaper.

Abdul (The shopkeeper)
Abdulin
Yep, the bloke who runs the corner shop really is called Abdul.

In Production

Meet the team...

Back row, left to right: Anthony Hunt, Andrew Price, Kraig Thornber, Andy Cresswell, Rebekah Hughes, Conrad Nelson.
Middle row: Andy Cryer, Howard Chadwick, Tim Frances, Jill Cardo, Susie Emmett
Front row: Jon Trenchard, Clara Darcy, Richard Colvin.
photo: Kay Burnett

Rebekah Hughes [*Musical Director*] Conrad Nelson [*Director*] Dawn Allsopp [*Designer*] Tim Skelly [*Lighting*]

A few words from our Creative Team…

Conrad Nelson – Director and Composer

Conrad says… The writer Vladimir Nabokov said: *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.*

This is very much how I see the play, but to approach it in this way demands a very crisp, heightened performance style. The pace is incredibly fast, and the production has to be tightly choreographed, as we move the action from one fixed point to the next.

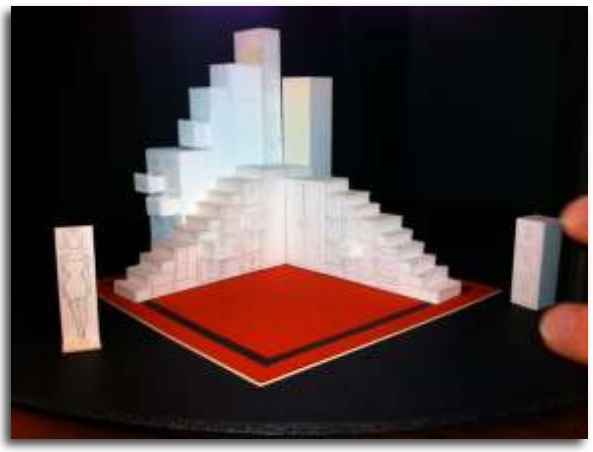
The famous tableau at the end is achieved through building a series of tableaux across the entire play. Some of these moments are clearly identified in the script; but in rehearsals we have built the scenes painstakingly, brick by brick, almost as a series of pictures.

This way of working demands a great deal from the actors, in terms of energy and concentration. It's extremely precise – and though it may look improvised and free, the actors actually have very little room for maneuver in performance. Integrating music, action and text with the complexity we are attempting here requires amazing discipline from everyone involved.

Dawn Allsopp – Designer

Dawn says… The design process begins with a chat between me and the director. I then go away and gather my thoughts and ideas and visual research. We may meet again to chat after this stage or I may go straight into a rough, 'white card' model.

With this I am exploring the ideas I have formulated in my sketches. It may be a very clear design vision at this stage and will change very little between here and completion. At other times there will be a few 'white card' meetings as together we work our way towards a good design solution.



An early white card model of the set

My starting point for the design was a line form the play about 'papering over the cracks'

I then went on to explore filing cabinets and drawers stuffed full of corrupt paperwork, barely concealed and trying to spill out at any given opportunity. I also wanted to create a timeless council office feel of dark wood, which would then sit well within the domestic setting of The Belcher household. Within the play we also go on a tour of the town and the decision to use cast iron architecture was to give a suggestion of street lighting and it also gave us an evocation of a bandstand.

All these elements were then collected together and with simple moving pieces, pop out drawers and rotating walls we could effortlessly move from one setting to another.
This is a play with several locations and the hardest challenge was to come up with a space that would serve these environments well but also have its' own identity. It also has to tour to different types of space and the challenge is to create something which can be adapted from a Proscenium Arch venue to sit well in both The Round and Traverse stages.

The design process is completed with a final model presentation which is supported by all technical drawings and costume designs.

Final model of the set

These two model pictures show the work in progress, and the final result.

All the costumes are designed before meeting the company members. Conrad and I chat and I draw designs based on those discussions.

My big thought at this design stage was to introduce as much colour as I could to stand out from the brown wooden setting. This would also help to give a sense of heightened reality, which I think served this play well.

All the designs were open for input from the actors once the rehearsal process began. It is important that they feel right in what they are wearing. A few designs changed as a result of both these discussions and because of what was available to buy. That is part of the fun and challenge of designing costumes.

Rebekah Hughes – Musical Director

Bex says… My role is to take the music and arrange it for the instruments in our cast band. The tunes are a mix of composed music and song, and existing music. Everyone in the company plays at least one instrument, and they are all really good musicians.

I write out the parts and run the music rehearsals. In a play like this, where music and spoken text are so closely interwoven, it's really important to get the dynamics spot on so that everything is clear.

The music in this production carries narrative and character, and it also gives the audience a sense of where and when we are in the story. For example, when we go to the Belcher's house and the band play 'There's no place like home'; or in the morning when we hear an old hymn tune.

In rehearsals I'm always in conversation with Conrad about what he wants from the music. It's a challenging and creative way to work.

The band plays a piece called The Cossack at the start of the play. It's a well-known brass band piece and quite tricky to play. It's nice to have this in our play, as a little nod to its Russian origins – for those who know.

Tim Skelly – Lighting Designer

Tim says… The best stage lighting design operates like good glue – forming a bond between the action of the performance and the stage design; contained within the architecture of the theatre building. It is always fascinating to work on a new piece of writing, even if it is an adaptation of an existing text from another time and place.

The original Gogol script has been adapted by many theatre-makers over the past centuries. This history holds a particular interest and so the starting point for my process is to look at past productions and to explore the intentions of the original playwright in his own time – in this case it also extended to reading some of Gogol's short stories.

This research then combined with a thorough reading and dissection of the new play-text. I often write a number of notes against the text that are early intuitive reactions to the material itself: *the time of day; the precise location of the action; observations about atmosphere or moods; the number of people on stage in particular scenes.*

At early meetings with the Director and Designer I can offer thoughts on the emerging set design. We have to consider the venues that the production will tour into, and how the different architectures and theatre forms might impact on the developing action.

This production moves from broad interiors and exteriors, to moments of song and brass playing, through vaudeville scene transitions to highly stylised and atmospheric events with real pathos. Finding a style that encompassed all of these elements was important and essential to the success of the design.

Stage lighting is a delicate balance between the intensity, colour, angle, timing and composition. All these aspects need to be considered for each moment of the action in space and time.

I try to spend as much time as possible in the rehearsal room watching the scenes and characters developing, and working collaboratively with the whole team to establish the key aspects of the storytelling. Not all of my initial observations are always valid but they all feed into a better understanding of the material and, hopefully, a richer theatrical

interpretation. Through rehearsal the needs of the lighting are established and a cue structure is developed with the Deputy Stage Manager.

Lighting states form a time-line of static pictures that move and change alongside the action of the play. Each lighting state needs to be timed to work sympathetically with the action of the performance; adding and removing different lights to best support and shape the action.

In the final days of rehearsals my time is spent focusing each luminére (light) – setting the quality, position and shape for each unit. These are then organised into groups within the computerized lighting desk in readiness for plotting – where each lighting state is programmed and stored in sequence. The technical and dress rehearsals allow for this work to be polished, often in a very short space of time.

If I have done my job well then the lighting shouldn't detract from the key intentions of the action but work seamlessly alongside. There is an old saying which states that good lighting shouldn't really be seen – meaning it shouldn't stand proud from the collaborative whole but should allow for theatrical unity.

In depth…

Deborah McAndrew – Writer

Debbie says… A commission to write a play often comes with some kind of brief – that is, a set of criteria for script I'm going to write. Sometimes this can be to do with the audience – for example, if the production is for families and children; or it might be more about the subject matter – for example, I recently wrote a play about allotments!

Northern Broadsides is a company that places great emphasis on crisp, rhythmic language and the northern voice. There is usually a strong musical element too – particularly in Conrad's productions - and the plays are mostly classics of some kind. Common to all theatre companies, there are also budgetary constraints - which means there is always a limit to the number of actors in the cast.

So – for this particular commission the brief was this: ***create a contemporary northern vernacular version of Nikolai Gogol's 'Revizor' – to include a brass band element. It must be for a maximum of 12 actors, and be able to tour to many different theatre spaces.***

This is quite an undertaking, as the original play is set in Russia, at the time it was written (1830s), and there's not a flugelhorn anywhere to be seen. The original is in Russian and there are 25 named characters, plus extras. Also some of the action in the original depends on doors and windows – which are not always possible in the kind of theatre spaces Northern Broadsides performs in – including The Round.

Here's a quick summary of my writer's 'to do' list:

Preparation

- *Read as many translations as possible*
- *Read other works by Gogol*
- *Read commentaries on the play and Gogol's life and work*
- *Talk to a Russian speaker about Gogol's language and culture*

Writing

- *Work out doubling possibilities for 12 actors to cover all parts; and decide which characters might be cut*
- *Decide when and where the play will be set*
- *Find appropriate Northern English names for the characters*
- *Give each character his/her own voice in English*
- *Find a vocabulary, tone and rhythm for the dialogue, so that it doesn't sound like it's been translated, but flows naturally in English*
- *Discover how and where the brass band come in; and how to make the music integral to the play, rather than just tagged on*

Re-drafting (and re-drafting)

- *Keep examining and questioning the structure of the original*
- *Solve the historical anomalies – eg: flogging*
- *Find the contemporary references, without being too obvious*
- *Break into some of the long speeches a little, to keep the whole stage alive*
- *Keep the pace crackling along – don't let it drop*
- *Clean up where there is repetition, sharpening all the time*

Production

- *Once the play is cast, polish the script in a way that may suit the strengths of these particular actors*
- *At the read-through, and throughout rehearsals, be prepared to answer questions and do a little bit of rewriting where required*
- *Relax and enjoy the first night – if the nerves don't get the better of you*

I would say that the preparation is the most interesting – as it's all new and full of potential. The initial writing is the most fun – when I let myself loose on the page and go for it; and production is the most exciting, and also the most nerve-wracking.

Redrafting is the gruelling, head-splitting time, when you have to throw things out and come up with new ideas; when you go through your script and pick at every word, every punctuation mark, every stage direction, every pause… everything. Someone famously said that 'writing… is rewriting' – and ain't that the truth!
Gogol famously didn't like the first production of *Revizor* in 1836. Perhaps he wouldn't like mine either, but I have stayed close to him, and sought to understand and remain faithful to the spirit and intention in the play.

The title is usually translated into English as *The Government Inspector* or *The Inspector General*. In French it is *Le Revizor.* There is no definite or indefinite article in Russian, so it's kind of up for grabs. A recent English adaptation simply went for *Government Inspector*. My choice of title, in selecting the indefinite article, *A*, is a way of acknowledging that this is just one version of many.

The setting of my version is a kind of 'now-and-never' place. Obviously there is no modern technology in the play and, like *Romeo and Juliet*, everything hinges on the sending of a letter. But, like *Romeo and Juliet*, a modern dress version shouldn't make you immediately ask where the mobile phones are.

Although he said it some years after he wrote the play, I took Gogol at his word that he intended *Revizor* to work as a kind of parable on the state of the human soul. Approaching the text in this way meant that I needed to pay attention to the less naturalistic elements in it, so that a stylistic heightened realism supported this notion of the play working on an allegorical level.

The integrating of a choric brass band element is part of the heightened style, as is all the musical content. This is all somehow inspired by the original

text. The character of Widdowson is rebellious, but that insubordination is expressed metaphorically – he won't play Belcher's tune.

Contemporary references are there, but non-specific: eg The PM (not David Cameron) etc… I hope that this all helps to give the play a timeless feel, while making the contemporary relevance of all the corruption hit home.

I have also paid attention to Gogol's attack on religious hypocrisy in the play, and even pushed that a little further. I think that there are notable instances in our very recent history where leaders of many countries and organizations have claimed that their actions are somehow sanctioned by a higher power. Far from being an attack on religion per se – I see these moments as commenting on those who declare themselves Godly, but do not act morally.

I think it's important here to say a word or two about the Dumb Shows in this version. In the original there is just one tableau, at the end, when everything has fallen to pieces. Gogol is quite specific about what he wants here – but he's also got about three times as many people on the stage as I am able to have. I also think it's quite a big leap for the audience to go with this final tableau, and so I decided to use a Dumb Show convention at the beginning, and again in the middle of the play. For me, this helps us get to where we need to be right at the end.

Reading the play as allegory helps to explain how it has managed to transcend its very narrow cultural context and speak to audiences of many nations across almost two centuries. Gogol's detailed observational comedy is not specific to the 'authentic Russian anecdote' he begged from Pushkin to begin his play; and his tiny, remote little town can represent all communities that are, one way or another, self serving or out of touch with reality.

It has been a great privilege to work on this wonderful play, and to spend time with Nikolai Gogol – whom I have come to admire very much. I hope that people who see A Government Inspector might be inspired to explore more of his wonderful writing.

Green room gossip...

We catch up with a few of the cast as they take a break from rehearsals for a well-earned cuppa:

Jill Cardo – playing Mary
Jon Trenchard – playing Snapper
Tim Frances – playing Frank
Richard Colvin – playing Widdowson

Jill: We're in week three... no, no, we're at the beginning of week 4.

Jon: Yes, yes!

Jill: Final week of rehearsals going into tech. It's been quite an organic kind of process, in that we've not really pieced everything together in order yet - just for the sake of doing it in order - which is quite good.

Jon: Yeh, we still haven't done that dreaded first run through of everything.

Jill: But we know where our music goes, and we know where everything should be, even if it's not quite there yet. So we're now starting to think about the fluidity of it -
Jon: Yeh.

Jill: - from one bit to another -

Jon: Linking it all together, which is the big difficult jigsaw.

Jill: Each bit's been broken down, and we've spent a lot of time doing each scene, or each act, and now it's trying to get from one to the other.

Jon: Trying to find out which head turns are funny, and which aren't.

Jill: Yeh.

Jon: And you've gotta remember everything in its place, putting it all together and actually finding - well for me - finding a kind of arc all the way through my scenes. I imagine it would be the same for everybody really - there's a kind of journey for everybody that we haven't explored yet because

we've been concentrating on the detail of individual moments and scenes.

Jill: It's been unusual because of the amount of music we've been looking at along the way. And the isolation of some of the characters - because lots of us don't really cross paths that much - for example mine and Susie's characters (*Susie Emmett, playing Annie*) have quite isolated scenes, so we've actually been in here quite a bit in the green room, being able to run lines - and as a result haven't actually watched the scene previous, or the next scene after you - or the piece of music that leads in…

Jon: It's quite unusual for actor-musician shows not…

Jill: …to be round the edge of the stage all the time.

Jon: Yeah, you're normally on stage the whole time, just fitting your bits into everyone's action. I suppose the nice thing about this is that a) you get to go and look at your lines, or look at your music in the green room, but also b) get to go and see what other people have been doing, and kind of laugh afresh because you haven't seen it yet.

Tim: I joined the company in week two, when another actor had to drop out, and I'm still catching up. You said it was week 4, and I'd lost complete track of time as to where I was. I am still playing catch up, actually - where things go and how things stitch together; and now it just becoming clear and helpful.

The technical work has been done, and we've got a really good foundation on which to build. Things like actual character and 'flesh'... I don't think I've got there yet. But I'm not thinking - 'we open tomorrow!'

Jon: The play itself is quite an oddity. Conrad's very right to be trying to find rhythm in it - which is in both the writing and in the physicality of it. So there is necessarily quite a lot of technical stuff that you need to do.

Playing Snapper I'm juggling with the idea that there is a journey to go through, particularly in Act 4 where he meets the commoners, the brass band - which becomes quite dark. But until you've had the whole journey you don't know how you're going to feel in that moment. So I just don't know how that's going to work yet - but there's also so much detail about the physicality and the voice work. It's all kind of choreographed, and so you have to be both thinking in the moment, and of a broader scheme of things.

There's also been a little bit of a difficulty in that the set has got lots of levels, and we haven't been able to play around with that yet. We've had the two staircases in a little bit - but you have to go up the stairs and jump off the end, and jump up to the next bit and walk down. So it'll be quite good that at the

end of this week we're going into the theatre a bit earlier than you normally would and all of those levels will be there and we'll be able to play around with that before we go into tech next week.

Tim: It's quite tough to put that very technical - almost mechanical - comedy, physical comedy onto someone like Frank, when I'm still working out who the man is. So I don't know how he does that stuff yet. Frank is there to be an opposite to everyone else - that's kind of how it works, so I'm biding my time. I'm doing more thinking than acting at the moment.

Richard: I'm kind of doubling and not doubling. I'm playing the 'honest men' of the village. The more we do the scenes, the more the relationships between my three characters have to be quite strong in order to make it clear that they're a metaphor for honesty. As an actor, I want to make all my characters quite different and interesting and all that stuff; so to deliberately play three separate characters exactly the same is counterintuitive.

Jill: It's quite brave to play different characters the same.

Richard: And everyone else is running and setting their hair on fire and covering themselves in jam and falling over and doing lots of great comedy turns… but Conrad's very clear, and the writing's very clear, that my character doesn't do any of those things. And it would diminish him if he did do any of those things.

Jon: It's quite difficult not to pick up on other people's energy on stage.

Jill: Sometimes that's the right thing to do, and sometimes it isn't.

And in the rehearsal room…

At the end of the play is a frozen picture of the moment in which the real Government Inspector is announced. Here are a few snaps of our acting company in rehearsal, experimenting with some ideas and playing with the notion of the tableau…

Thunderbolt!

Punch Up!

Their characters – when they were at school, perhaps…?

MUSIC

The Brass Factor

Brass band music is integral to our production. At one point in the play the 'voices' of brass instruments replace actual dialogue. Nine out of our company of twelve actors are accomplished brass players, and we have had a lot of support from Harrogate Band, both musically and practically in sourcing instruments for us.

The Musical Director of Harrogate Band came down to rehearsals to put our actor-musicians through their paces…

Craig Ratcliffe
Musical Director of Harrogate Band

The cast are doing great. I was stunned. They're playing *The Cossack*, which is a really complicated march. In brass bands we have different types of marches: contest marches, and road marches. A road march is what you'd hear as the band marches down the street - something nice and simple - but *The Cossack* is a really complicated contest march - and I thought 'this is going to be quite tricky' - but I got there and there's some fine players in that group. It's a good balance of all the instruments of the brass band.

I think *The Cossack* is played at the beginning of the play. It will open the show really well, and it's got a bit of grit to it. You can hear the determination in it. The melodic lines want to get from one place to another quite quickly. They feel like they're going somewhere.

When I took the cast in rehearsal they did really, really well with the music. I even asked them at the end of rehearsals - Is anybody free, we need a front row cornet player...

It's fun working with bands in a different way. I started playing the euphonium with a band when I was 10. I had lessons too, but with the band you literally get thrown in at the deep end and work your way up. It's very much a social thing – it's about learning in a non-formal kind of way

Brass bands are great because you can literally turn up and learn.

My first conducting experiences were with Wetherby band, who I learned with. They had a junior band as part of the lottery grants - one of the good things with the lottery grants, is that bands got all these new instruments, but in order to get the grant they had to show that they were doing something with all the old ones. So they started a junior band at Wetherby, which I took over at the age of 14, which was great. Really good.

I went to the university of Huddersfield to study music, and I played for lots of really good bands when I was there, Brighouse and Rastrick and all those kind of bands. Huddersfield is the best place in the whole wide world for being a brass player. Brass bands are graded a bit like football clubs, with the top echalon called the championship section. At one point within a two-mile radius in Huddersfield there were seven championship section bands. So you couldn't get away from it, and it was great being a brass player because you could always go somewhere and meet other brass banders. And that group of people understand each other, and if they're short of a player for a concert , or somebody at a rehearsal, you could be playing every night of the week.

I came back to Harrogate when I finished university, and I played solo euphonium at Harrogate band. They were looking for a musical director - so I applied for the job, and it was great, having been a player within the band, part of that social side of things, to take a step over and become the MD. I've been doing that for two and a bit years now.

The brass band sound is really difficult to explain to people who've never heard it. There's an emotion and a warmth that you really don't get from any other ensemble. You can get it from an orchestra - from a string section, but not so much as you do in a brass band. It really stirs the soul; it captures the imagination.

Craig explains a bit more about the brass family of instruments

If you forget the valves - originally a brass instrument was just a tube. It's flared at one end, so the sound goes out - that's the bell. At the other end you have what's called a mouthpiece. You blow into the mouthpiece, creating like a buzz with your lips - and that starts the vibrations within the instrument.

The first instruments were like a trombone, with a slide. If you blow a note on a trombone and you make the slide longer, the air has further to travel, so the pitch gets lower.

Brass instruments have what's called the harmonic series. It sounds quite complicated, but you can actually play about 10 notes, sometimes more, just by using your lips. If you think of a bugle – it has no slide, and no valves, and therefore only has a certain amount of notes. So all the tunes played on a bugle – like the Last Post on Remembrance Sunday – are achieved just using the change of tension in the player's lips.

The slide on a trombone gives it greater range than the bugle, but there are still only 7 positions - that's not only 7 notes though, because of the harmonic series. At each position of the slide, you can change the pitch using your lips. But you can't play really quick things on a trombone. Really good players can play fast, but you can only play so many notes so quickly, so the valves you see on other instruments are a quicker way of being able to change the note.

The way valves work is to make the pitch go a little bit lower. If you press the second valve it adds a little bit of length to the tube; the first valve, twice as much; and the third valve twice as much again... so the valves just make the tube longer. Combinations of valves give further variation.

When you press the valve it doesn't stop the air, it makes it go on a different pathway and further.

The euphonium is my instrument

If you compare a brass band to an orchestra, the cornets are like the violins, and the euphonium is like a cello. It's the principle tenor instrument in the band. So the solo euphonium player is like the lead cello player, which means you often get melody lines, and loads of interesting and complicated parts. Sometimes you've got the tune, or the bass melody, or the harmony parts. You get solos to play too.

The euphonium is a really flashy instrument, with a fantastic range.

And as well as being involved in a brass band, you can play in wind bands - and there's some orchestral repertoire as well, for the euphonium.

The brass family is probably the closest to the human body in the way that it works. It breathes. The vibrations that you make with your lips are just like the vibrations that you make with your vocal chords. When you play a brass instrument, it's part of you

So, if someone wanted to learn a brass instrument what should they do?

A young person - should speak to their music department in school to see if there are any lessons in school. I would also highly recommend going along

to a brass band, you be loaned an instrument for nothing – just a little bit of subs. Even now in Harrogate, which is a championship band, there's maybe only 5 people who own their own instruments. The rest of the instruments are hired from the band. The subscription fee at Harrogate is £5 a year. All of our money comes from the concerts that we do and the engagements that we take part in.

There are so many bands, of so many different standards. Some that compete, and some that just turn up for the playing and the social side. It's a fantastic thing being part of the brass band world.

Get in there, get playing.

Here's a great link to Harrogate Band performing at Durham Miners Gala 2011 – see if you can spot Craig!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dndDLAwG0bM

And here's their website

http://www.harrogateband.org

SECTION TWO

LITERATURE

The writer – his life and work

Nikoai Vasilievich Gogol

1809

- Born March 20th at Sorochintsy in the Ukraine. Gogol's family were minor Russian-speaking nobility. His father wrote puppet plays based on Ukrainian folk tales.
- Anecdotally – Gogol was rather a good actor at school.

1828

- Graduated from school.
- Went to St Petersburg to enter government service, but couldn't get a job.

1829

- July - published a long poem (idyll) under a pseudonym. It wasn't well reviewed and Gogol bought up all the unsold copies and burned them (sign of things to come). Then he went to Germany until September.

1831

- Took up post as a teacher of history in a young women's college.
- In September published a collection of tales of Ukrainian village life, which was an instant critical hit – receiving high praise from the great Pushkin.

1832

- March - second volume of Ukrainian tales and Gogol was firmly on the literary map.

1834

- July - appointed Professor of history at the University of St Petersburg.

1835

- Published *Arabesques*, which included *The Portrait*, *Nevsky Prospect* and *Diary of a Madman.* Also another collection of stories about Ukraine.
- **Wrote *Revizor* (The Government Inspector). Based on an anecdote given to him by Pushkin.**
- Gave up teaching, and began work on *Dead Souls.*

1836

- **April 19th – first performance of *Revizor*, Alexandrinksy Theatre, St Petersburg.**
- May 25th first performance of *Revizor* at Maly Theatre, Moscow.
- Gogol wasn't pleased with the production – or the interpretation by different political factions. So he left Russia and went to live in Rome, where he remained for 11 years, returning only to oversee the publication of his books.
- *The Nose* appeared in print for the first time.

1842

- *Dead Souls* published

1843

- Collected Works published, including *The Overcoat*.

1845

- Burned the second volume of *Dead Souls* – destroying 5 years work.

1846

- Published *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* – a reactionary defence of Tsarist autocracy and serfdom. He was shocked by the hostile response it received.

1848

- Went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in search of spiritual enlightenment; but returned to Russia, seemingly none the wiser.
- In the grip of religious mania, aggravated by association with a fanatical priest, Gogol became chronically ill, through self mortification and malnutrition.

1852

- February 11th – burned the rewritten second volume of Dead Souls.
- February 21st – died in Moscow, aged 42.
-

Who was Pushkin?

Alexander Pushkin was the friend Gogol wrote to, asking for an 'authentic Russian anecdote' on which to base a comedy. Pushkin wasn't just any old mate, but a great Russian poet whom many consider to be the father of Russian literature.

He was born in Moscow in June 1799 into a very distinguished family of the Russian nobility. By the time he graduated from what was probably the poshest academic institution in Russia – the Tsarskoye Selo Lyceum – he was already on the literary map.

Pushkin's most famous work is a verse novel called *Eugene Onegin*, but he also wrote narrative poems, drama and prose.

Pushkin met Gogol in 1831. He praised Gogol's volume of Ukrainian short stories very highly, and thereafter supported Gogol's career and work – even to offering him an nice little anecdote he might have used in his own work at some point: that of a man being mistaken for someone very important in a remote Russian town.

Unfortunately Pushkin had problems with debt, and seemed to make a hobby of dueling over matters of honour. The last duel of his life, in February 1837, was with his brother-in-law, Georges d'Anthes, who was alleged to be having an affair with Pushkin's wife. Both men were injured in the encounter; Pushkin was shot through the spleen. He died two days later, aged just 37.

Gogol's Overcoat

We have all emerged from beneath Gogol's 'Overcoat'

This quote, attributed to the great novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, describes the influence of Nikolai Gogol on all Russian literature that came after him. The impact of 19th and 20th Century Russian writers on the whole world is considerable, making Gogol's legacy all the more remarkable.

The Overcoat was published in 1842; seven years after Gogol wrote *Revizor*.

It is a short story about Akaky, a poor government Clerk in St Petersburg; a singular, dedicated and solitary man; overlooked by his superiors, and teased by his younger colleagues.

Akaky decides that he must get his old and threadbare overcoat mended, but the tailor declares it irreparable and Akaky must have a new one. The cost of this coat is far beyond the poor clerk's means, but he constrains his meagre budget even further and begins to save.

While Akaky is saving up the money he visits the tailor to discuss the design of the overcoat and Akaky begins to obsess about it. In fact, but the time he has enough money to pay for it he thinks of little else. The finished overcoat is beautiful, and will keep Akaky warm in the harsh Russian winters for years to come. However, on his way home late from a party Akaky is mugged, beaten and his overcoat – for which he waited so long and sacrificed so much --- is stolen.

Distraught at the loss of his coat, Akaky can get no help from the government authorities. Finally, he seeks the personal help of a high-ranking general. (This character is simply referred to as a 'Very Important Person') The V.I.P keeps Akaky waiting, and then scolds him for bringing such a trivial matter before him.

Akaky is devastated at his treatment, and the loss of his coat, and soon falls into a fever from which he never recovers --- cursing the V.I.P as he dies.

Shortly after Akaky's death his ghost (or corpse) is seen around the dark streets of St Petersbury, trying to relieve the living of their overcoats. Finally Akaky's ghost catches up with the V.I.P and, having succeeded in taking his overcoat, is never seen again.

The story ends with a rumour that another ghost haunts St Petersburg, stealing overcoats. A ghost that resembles the criminal who robbed Akaky in the first place…

Much has been written about The Overcoat, and interpretations vary. What appears incontrovertible is that this short story is a masterpiece.

Russian literary giants, who acknowledge their indebtedness to Gogol include:

Fyodor Dostoevsky
Novelist

Born 11th November 1821, Moscow
Died 9th February 1881, St Petersburg

Works include: *Crime and Punishment The Idiot The Brothers Karamazov*

Wrote in Russian

Dostoevsky on Gogol…
We have all emerged from beneath Gogol's 'Overcoat'

Leo Tolstoy

Novelist, essayist, dramatist

Born 17th September 1828
Died 20th November 1910

Works include :
War and Peace
Anna Karenina
The Living Corpse (play)

Wrote in Russian and French

Tolstoy, like Gogol grew increasingly religious throughout his life. Unlike Gogol, Tolstoy's religious fervour did not destroy him at an early age, but he lived to the ripe old age of 82.

Vladmir Nabokov
Novelist, poet, dramatist (lepidopterist)

Born April 1899, St Petersburg
Died July 1977, Montreux, Switzerland

Works include:
The Defense
Lolita
Pale Fire

Wrote in Russian and English

Nabokov on Gogol…
…whenever he tried to write in the round hand of literary tradition and to treat rational ideas in a logical way, he lost all trace of talent. When, as in the immortal The Overcoat, he really let himself go and pottered on the brink of his private abyss, he became the greatest artist that Russia has yet produced.
Lectures on Russian Literature

Study

Writers' Response

Sometimes the easiest way to get writing is to respond to something already written. Staring at a blank page and praying for inspiration isn't always the answer. Here are a few suggestions for writing in response to items in this pack.

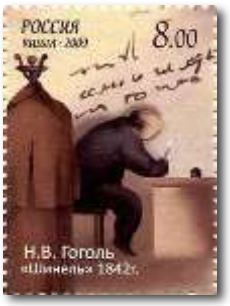
Read the synopsis to ***The Overcoat*** above – or, better still, read the story itself. There are a number of good translations available, and you can get it for Kindle too.

What strikes you most about it? This can be anything:
- The atmosphere
- The characters
- The supernatural element
- How clothes are significant, and why they can mean so much to people
- Something else…

How does the story make you feel? Examine your emotions:
- Angry at injustice
- Pity for the main character
- Curiosity about the world of the story
- Something else…

What Gogol thinks isn't important – you might.
What Gogol conceals from the reader, you could uncover:

- What can't you see?
- Whose thoughts are closed to you?
- Are there any marginal characters or events that could be developed?



Compose a poem, scene, or story in response to your experience of The Overcoat. There isn't a right way to do this. It's your response; how the story triggers your imagination. It can be clearly connected to Gogol's story, or hardly at all.

It's up to you…

Pushkin's anecdote

Gogol famous asked his friend for a little anecdote to be the subject of a comedy. Has anyone told you a funny story recently?

- An incident on the bus.
- An accident in the supermarket.
- A strange coincidence.
- An unexpected encounter.
- A misunderstanding.

The exercise can begin with a conversation – as a group, or in pairs. Tell each other anecdotes. Short events that might suggest a bigger story…

Then begin writing – a poem; a short drama; a prose story

Here are some things for you to think about.

Characters

- Identify the different characters in your story.
- Who is the protagonist?
- Do you need more characters?
- What do your characters want?

Events

- What happens before the anecdote?
- What happens after?
- Is something happening elsewhere at the same time that might affect the outcome of the story?

SECTION THREE

DRAMA

The Russian Theatre

The evolution of the Russian Theatre and the work of its practitioners have had a massive impact on western acting style – particularly in American film. It's possible to trace this process back to Gogol's disappointment at the acting in the first performance of *Revizor*. The style of performance at this time owed much to the traditions of vaudeville in Western Europe – a style that Gogol considered too crude for his closely observed characters. Following the first production he added a set of instructions to his play, in which he urged the actors to pay attention to detail and adopt a more psychologically accurate approach.

Almost half a century after the death of Gogol, in 1898, the Moscow Arts Theatre (MAT) was founded by the pioneering actor and director **Konstantin Stanislavski -** with the playwright and director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

The Moscow Arts Theatre
Kamergersky Lane
1900s

At the MAT Stanislavski developed his famous System of acting – which seeks total naturalism in performance. The MAT and Stanislavski's style of acting enjoyed great success with the plays of **Anton Chekhov.**

Chekhov's wife, the actress Olga Knipper, was a member of this early MAT company – as was a young actor called **Vsevolod Meyerhold.**

Pupils of Stanislavski took his system of training to America, where they were adopted by the actor and director Lee Strasberg. In 1951 Strasberg took over as Artistic Director of The Actor's Studio in New York. This was a workshop for professional actors to perfect their craft away from the practical constraints of paid work. Drawing on Stanislavski's methods, Strasberg developed the talents of many great film actors, including Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman and Al Pacino.

Though arguably the American Method became quite distinct from Stanislavski's System, Strasberg's derived approach to acting proved so perfectly suited to acting for camera that the intense pursuit of absolute realism in performance has been a measure of good film acting ever since.

Stanislavski's protégé Meyerhold broke away from his master's ultra naturalism to develop an apparently opposite, self-consciously theatrical system called **Biomechanics**. He greatly influenced the pioneering Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein.

Drawing on Meyerhold's theatre work, Eisenstein was an early exponent of the film theory of Montage – that is the idea that how you put images together affects how they are understood by an audience. Eisenstein's theories and work had a major influence on the development of cinema.

Photograph of Anton Chekhov (centre) reading his play 'The Seagull' to the MAT company. Stanislavski can be clearly identified, seated to the left of the playwright… and, looking very intense on the far right of the picture - Meyerhold.

Close up on…

MEYERHOLD

Born February 1874
Executed February 1940

It's hard to believe that a theatre maker could be considered so dangerous that he would be arrested, tortured and finally executed by government forces, but that's what happened to **Vsevolod Meyerhold**.

He began his acting career with Stanislavski at the Moscow Arts Theatre, but he was excluded from the MAT Company of 1902 and so began to follow his own ideas, and experimental methods.

Although Meyerhold recognised Stanislavski as his great teacher, his instincts took him in a very different direction towards a highly stylised, physical mode of performance that came to be known as **Biomechanics**.

Meyerhold's turbulent career straddled the great changes brought about in Russia following the Revolution of 1917, when the Tsar was overthrown and a new Socialist Republic established under the leader of the Bolshevik party, Vladimir Lenin.

At first the new regime suited Meyerhold's work and politics very well. He was a member of the Bolshevik party and a supporter of the Revolution. In the new Soviet Union live theatre was viewed as one of the most effective forms of communication to a largely illiterate population. The theatre director, in control of this weapon, had great power – but it was a double-edged sword.

In the early 1920s Meyerhold founded his own theatre, The Meyerhold Theatre; part school, part theatre, part laboratory where he further developed his theatrical system, Biomechanics. In 1926 he staged Nikolai Gogol's *Revizor* according to these principles, with startling results.

Following the death of Lenin in 1924 there had been a power struggle at the top of the Communist Party that now ruled Russia. A man called Joseph Stalin rose to take control of an increasingly authoritarian state.

Despite his belief that Gogol's *Revizor* was a savage critique of corruption under Tsarist rule, Meyerhold's production did not meet with the approval of the government. So called 'Soviet Realism' was the only art form permitted – theatre, music and fine art were expected to glorify the Revolution and deliver the party dogma. The arts had to conform in style as well as content to a realistic representation of life. Meyerhold believed that theatre should divide audiences and provoke strong reactions. He didn't want his audience to leave the theatre 'of one mind', and he believed in an expressionistic, symbolic style of performance and theatre design.

He fell increasingly foul of the Soviet censor and in 1938, after a final matinee performance of *Revizor*, his theatre was liquidated. The following year Meyerhold's wife was brutally murdered in their Moscow apartment, and shortly after that Meyerhold was arrested by Soviet police. He was tortured and forced to confess to being a western spy. He was sentenced to death and shot by firing squad in February 1940.

BIOMECHANICS

Meyerhold's ideas begin in the same place as Stanislavski's, where psychological truth is revealed through behaviour and the body. But for Meyerhold this extended outward into disciplined, stylised movement.

His system was drawn from two significant influences:

Pavlov
The Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov proposed that our human behaviour was best understood as a chain of reflex responses to the external world.

You may have heard of 'Pavlov's dogs' – a famous experiment where Pavlov demonstrated that dogs could be trained to associate the ringing of a bell with the arrival of food and so salivate. Once conditioned, the dogs would salivate at the sound of a bell even when no food was then presented.

This made perfect sense to Meyerhold, who saw in this proof that people don't act – they *react.* For him, emotion did not come from the inner workings of the mind but was a reflex.

Taylor
The American industrialist who was a key pioneer in the theory of Time and Motion. This is a management theory that divides work tasks into its component parts to discover the most fluent and efficient way of working.

For Meyerhold this translated into the movements of the body – smoothly and economically responding to stimuli from the external world.

Biomechanical exercises did not appear on stage 'in the raw' but rather served to technically underpin the work – similar to the way in which a musician practices scales and arpeggios to develop strength and technique.

Every action on stage is defined biomechanically, and divided into three distinct parts:

- **Otkaz** – Russian for *refusal*.
    - This is a preparatory movement, like the coiling of a spring. Perhaps *resistance* might be a more accurate description – like crouching down before jumping; reaching back before throwing. A gathering up of energy.

- **Posil** – *to send*
    - The action itself – the fulfilment of what is suggested by the otkaz.

- **Tochka** – *end point*
    - This is identified and defined as a distinct and final stage in the biomechanical action.

By defining a rhythm for every action performed by the actor, Meyerhold gives action form and structure. Rhythm is crucial and the emphasis is all on the movement of the actor. The look of Meyerhold's work was carefully constructed; composed and choreographed.

Meyerhold believed that any type of play could be approached and performed using his methods.

Certainly his production of *Revizor* was extremely effective. He made cuts, alterations and additions to the script and created a very stylised, expressionistic production. For the final tableau he used mannequins.

More images of Meyerhold's production of Revizor can be found here:
http://www.glopad.org/pi/en/record/production/567

Study

Biomechanics

There is so much to learn about Meyerhold's theories and exercises. Here are just a few ideas to give you a taste of his methods and how to apply them.

Warm up
Biomechanics is physical so you need to be properly warmed up with every part of your body stretched and supple.

However you do this will depend on your teacher or group leader, but it's important - and not just to prevent pulled muscles. You must pay attention to all parts of your body and be fully aware and committed to the work, from the top of your head to your finger ends and right down to your toe nails.

Your body needs to be centred and balanced, so make sure you practice a neutral stance once you are nice and warm. Only then are you ready to begin.

Stick work
For this set of exercises, intended to develop coordination, balance and precision, each person will need a stick – something like a broom handle (you can pick these up quite cheaply from hardware stores)

Form a circle.

- Begin by holding the stick vertically in the centre and throwing it lightly from hand to hand, catching it at the same point in each hand and building up a steady even rhythm.

- Everyone in the room should be moving together, throwing the sticks in the same rhythm to the same hand.

- As you move, consider the three points of biomechanical movement: Otkaz; Posil; Tochka. How does your movement divide into these three points? Once you've applied these concepts does your movement change?

A variation

- Stand with one foot in front of the other, with feet parallel – not too far apart. Hold the stick in the same hand as the front foot, and towards the bottom. Now toss the stick so that it spins through 180 degrees to be caught at the other end. Make the movement fluid and soft.

- Again – notice the three mechanical stages of movement.

- Now swap legs and hands.

In Pairs

- Toss the stick from one person to another. Get a good rhythm. Feel the smooth transference of energy.

- Note the biomechanical stages. How is it different when you're not catching the stick. What is your Tochka when you're not catching?

- Move further apart, maintaining the smoothness and precision of movement. Physically what adjustments are you making to throw further. How does this affect the biomechanical stages?

A variation

- Two sticks – so you are throwing and catching in the same movement.

Exercise
Drinking a glass of water

Consider the action and divide it into its three biomechanical parts:

- **Otkaz** prepare to pick up the glass
- **Posil** picking up the glass and drinking
- **Tochka** replacing the glass on the table

- Perform the action simply and smoothly, thinking rhythmically that there is a beat between each part.

- Repeat the action, thinking all the time about the component parts. Repetition is part of the training. Like a pianist performing scales over and over again.

- That is the 'mechanical' part of biomechanics.

- But in a play there is a story, a character and an environment impacting on the person picking up the glass and drinking. This is what informs the reflex response – the *reaction*. This is the 'bio' part of biomechanics.

So –

- Where is the glass? Is it water? Is it hot or cold? Does the drinker know if it's hot or cold? Is the drinker thirsty? Is the water pleasant tasting? Or not? Is it medicine? Or poison?

- You see – suddenly your Otkaz, Posil and Tochka are informed by character, story and environment. How does this change what you do, and how you do it.

- Whatever, you must remember to retain the mechanical discipline and rhythmic smoothness as you act / react in the drinking of the water.

Think of more solo actions you might perform, work in pairs and groups to create scenes and little stories confined to one action, divided into three component parts.

Recommended reading:
You'll find more information on Meyerhold; his life, work and for further exercises and detailed practice in: ***Vsevolod Meyerhold*** *by Jonathan Pitches*, published by Routledge

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Credits and links

Production and rehearsal shots © Nobby Clark

Other photos sourced at:

http://all-photo.ru/empire/index.en.html

http://theatrefutures.org.uk/stanislavski-centre/

http://en.wikipedia.org

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/3746/Anti-illusionist-stage-from-Vsevolod-Meyerholds-production-of-Nikolay-Gogols

Information and education pack written and compiled by Deborah McAndrew for Northern Broadsides © 2012