

# Questors in Gogol master-satire

## 'GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR'

THE QUESTORS' current production, Gogol's "The Government Inspector," is a play which can hardly fail to appeal to all "brows," whether they be high, middle, or low. And since—apart from the Danny Kaye film, "The Inspector General," which bore only a slight resemblance to Gogol's comedy—the latest London production of which I know is the Old Vic Theatre Company's in 1948, we are certainly indebted to The Questors for letting us see what is acknowledged to be one of the world's greatest comedies.

This was a good production, whichever way you look at it. As comedy, it definitely scored. Yet, as with all the great comedies, the play has its serious base. Gogol intended it as a moral satire directed against bad and corrupt public officials and, though the Czarist regime under which he wrote has gone for ever, such have not entirely disappeared from the world of today.

The story, for those who do not know it, deals with the conscienceless officials of a small provincial town who learn, to their horror, that a government inspector will visit them on a tour of investigation. The town streets are filthy, the mayor and judge accept bribes as a matter of course, the children are untaught, and the sick untended. All this, mind you, is presented to us in the most amusing fashion and by brilliant dialogue which is completely undated. The idea, incidentally, is derived from a true occurrence and was given to Gogol by Pushkin who, while staying at an inn in Nizhny-Novgorod, was himself mistaken for a great official from Petersburg!

### Czar liked it

A play such as this could never have been produced in Russia except with the highest sanction. That it was staged at all was due to the poet Zhukovsky, who gave it to the Czar to read. Nicholas was delighted with it, and the play was produced with his sanction in 1836. Later, however, when it was shown in Rostov-on-Don, the governor of the district jumped on to the stage and shouted "You are insulting the authorities! I'll send you all to Siberia!"—and the cast escaped arrest only when he was shown the Petersburg censor's certificate!

But back to the Questors' production. Of this, I felt that the main characters were successfully realized with the exception of, oddly enough, the most important of all: Hlestakov. Whether the concept of this character was due to producer John Clemow or to actor Gordon Millais, I do not know, but I felt that it was overdrawn and out of key with the rest of the production. For, farcical though the situations may be, exaggerated or emphasised though the characters certainly are, each personality still holds a certain amount of realism. But this Hlestakov failed to convince me. He was too foolishly foppish and would not (I felt) have deceived anybody.

### Gogol's directions

I realize that many will disagree on this point, and I look forward with great interest to the discussion of the play which is to be held on February 7. Meantime, I will try to elucidate my point of view by directing attention to Gogol's own notes on this character. He says: "the more candour and simplicity an actor puts into this part, the more he will succeed in it."

What are we to gather from this? That Hlestakov was not very bright? Obviously he was not—and Gogol tells us, too, that his servant Josif has more sense than he. That he accepted the adulation he received as being due to his own superiority? The Hlestakov of Millais obviously did. But Gogol's Hlestakov would, I feel, accept the good things which fate unexpectedly sent, rather with the simplicity of an animal accepting good fortune as and when it finds it. I do not know whether Millais' conception of Hlestakov was influenced by the film or by the Old Vic Theatre Company production? The first may be dismissed, and as for the second, while it is true that Alec Guinness played the part as a dandy, it is also true that this whole production was of a different nature from the Questors'. In fact, more of a fantastic theatrical caper.

### Dickensian effect

I don't know why Marya, daughter to the Mayor, was played as an adenoidal, unattractive young person, though this characterization was certainly amusing. But, in this case, would Hlestakov have appeared so to enjoy his love-making? However, Jo Arundel's Marya and Mary Griffiths' Anna Andreyevna (the Mayor's wife) were certainly comic, and not exaggerated beyond acceptance. And I wondered, as I watched them, whether anyone else felt that these two might have stepped straight out of a volume of Dickens, and one illustrated by Cruikshank at that!

The Mayor (Wilfrid Sharp) was admirably cast and I liked his performance. His "h" dropping seemed quite in keeping with the Serviceman who had achieved promotion, to what was (in Russia) a Government appointment, from the lower ranks. Josif (Ronnie Manna) caught the character very well indeed, and was excellent in soliloquy, while Mishka, servant to the Mayor (Ned Gethings) was completely right as a brawny, illiterate peasant. I don't know who was responsible for the

chamberpot incident, but it was a very well contrived piece of business, quite subtly effected.

Peter Whelan and Vincent McQueen were well cast as the Judge and the Charity Commissioner, but I felt that Douglas Thomas tended to make his school superintendent somewhat too timid and miserable looking for the successful rogue that he was. Gogol's notes on the postman tell us that "he possesses good nature to the point of simplicity": Paul Imbusch did not convey that impression, but he did establish a personality, and handled his share of the denouement scene very well.

Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky, the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of the play, were well handled by Kenneth Cheale and David Lorraine, though they might with advantage have been rather more alike. I was unable to understand why the shopkeepers adopted a foreign accent—were they meant to be Jews? If so, they might have been more Jewish... but surely they would not all be Hebrews? These and other parts were played by Neville Bradbury, Michael Green, Roger Fleming, Derek Cusdin, Alan Drake, Betty White, Sylvia Eatop.

The admirable costumes were designed by Vivien Innes and made in the Questors' Wardrobe under the direction of Joyce Fisher. Setting was designed by Jane Kingshill and constructed in the theatre workshop under the direction of Ian Jones. John Holbrook assisted in the production, and Beryl Owen stage managed assisted by Mary Collins, Jose Roberts, Rosemary Ruttle, Mary Smith, Molly Dale, Marjorie McGarrick, Ffrangcon Price and Ruth Milner. Lighting was by Simon Gray, and Sound by Michael Gamble.

### Council present

Afterwards, the Mayor of Ealing, Ald. T. J. Brennan, made a speech of thanks and appreciation. In his drily humorous way, he said that perhaps the play was not quite the right sort for a mayor to see. But it had been most enjoyable, although he and members of Ealing Town Council were not present merely to enjoy themselves. They were there to indicate their support for what had been going on in the Questors' Theatre for the last quarter of a century, and also for the great experiment which had been undertaken.