



Pearson
Edexcel

GCSE (9–1) Drama

Prescribed Text Guide

Government Inspector,
Nikolai Gogol (adapted by
David Harrower)

Issue 3 – August 2021





Contents

Summary	3
Key Characters	5
Context.....	7
Themes	8
Resources	10
Practical activities.....	11



Recommended edition for Component 3

Government Inspector, Nikolai Gogol, in a version by David Harrower – ISBN 9780571280490 (Faber & Faber)

Summary

The political and administrative systems in 19th century Russia were inefficient and corrupt. The physical size of the country made it impossible to maintain effective systems to monitor town officials. The play explores the idea of mistaken identity and how an opportunistic civil servant (Khlestakov) and his servant (Osip) are able to exploit this system for personal gain. This five act play largely makes use of a single set (the Mayor's House) with only Act 2 set in another location (a room at the inn).

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 school's 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.



Key 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.



Context to *Government Inspector*

The original performance took place at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg in April 1836. David Harrower's version was first performed on stage at the Warwick Arts centre and then the Young Vic theatre in June 2011

Students are required to refer to the context **in which the text was created and first performed** as part of their response to sub-question (b)(i). This could be the social, political, context and/or the context to the **first performance**, which for this text **took place in St Petersburg, in 1836**. Other contextual information may be covered in sub-question b (ii) and (c). The following contextual information may be of support to students when preparing for this question.

Government Inspector was first performed in St Peterburg in April 1836, a satirical comedy, based on anecdote from the writer Pushkin which mocked the Russian local authorities which existed in the 1830s, highlighting the problem of corruption within local and the need for wide-spread governmental reform. 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.

While the play initially caused controversy, Tsar Nicholas I approved the play after the opening night and the play continued to be performed. In fact, 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. He was also unhappy with the first production, feeling that actors were playing it as 'burlesque' for 'cheap laughs'. He insisted that truthful depictions would be much funnier and that the correct performance style was comic realism. 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.

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.



Themes in *Government Inspector*

Fear and misunderstanding are important themes within *Government Inspector*. 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 are also central to the play. 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.

Gogol wanted to explore the idea of bureaucracy in the play; for example, the idea 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 is also a significant theme. 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 for *Government Inspector*

There are a wealth of resources available on the Pearson Edexcel website and these are being added to and updated regularly. These resources, including the [Sample Assessment Materials](#), and [specimen paper and mark scheme](#), are free to download.

Online resources

[Context to and history of the play](#)

[Information](#) on the Leeds Playhouse 2016 production.

Northern Broadsides [education resource pack](#).

[Information on the Young Vic](#) 2011 production

[Resources](#) based the Nottingham Playhouse version of the play.

[The Guardian review](#) of the Young Vic production.

[British Theatre Guide review](#) of the Young Vic production.

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.

YouTube is a useful resource. and teachers and students may find theatrical versions of the play useful, some full length, while others are extracts. These can be used to suggest ideas for staging and the ways in which the characters can be portrayed. Past production/rehearsal photos can also be found online, and these may offer ideas for performers, directors and designers.



Practical activities to help prepare for Component 3

The following suggested exercises may help students practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Government Inspector*, and to have some practical experience of bringing the text to life.

Students must respond to the text as performers, directors and designers, so practical experience of all of these roles will be useful. However, the questions are grouped into two areas:

- activities for performers and for directors of performers
- activities for designers and for directors of production elements.

1. Performers and Directors of Performers: Questions (a)(i), (a)(ii) and (b)(ii)

There are a number of performance elements which will come up across these three questions:

- vocal skills/voice
- physical skills/movement
- non-verbal communication
- stage space and stage directions.

Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all students have an understanding of each performance element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance, as well as a grasp of how to use these elements as a performer and as a director.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider 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.

This kind of activity might be particularly useful as students are first exploring the play.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation and to explore motive/objective. It would also help students to consider the journey of the character in the context of the complete text. This would work well to develop understanding of



improvisation work early on in the process but would also be an excellent practical revision technique for students.

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.

Exploring voice and vocal skills such as volume, pitch, tone, pace, pause, emphasis, accent and dialect can also help performers and directors of performers to consider character choices. How might vocal choices help the audience understand where characters come from? How might they show an understanding of the character at that moment within the play? 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.

Still image and mime are often highly effective in exploring the use of physical skills and non-verbal communication and the use of space. Students could be given the opportunity to look at relationships and emotions within a given moment from the text by creating either a short sequence of mime or a series of still images. Using facial expression, movement, gesture, posture and their proxemics (or position within the performance space) will enhance their understanding of how these characters might be feeling at this moment, or what they might want to achieve.

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.

Following practical activities, evaluating the ways in which performance skills have been used and asking students to offer reasons for their performance choices verbally after sharing work, will also help students become more confident with the relevant vocabulary.

Staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus is also a helpful activity for students. This focus might be the kind of statement to be found in question (b)(ii) for example, ‘The Mayor is worried about Khlestakov’. Assigning the role of director to one student within each the group and asking the director to verbally justify or give reasons for the choices made when staging the scene, similarly, will help all students to grasp the role of the director and to feel more confident about responding on paper to question (b)(ii).

Once students are more confident in working as a director, or with a student director, further explorative activities might be useful.

For example, exploring the use of proxemics and stage space with the director. The director assigns roles and gives each character a double who feeds lines to the performer, allowing the performers to move around the space without needing to hold a script. The



director gives clear suggestions for the use of space and movement to the performers. This could also be applied to vocal and/or physical skills.

2. Designers and Directors of Production Elements: Questions (b)(i) and (c)

There are six production/design elements which will come up across these two questions:

- staging
- set
- props and stage furniture
- costume
- lighting
- sound.

Three of these will be possible options on each question with all six appearing on the paper each year. Best practice would therefore be to ensure that all students have an understanding of each production/design element and how it could be used to enhance the play in performance. A grasp of how the differences in approaching these elements as a director and as a director will also be valuable.

It might be useful to set up a production meeting and pitch for your students. In this model, for example, a small group of five could consist of a director, set, costume, sound and lighting designers. The director then asks important questions to each member of the production team in order to develop a creative concept for a production of the play and then sells a potential 'theatrical' pitch to the teacher (producer or 'dragon' in order to secure funding).

The teacher should support students by ensuring that the students all have a good understanding of the text and of appropriate performance styles for this text. Each member of each production team must justify their ideas by referring to key moments from the play. This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the written examination.

The play was first performed in 1836 and set at the time of that first performance, although students may adapt the setting/time period as preferred. Any such choice must be justified with a clear sense of why the time period was chosen; students may well choose the original time period just as in the first performance. Designers/directors will also need to think about how their chosen performance style will be supported through design and about how design elements will be used to time passing and the increase in tension throughout the play.

Creating a model box or stage plan 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 scene or episode will be played in a potential space, and to choose a specific stage. By creating this visually they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas when writing about set, stage furniture or staging in particular. *Government Inspector* was originally staged end on/in a proscenium arch with a naturalistic (for the time) set, but students may choose



to change the staging and approach to set, for example, using symbolic set and stage furniture items to emphasise the corruption within the town, and the changes in location.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key moments is another effective way of considering how sound design can play an important role in the development of a key idea of theme. There are a number of sound cues within the text already and these could be created live or using recorded sound. Similarly, there are opportunities for music and sound to be used to create atmosphere and/or location, for example, consider the sounds of the Mayor's household or the inn. How might these 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 a number of lighting changes and effects within the play text, and these could be created using colour, intensity and specific lighting effects such as gobos and spotlights. Although the play is set primarily in one location, the lighting state in your interpretation does not have to remain the same, considering more abstract lighting at moments during the play. Different kinds of lamp could be used to create shadows/suspense and to emphasise key themes.

If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches. There are computer programmes available that will help you to create a virtual set and lighting grid for a production of the play. Students could also have a look at previous productions and lighting designs to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is designing potential costumes and props. Research is key and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. Students could be asked to link their intentions verbally with the initial production, as they will need to do in question (b)(i), either because they are adopting a similar approach or because they are developing different ideas. Costume designers will need to think about how both the chosen time period, the performance style and characterisation/status will be supported through the style of the costume for each character.

While the majority of these activities will result in informal sharing within the class, using the set text as the basis for more formal performance work is also worth considering. *Government Inspector* is a prohibited text for Component 2. However, students might complete a mock performance from text in year 10 using extracts from their prescribed text. This will not only support performance and design skills; it will also help students to become confident with staging extracts from the play for an audience.