

Set Text Guide: Government Inspector - V2



GCSE (9-1) Drama

Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in Drama (1DR0)

GCSE Drama 2016: The Government Inspector

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Summary

Act One

(Divided into four scenes.)

The Mayor has called a meeting with the town's leading officials, including the trustee of charitable institutions, the schools superintendent, the judge, the doctor and the police superintendent.

He has news for them – a government inspector is on his way from St Petersburg, and he is travelling incognito.

The officials plan to cover up the corruption that is going on in the town. Then two landowners– Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky – arrive to report that they have seen the government inspector at the local inn.

The Mayor's wife Anna, and his daughter, Maria, are excited about the arrival of the inspector, as they both see it as a romantic opportunity.

Act Two

(Divided into four scenes.)

Khlestakov and his servant Osip are staying in a shabby room at the inn. Osip reveals that his master is, in fact, a low-ranking clerk who has lost all his money gambling and is on the run from various creditors. He cannot pay the bill for their room. Osip is trying to negotiate a meal from the kitchen staff, who have been told not to serve them.

The Mayor arrives. In a comic misunderstanding, Khlestakov thinks he is about to be arrested and the Mayor, thinking him to be the government inspector, invites him to stay at his home, having first being given a tour of all the local institutions.

Khlestakov accepts the Mayor's offer.

Act Three

(Divided into five scenes.)

Anna and Maria are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the government inspector. Khlestakov and the Mayor arrive after a tour of the hospital and a hearty meal. Khlestakov realises he has been mistaken for someone else and starts to elaborate on his (fictitious) life in St Petersburg. When he goes to his room, Anna and Maria argue about which one of them Khlestakov liked most.

Act Four

(Divided into eleven scenes.)

The Mayor and his officials set out to bribe Khlestakov in order to prevent him from reporting them to the authorities in St Petersburg. Meanwhile, a group of shopkeepers arrive to ask for Khlestakov's help to put an end to corruption in the town. Khlestakov is so amused by the events that he writes to a friend to tell him about it.

Both Anna and Maria have designs on Khlestakov and, when Anna catches Maria with him, she sends her daughter away and Khlestakov immediately declares his love for the mother. When Maria returns, Khlestakov asks her to marry him, and the Mayor and his wife are delighted.

Osip is plotting for them to leave the town as soon as possible, before their deception is discovered. Khlestakov explains to the family that he has to return to St Petersburg for a few days, but will return to marry Maria.

Act Five

(Divided into four scenes.)

The Mayor and his wife are excited about the prospect of a new life in St Petersburg with their daughter once she has married this high-ranking official. The postmaster arrives. He has steamed open Khlestakov's letter to his friend, in which he not only tells about his deception but also makes derogatory comments about the town's officials.

As the Mayor slowly begins to accept that they have been tricked, a policeman arrives with a letter to inform them that a government inspector has just arrived and they are all to report to the inn immediately.

Characters

Khlestakov

Khlestakov is an opportunist, a chancer. He is self-centred and lives by his wits. Although he and Osip have clearly been master and servant for a while, he appears to spare little thought for Osip, and uses him in the same way he uses everyone else.

He is used to seizing opportunities and turning them to his own advantage and, as the 'government inspector', finds himself able to manipulate the townsfolk from the Mayor and his family downwards. Yet he is a 'likable rogue', part of a tradition of characters who do outrageous things but get away with it because, ultimately, nobody gets hurt – in this case the Mayor, Anna and Maria are just as keen to use him as he is to use them.

Osip

A servant who is extremely loyal to his master under very trying circumstances. As a servant he has little choice but to obey his master's instructions, and yet he has a subversive streak and is not above asserting his own personality and offering his own opinions at times. He is loyal to Khlestakov – organising his escape at the end of the play, for example – and provides some of the moments of humour in the play – vying for attention with the waiter in the inn, for example.

The Mayor

A dishonest official. The news of the impending arrival of the government inspector sends the Mayor into a panic. He is distraught at the thought of all of his scams and schemes being discovered and his comfortable lifestyle coming to an end.

When he meets Khlestakov and invites him to stay in his home, he assumes he can manipulate the young man in the same way he has manipulated everybody else. He does not realise that he is being played at his own game, as Khlestakov sets out to marry Maria while planning his escape. The Mayor only sees the opportunities for himself that marrying his daughter, Maria, to the government inspector will bring.

Once he realises he has been fooled, the Mayor is apoplectic with rage and turns his anger on the audience. He addresses them directly, asking what they are laughing at, connecting the corruption evident in the play with the corruption surrounding the mainly middle- to upper-class audience of the time the play was first written and performed.

Anna

As the Mayor's wife, Anna is aware of his corrupt dealings but goes along with him because of the better standard of living she enjoys. She is happy to see her daughter married off to the government inspector, even though she knows that he was more than happy to flirt with her as well. The lure of a better standard of living and the higher status she would enjoy as the mother-in-law of a government inspector is enough to drive her ambitions for her daughter.

She is very much a 'double act' with Maria, and between them they offer a female perspective on the largely male-dominated unfolding of events.

Maria

A little naïve, Maria is looking for a way out of the family home and into one of her own – hopefully with someone who has prospects – and a moustache. She is flattered by Khlestakov's advances, and taken in by his proposal of marriage.

As the Mayor's daughter, Maria has some status, but only within the town. Her ambitions – and those of her mother, with whom she plays a 'double act' – are to rise socially onto the 'national stage' as the wife of a government inspector in St Petersburg.

Social, cultural and historical context

The Government Inspector made its first appearance in St Petersburg in April 1836, followed by a production in Moscow in May the same year. It is the classic tale of mistaken identity in which the corrupt, self-seeking officials of a small town in tsarist Russia mistake a penniless clerk from St Petersburg for a government inspector. Gogol's aim was to explore corruption in small-town Russia, in order to highlight corruption at a higher level. Surprisingly, Tsar Nicholas I gave permission for the play to be performed, and is said to have remarked afterwards that 'everybody has got his due, I most of all'. It is also reported, however, that ten years later, when questioned about the play, the Tsar had completely forgotten it and had not the vaguest idea who Gogol was or what he had written.

The success of the play was overwhelming and it is fair to say that, at the time, it was regarded as the most important theatrical and literary event of the decade. This was something of a mixed blessing for Gogol, who became increasingly concerned that the true meaning of his play was being misinterpreted and that his ideas were being misrepresented by the thousands of people who were talking about it. He worried that the official censors would suddenly turn on him, making it impossible for any future works to be given a fair hearing in Russia.

It seemed to Gogol that his play was being regarded either as a 'coarse and trivial farce' or as a call to fellow writers and dissidents to publicly question the corruption in society. Both possibilities were enough to make him go to press to attempt to explain his intentions in the play and to justify his characters' actions. For example, he appended an epilogue to the printed version of the play, explaining that the real government inspector represented the 'conscience of man' and that the other characters were 'the passions in our souls'. In other words, Gogol tried to convince his readers that his corrupt and grotesque characters were there to represent the general population, while their conscience could only come from the government.

Gogol was struggling to come to terms with his new-found celebrity in St Petersburg and Moscow society, and in June 1836 he left for western Europe. He spent the eve of his departure with his mentor, the writer Alexander Pushkin, with whom he shared the first draft of what was to become his literary masterpiece *Dead Souls* (published in 1842) and explored many of the themes present in *The Government Inspector*.

Gogol lived the rest of his mainly abroad. In 1848, having fallen into what was described as 'religious mania and despair', he visited Jerusalem. He wrote pamphlets supporting the tsarist regime – much to the horror of his radical and liberal friends – and returned to Russia, where he starved himself to death in 1852. His final act before he died was to burn the second part of *Dead Souls* on the advice of his spiritual advisor, who convinced him that his writings were sinful.

Professional theatre in Russia at the time of the first performance of *The Government Inspector* was very much in its infancy. It was controlled by the Russian court, which took responsibility for the theatres and the dramatic repertoire, much of which consisted of imports from the rest of Europe. Russian dramatists tended to be most successful with comedy, and were clearly influenced by the work of Molière. (Molière, in turn, had been influenced by the style of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*).

By the time of *The Government Inspector*, a more genteel style of comedy was prominent, and Gogol was determined to champion a Russian theatre that reflected national life, rather than a theatre that was dominated by what he saw as superficial works, often in either melodramatic or vaudeville styles. In 1836, drama and performance in Russia were not considered serious art forms to be ranked alongside dance or music. Little attention was given to rehearsal and there was no director as such, with Stanislavsky and his systems still half a century away.

The Government Inspector has had a long and varied production history with, for example, Stanislavsky directing it twice – in 1908 and 1921. Meyerhold's 1926 production is regarded as a masterpiece, with its combined elements of *commedia*

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dell'arte, symbolism, expressionism, pantomime, harlequinade, techniques of oriental theatre bio-mechanics, opera and ballet.

Its first production in London was in 1906, followed by a production by Theodore Komisarjevsky in 1920 that was revived six years later with Charles Laughton and Claude Rains in the cast. The play has been performed regularly ever since, up to and including David Harrower's version of the play that first played at Warwick Arts Centre and then at the Young Vic in London in May and June 2011.

Themes

Fear and misunderstanding

The townsfolk believe that Khlestakov is the government inspector and Khlestakov does nothing to persuade them otherwise. He enjoys their hospitality and profits from their fear of what he might do should he find anything amiss in the town and report back to St Petersburg. The initial misunderstanding, where Khlestakov is mistaken for the government inspector when he and his servant, Osip, are staying at the inn on diminishing funds, is compounded as the town's officials set out to prove to him how worthy and honest they are. Their initial mistake shows an ignorance of the system and the way bureaucracy works – where is his letter of introduction, for example? where are the terms of his inspection set down for them? – that is exploited by the arrogance with which Khlestakov readily adapts to his new-found status to the point that he almost forgets that he is not, in fact, the government inspector and invents an elaborate backstory for himself and his life in St Petersburg.

Bribery and extortion

All the officials in the play are corrupt. The judge openly admits to taking bribes, the postmaster opens and reads letters, the police drink and brawl, and the Mayor is diverting the church restoration funds for his own ends and extorts money from the town's shopkeepers.

This is the world into which Gogol plants a very, very junior official from St Petersburg and has him elevated – through no fault of his own – to the position of government inspector. Once he realises what can be gained by his deception, the wider themes of bribery and extortion become more personal, as Khlestakov sets out to better himself on the backs of others.

Bureaucracy

Gogol indicates in his plot that the lack of communication between the small town and the government centre in St Petersburg demonstrates that Russian bureaucracy under Tsar Nicholas I was so vast that there was no means of regulating the behaviour of civil servants or the efficiency of local government offices. In the chaotic atmosphere of the Mayor's office in the opening scene, Gogol immediately establishes the image of small-town Russian bureaucracy as inefficient at best and unprofessional at worst. Nothing of any value seems to be accomplished by the masses of paper and the seemingly endless roll call of characters holding official government titles. These are the officials of the town, responsible for schools, hospitals, roads and buildings, but they are tied up in so much red tape that it is almost impossible for any of them to recognise what is true and what is not. So, when Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky report that the government inspector is staying in the inn and has been there for two weeks, not a questioning voice is raised.

Deception and self-deception

The townspeople deceive themselves into believing that Khlestakov is the government inspector, whereupon Khlestakov takes advantage of the case of mistaken identity, extending the deception to his own advantage. The local people attempt to deceive the government inspector over the corruption within the local government, but find that they have only deceived and cheated themselves in the process. Gogol uses the basic plot of mistaken identity to explore not only Khlestakov's reactions to being elevated to the position of government inspector, but also the reactions of the locals when given an opportunity to speak out about the corruption in their community.

Resources

There is a wealth of resources available on the Pearson Edexcel website and these are continuing to be developed. Many of these are free to download.

Although the recommended edition of the text does not contain any background notes or information, the Methuen student edition, an English version by Edward O. Marsh and Jeremy Brooks, does contain detailed commentary.

YouTube has numerous clips of various stage versions of the play, and there is certainly a lot there to help students to visualise the play in performance.

Recommended edition: Faber & Faber ISBN 9780571280490

Soundtracks that may be useful when exploring *The Government Inspector*:

Depending on the setting of the production, music can reflect the chosen time period or act as a counterpoint to it – anything from Philip Glass to Tchaikovsky to Pharrell Williams' 'Happy' might provide background and/or punctuation music.

Model Box resources

www.theatre-inabox.com

Other resources

www.wyp.org.uk

Work pack (free to download) from the Birmingham Repertory Production (click EDUCATION) and photographs from the recent production (April 2016) on the welcome page

www.youngvic.org

A resource pack (free to download) from the 2011 production

Practical exploration activities

Performers

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *The Government Inspector*. Some of these exercises may help performers to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique for considering the 'before and after' life of the play. For example, a useful exercise would be to create a news report where some of the characters are interviewed for the local paper (depending on the chosen performance context) after reporters are 'tipped off' about events surrounding Khlestakov's disappearance at the end of the play. Each character will have a different viewpoint on the revelation that he was not really a government inspector. This could be particularly useful for developing the structuring of events for individuals who were taken in by Khlestakov – the Mayor, Anna and Maria, for example – but it would also be a useful opportunity to hear from some of the more minor characters.

Past 10 seconds In this activity, take the characters back in time in stages: 10 seconds before the start of the events of the play, then 10 minutes, then 10 hours. Then take them forward again to show how the established events of the play unfold when the presence of the inspector staying in the inn is revealed.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps performers to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow performers to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

Circle hot-seating is a variation on this. The group sits in a circle with the names of characters on the backs of some of the chairs. If you are on one of the named chairs, you become that character for the time you are there, and answer questions as that character from others on non-named seats. Then, on a signal from the director, everyone moves round one chair, and the next person then has to pick up on the character if they land on a named chair.

A more theatrical way of exploring hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, take some of the events as described by Khlestakov – for example, his life in St Petersburg – and devise work around his version of this in order to develop an understanding of the extent of his arrogance.

Gestic props and multi-role are also effective ways of developing details of character. For example, it might be useful in practical workshops to collect a series of props that might be associated with characters. There are numerous possibilities here, depending on the possible variations there might be for updating the context or leaving it in the time period of its first performance. Simple props will assist performers to develop sub-text through physical action.

Students should be encouraged to explore the range of characters in the play, as this will allow them first-hand experience of how each character might stand, use space, behave in silence and in relation to others – Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, for example, and Anna and Maria.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. For example, a voice workshop that explores a range of accents might help to stress an attitude of a specific character. Does it make a difference if the Mayor speaks with a regional or RP accent? Does it help to explore a 'working-class voice' for Osip but not for the superintendent or the postmaster? Khlestakov will play with his accent as his status increases. This could be an interesting exercise in either sustaining it, or not.

It is worth considering the theatrical impact of specific accent choices for the characters in the play, particularly as status is so important to the characters. It is sometimes useful

to explore a vocal mantra for each character. Finding a line or phrase that is said by each character can help to define their attitudes and emotions.

Exploring the vocal placement of each character can also help performers to define detail and bring a role to life. Key vocal resonators to explore include the nose, the throat, the stomach, the chest and the head. What quality is explored when the voice of the character is placed in a different resonator?

It might be useful to explore different resonators with a key monologue or speech. For example, Osip's speech or the Mayor's 'Engaged? Engaged?' speech, or Khlestakov's 'high life in St Petersburg' speech.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? There are numerous opportunities within the text to explore physical reactions to Khlestakov's arrival at the Mayor's home, for example, or his interviews with various townsfolk that are indicative of what the individual character is thinking. Non-verbal communication will communicate subtext and detail in the first appearance of Osip and Khlestakov, for example.

Non-verbal details can also develop the mood and atmosphere of a moment, and stage directions often give insight into the non-verbal details of a character's behaviour. This again would be interesting to explore in a practical workshop. For example, consider the stage directions at the start of each act and how these will dictate – or not, in an interpretation – images and proxemics.

Directors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the key concepts, characters and themes that are central to *The Government Inspector*. Some of the suggestions may help directors to consider how key ideas in the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting** and pitch for your students – either as one group or in smaller groups, depending on numbers – as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions.

Remember audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help your students to consider the text in a holistic way. In this model, for example, a group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director puts important questions to each member of the team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play, then sells a potential 'theatrical' pitch to the teacher (producer or 'dragon') in order to secure funding. It is important that the director has an overall vision for the play in performance, and the design team should question the director on their overall approach and theatrical intention.

This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas and contextualise themes and key moments or, probably more effectively, at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It is important with this activity that each member of each production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Another useful exercise for a director to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene** with a particular focus and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, it might be useful to explore the moment of the first meeting between the Mayor and Khlestakov, as each is uncertain of the status of the other and how it will work for them. Try exploring the scene by defining the levels of status to look at what happens when the Mayor is strong and overpowering compared to a more servile Khlestakov, and then reverse this. This would impact on the dynamic of the moment. Consider Anna and Maria and their function in the play from a 21st-century viewpoint. A director would be

encouraging actors to think about appropriate interpretations of characters within the context of the whole play.

A director may **explore the structure of the play** and look at other ways into it. For example, starting with Act Five, scene four, flash back or rewind the story to the beginning, then take the narrative through to the end. Consider cross-cutting Act Two, scenes one, two and three, into Act One so that Khlestakov has more of a presence and the audience learn more about circumstances earlier on in the play, which will act as a counterpoint to the concerns of the officials.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *The Government Inspector*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'. This is not an exhaustive list; it is a guide.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each act will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *The Government Inspector* is set primarily in a room in the Mayor's house, with Act Two set in the room in the inn, and a model box design might help students to consider how this space could be created within a number of different stage spaces, either real or imagined.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key moments is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. For example, consider the sounds of the Mayor's household or the inn that might punctuate the narrative and support moments of tension or revelation. What theatrical impact is created when you explore the use of different sound effects at different volumes? Does music or sound effects underscore key speeches, for example – Osip's story or Khlestakov's version of his life in St Petersburg or the Mayor's disintegration at the end of the play?

If you have access to different lighting effects, it might be useful to **explore key moments in different lighting states**. There are no specific instructions from the playwright, so it is possible to explore a number of approaches to lighting, depending on an overall concept for the production of the play. Although the play is set primarily in one location, the lighting state in your interpretation does not have to remain the same. Researching previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact is a useful activity. If access to lighting is limited, there are computer programmes available that will help you to create a virtual set and lighting grid for a production of the play.

Another useful design consideration is to look at the time of the play and **develop ideas for performance by sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and this will help those who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? How does the performance of a performer playing Maria change when she wears a small heel or character shoes? A costume creating the original time period provides challenges for performers in the same way as any modernisation might do. It is always interesting for designers to interview performers and discover how costume can reveal insight into characterisation and interpretation.

