

Professor David Peimer | Nikolai Gogol's Play "The Inspector General"

- Okay, so today we're going to dive into one of the other Russian great writers of the so-called Golden Era of Russian writing in the middle of the 1800s, more or less. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and of course, this guy, Nikolai Gogol. And I mean, short, quite brief life. And he's dying before the emancipation of the serfs in the 1860s, beginning of the 1860s. And he is really regarded, Gogol is absolutely world renowned and really regarded as one of the greatest playwrights, not only satirists, but in particular for his satire. And the play we're going to look at today, "Inspector General," sometimes translated as "The Government Inspector," but I'll call it "The Inspector General" for today, is really one of the absolute classics of all satirical, not only comedy, but satire writing, that is, I think, has ever been written. All the way back to Aristophanes, 2000 and a half years ago in Ancient Greece. And Gogol, I think, really kicks off the entire contemporary genre of satire, political, social satire, human nature satire, if you like. And it's this one play in particular, some of his short stories, but it's the one play in particular, "The Inspector General," that is so globally renowned, and I think absolutely worthy of the reputation. So I'm going to look a little bit at his life first, brief bio, and then we're going to go into the play itself. Because what's also interesting is how Gogol and his play are caught up in this period that Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and the others are caught up in, which is the beginnings of the emancipation of the serfs, the beginnings of some liberalisation, the beginnings of literature, other things reaching Russia and the conflict or the cultural clash between Western Europe and Russia. And the questions of Russian identity that Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, they were all so obsessed with and caught up in. And I think that's part of the fascinating beginnings of a resurgence, if you like, of major Russian nationalism, certainly as represented through these literary figures. And we look at a little bit what Gogol and the others contrast themselves with, so the Western European writers and developing on the path of the Enlightenment, and how they, trying to find a distinguishing characteristic, which makes them different to what's happening in Western Europe. And I think it's quite profound because it gives me personally a deeper sense of what's going on at the moment and how all the propaganda coming out of Russia can actually speak to some people perhaps imbued with Russian mythical history, if you like. Why certain languages of propaganda are being used, why approaches, what it refers back to mythologically. And these guys are trying to articulate it because they are exactly caught in that time, when it's post-Napoleon, and it's the Enlightenment, it's ideas of Western Europe are all moving across to Russia, and the Russians through these writers anyway and cultural thinkers are trying to understand what is Russian identity and articulate it. Gogol doing it through satire, and then the second part, of course, is the brilliance of the beginning for me of contemporary satire, which he brings, he wrenches out of

ancient history into the more modern era. It begins with Gogol. And we'll see the influence on Dario Fo, the great Italian playwright and satirist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The influence on Kafka, his friendship with Dostoevsky, his friendship with Pushkin, and his influence on Vaclav Havel, the great Czech playwright and dissident and president.

Okay, so Nikolai Gogol, you can see the dates that he lived. Quite a short life. And he's born in Ukraine, what is today we would call Ukraine. Of course, then it's all part of the Russian Empire under the Czars. And he comes from a, we're not sure, middle class, slightly lower middle class family. On his mother's side, there's a military tradition, but not the top military, but not the bottom military, if you like, of rank. And his father is part of the Ukrainian Cossacks, as they were called at the time, but we're also not totally sure. It's a bit of mystery around his actual origins of his parents. But he does allude to growing up in specific parts, semi-rural, but towns, if you like, of the Ukraine, which is interesting because he's embedded in Ukrainian folklore and trying to look at how Ukrainian folklore is part of the greater Russian folklore and mythical history. So his father dies when he is 15. We don't have much knowledge of his mother afterwards. He leaves school very early, and he's not popular amongst his schoolmates. They call him a mysterious dwarf. They mock him. Today we'd call it bullying, I guess. They mock and tease him about his nose. It's out of shape or strange, whatever. He leaves school in 1828, and Gogol went to St. Petersburg, which is the centre for the Russian literati and the artistic, the literary. It's the centre of artistic and literary culture in a way. St. Petersburg. For some of these guys. And there he meets Pushkin, he's friendly and so on. He tried to get an appointment to the history department at the University of Kiev in the Ukraine, as we know. And despite the support of Pushkin, the great Russian poet, and we've looked at him before, his "Ode to Liberty" and other remarkable poems of Pushkin, despite Pushkin's support and the Russian Minister of Education's support, the appointment was blocked by a couple of bureaucrats, faceless and nameless bureaucrats, who said that he was not qualified enough. So we start to get the relationship between him and the emerging bureaucracy of the Czarist rule in Russia and the massive explosion of bureaucracy. And I'm going to link it to how it all started. And that becomes his obsession, is the bureaucracy and the notion of the state taking over through faceless, nameless hordes of bureaucrats. And the obvious link to our times today, the obvious links to Kafka and many others. You know, Havel is pretty clear. So he's blocked from getting an appointment at the University of Kiev. 1834, he's made professor of mediaeval history at the University of St. Petersburg, which is a pretty prestigious job, but he doesn't really have the qualifications for it. It's all done through network and who knows who and that sort of thing. So it's a disaster. He's a disaster as an academic and as a scholar, but he's a great writer. So it lasts about a year, and then he resigns or is forced to resign, we're not quite sure, in 1835.

Between 1832 and 1836, he has extensive contact with Pushkin. Now, that's really important 'cause Pushkin is, as I've mentioned, regarded as the great, if you like, modern, the beginnings of modern poetry and modern literature, specifically poetry, in Russian history. Then from 1836 to 1848, he travels through Germany and Switzerland and other parts of Europe and Paris, and he settles in Rome. And in 1848, he had returned from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem 'cause he was religious, as most of these guys were. Dostoevsky battling with God and religion so much. Dostoevsky is obsessed with a kind of demonic battle with a question of a God. Tolstoy is a whole different story. He's trying to include a kind of bit of a naive Christianity. Anyway, he comes back from pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and he returns to Russia. And he dies there in 1852. Strange death. All sorts of psychological reasons we're not totally sure of, and I'm hesitant to use contemporary words today, but he refused food. He took to the bed. And he died almost of semi-starvation within nine days of refusing food. So something strange happens in Gogol, and quite a few others. A lot of them, their parents died young or the father died young, and their lives were so precarious. Dostoevsky was four years in a Siberian prison camp, in a harsh labour camp. Had to wear chains around his ankles every day. Tolstoy was the only one who came from a very rich aristocratic background, very different. Anyway, Gogol, when he wrote it, "The Government Inspector," "The Inspector General," he was shocked that the critics saw it as an indictment of Czar Nicholas's despotic regime. And interestingly, the Czar himself stepped in to prevent the production from, and the publication of "The Inspector General" play to prevent it from being banned, which is an extraordinary thing to happen because this is before 1860, the emancipation of the serfs and other liberal laws, if you like, and the Czar steps in to stop it. And the Czar argued that, "Oh no. He is showing the foibles and the lack of morality in ordinary human beings." It wasn't a critique of Russian imperialism, of the Russian state and the despotic regime of the Czar. So the debate has continued to today of all satirists who write. Are they writing about human nature, human foibles for corruption, greed, bureaucratic, non-emotional control of others through forms and paperwork. You know, all the stuff we know of bureaucracy. Is it merely the individuals? And it's not the leadership of the state, which is it? And it's fascinating that the Czar himself steps in to say he's going to allow the production and the publication to carry on because it's about human nature and its human beings. It's, of course, it's not his bureaucracy of his regime. So fascinating example there that the patronage saved him in a way. Gogol is interesting because he believes more in a version of an autocracy. And he is pretty committed to the Russian Orthodox Church. And I'm going to come onto that in a moment.

Okay, these are the three main pieces that we know Gogol famous for. "Inspector General," which he writes in 1836, "The Nose and Other Stories," he writes it in those, in that 11-year period, gets published. "The Nose" is the one that has gone down in literary

history, and "Diary of a Madman" in 1834, which has been taken up by many, many other writers, playwrights, and adaptations in variations have been done of "Diary of a Madman." The most recent, interestingly, by a Chinese author who adapted Gogol and tries to link it to satirise versions of Chinese state rule, despotism and bureaucracy. So hugely influential from these three works on their own. I'm going to look at "The Nose" a little bit as well. This is a, perhaps, an interesting, slightly different portrait of Gogol. Looking much younger of course, and a whole different image that we get of the guy. Obsessed with noses? For us to decide. Before I go into the actual play, it's important to say that some critics have seen and accurately the antisemitism in Gogol's writing and in Dostoevsky and others. And it has to be said straight up front that he is part of the general milieu. And I'm not justifying it in the slightest. I never, ever would. But he's part of the milieu of antisemitism, which is Dostoevsky, it's Tolstoy. All of them have it to a degree. It is so thick in the air. And I'm sure Trudy and others have gone into this in much more detail and depth than me. But it is so thick in the air of the Russian aristocracy, of the Russian rulers of the time. The antisemitism's so deep, it's in every town, village, city, every interaction. Again, I'm not justifying a thing for a second, but it's not an obsession of Gogol's. And that's what makes him a bit different. It's not an obsession of Dostoevsky either. It's there, but I would never categorise it nearly as big as T.S. Elliot and some of the others who very consciously wrote much more vitriolic comments of an antisemitic nature. Anyway, he does have some Ukrainian Jewish characters, and you can see the anti-Jewish prejudice in some of the Ukrainian and Russian literature and culture. All of it happening at the time. These are just the big guys who've lasted 150 years. There are many others writing, of course, at the same time. He did write one novel with a Jewish character. A novel called "Taras Bulba." And this is, it is the stereotype. The character's called Yankel. And the stereotyped Jew in Russian literature who's exploitative, who's cowardly. He's capable of a lot of gratitude. But he's framed as a merchant who's cowardly and exploits. And he drowns in the Dnieper River, thrown in by Cossack lords. Cossacks appear quite a bit in some of Gogol's lesser novels and stories. Interestingly, Sholem Aleichem consciously took from Gogol and consciously mentions it, that he was borrowing in particular the idea of the rural East European landscape. And it's important because we all know that Sholem Aleichem and the introduction of the Cossacks obviously in "Fiddler," et cetera. And Sholem Aleichem also speaks about what he got from Gogol. 'Cause Gogol wrote letters and a lot of essays about how you soften danger and rage with laughter and comedy. And Sholem Aleichem alludes to this quite directly, the influence from Gogol, of how to play with danger through comedy and lighter touch, which we get in "Fiddler on the Roof," even with that terrible scene of the Cossacks attacking. But the whole, the general genre is lighter, is maybe a little bit idealistic, a bit romantic. And Gogol writes a lot about, and going way back to the Ancient Greeks of Aristophanes, how do you incorporate... You try to

have a vicious satirical attack on the system about corruption, greed, and power obsessed and many things, but you frame it in a satirical, comic way. Part of the great anti-apartheid South African theatre as well with Albert and so on. So Sholem Aleichem writes about that. And Sholem Aleichem also interestingly rewrote some of Gogol's, one or two of Gogol's Jewish characters, and took out the antisemitism, of course. And he tried to show it from a Jewish perspective rather than from the antisemitic perspective. His plays have been translated into 172 languages. More than 135 films have been based on this guy's work. What's he trying to do? Gogol wrote, "I'm trying to find a truly Russian Russia in literature." And I'm quoting here from Gogol. "One voice to proclaim one long-awaited homecoming. "All Russians will say in one voice, 'This is Our Russia. "'We are truly at home, we are in our land.'" And in that phrase of Gogol, which is influenced through, with Dostoevsky and Pushkin, and Tolstoy to a degree. All of them, Turgenev. They're obsessed with the land, nationalism, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the tension between the Enlightenment of Western Europe and what on Earth is Russian identity in that context. Russia being an absolutely feudal, totalitarian state, the Czar and the peasants. Barely a middle class. Only emerges after the 1860 emancipation of the serfs. Okay, this here is a picture of "The Nose." This is from one of the early translations into English of "The Nose and Other Short Stories by Gogol." And I'm going to come onto this story, which has had huge influence especially on Kafka and many others. Another picture for everybody of a much younger Gogol. And we'll come on to some of the other images in a moment. I'm going to hold on this one here for the moment. So "The Inspector General," what on earth is it? It's satirising obviously greed, stupidity, and the extreme political corruption of Imperial Russia for his own times. The irony of the emancipation of the serfs, 1860, is giving rise that then anybody could aspire, theoretically anyway, through hard work to become part of the middle and even nobility classes. And what that does, together with that there is a massive expansion of a bureaucratic culture in the Russian state. Because how do you control all these people? Before it's been feudal, the lords or the aristocrats and serfs, who have no rights really. But emancipate them and they can go into all sorts of jobs. Suddenly civil servants, bureaucrats, become absolutely huge. And many of these emancipated serfs go into those jobs. And we get echoes into the, obviously the early to mid 20th century of that because it becomes an area where, let's put it, people born very poor and in poverty, they can aspire to becoming low-ranking or middle-ranking civil servants or even higher civil servants. So the idea of bureaucracy expands exponentially as it does throughout the world, but in particular in Russia 'cause it's happening quite quickly. And that's, we are still, I think, very much part of that legacy today. I think if I'm right the service industry in England even, or that's linked more to servants, not only bureaucracy, around the beginning of the 20th century, I think it was about over 10% of the entire population were working as servants, if not more.

So anyway, we get these ideas and what is happening in Russia at the time. So explosion, the ironic of the bureaucracy is that you've got to control all these people who've now been liberated and emancipated. In the play, there's the main character, Khlestakov. Afterwards, I'm going to go into that in a moment, but very quickly, the Daily Telegraph, one of the obviously important newspapers in England, in 2014, they came up with what they regarded as the 15 greatest plays ever written. And Gogol's "Inspector General" was one of the 15 they chose. We can make of it what we wish, but I really believe it's right up there. Okay, then the origin of the play, he wrote a letter to Pushkin and he said, "Pushkin," I'm quoting from the letter. "Do me a favour. "Send me a subject, an authentically Russian anecdote. "My hand is itching to write a comedy. "Give me a subject and I'll knock off a comedy in five acts. "I'll do it in a few weeks. "I promise you it'll be funnier than hell. "I want to take on everything that is corrupt in Russia now. "Send me an idea for God's sake. "My mind and stomach are famished." And then Pushkin wrote back, "Okay, a character, Crispin, arrives in a provincial town. "He's taken for a governor from St. Petersburg. "The real governor is an honest, corrupt fool. "And the governor's wife is now going to flirt "with this new guy who arrives "and will the daughter and so on." And he gives the idea. And the idea came from Pushkin. Of what to take and make into the actual play. Okay, very briefly, the plot of the play is that we have corrupt officials in a small Russian town. There's the mayor, there's the chief of police, there's the chief of the schools, the chief of taxes, all of them, et cetera. About 10, 12 of them who are under the mayor. And they're completely corrupt. And there's bribery and corruption, everything is happening that we can imagine. They don't kill, it's not mafia horror, but they're completely corrupt in a comic way. And you can bribe them for anything. And then the play opens with complete panic. The mayor has received a letter that the Inspector General is coming from St. Petersburg to inspect them and their books to check for corruption, to check that they're balancing the books, what's happening to the money. Why ain't the taxes going to St. Petersburg as they're supposed to be. And it's in the very opening scene of the play. And the other important point is that the letter says that the Inspector General is coming incognito, and he will inspect incognito. So you won't know, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Chief of Police, Mr. Head of School, Mr. Head of Hospitals and all the other social services. You won't know who is the Inspector General and who isn't. He's incognito. It's a brilliant, simple, simple, but brilliant premise for a satire that you can imagine. So the mayor and all the others are in a flurry of anxiety and panic. And we see this show in the early scenes of the play 'cause how they're going to cover up their bribery, their corruption, the money, where, how do they cover, where's the money, what's it gone, where's the paperwork, where's the money, et cetera. Incognito. They've heard a few strangers have arrived in the town. Maybe one of the strangers is the Inspector General. And going to report back to the Czar and all the rest of it.

The panic and mass anxiety hits the town and in particular these corrupt town leaders. They're suspicious of every newcomer who's arrived in the last week or two in their town. And then there's the character, Khlestakov, who has his sidekick, who is sort of a servant if you like. And he's basically, he's a gambler, he's an opportunist. He is a, he's a charming, fun, witty, great charisma character who travels from town to town trying to gamble his way out, make some money and move on. He's the classic rogue, if you like. He's the trickster character, but he's not malicious. He doesn't, there's no physical injury or damage in that sort of way. He's just trying to make a, he's a conman trying to con people all the time. That's what he is. But in a charming, charismatic way. And he gets wind that they're expecting the Inspector General, and he is mistaken, classic play, mistaken identity. Shakespeare, many others, it's a classic recipe for comedy, mistaken identity. And the mayor and all the others think this is the Inspector General. So what happens is that they bribe him, they give him money. He takes more money, loans and money. He flirts with the mayor's wife. Then he gets engaged to the mayor's daughter even 'cause the mayor will do anything so that the truth won't come out about bribery and corruption going on. So he makes a lot of money. Some Jewish merchants arrive. And the mayor grabs money from the Jewish merchants. And then the imposter, inspector figure, discovers this and demands all the money. So the mayor has to give over the money from the Jewish merchants even, et cetera. And that's the only role of the merchants. They're not shown in terms of the Jewishness in any other way. And then they realise, then the imposter says, "Well, you've stole the money from the merchants, "and you stolen, you're bribing everything. "I'm going to dismiss you. "I'm going to have you sent to Siberia. "I'm going to have you destroyed, your family." Which gets him even more bribery and more money and so on. So it builds in a wild fantasy if you like. And so it becomes bigger and bigger. And then at the last minute, the imposter figure decides, okay, he's made enough. He's conned them out of enough. He's going to duck town. And he gets the fastest horses, and they all bring them and the mayor, everything, the fastest horses, and he rides out of town full of all the money. And then at the end of the play, as the mayor and the Chief of Police, Chief of schools, Chief of Hospitals all relieved and happy. And in the last scene of the play, they're relieved, they're happy, they celebrate all their money. A letter arrives. The real inspector general from St. Petersburg will arrive the next day. And the end of the play is a frozen tableau of all the corrupt towns leaders. And Gogol wrote there, "Keep them in a frozen tableau "for at least a minute and a half." That's a long time on the stage where you are watching no action. Minute and a half, it's a long time, stage wise. We just watch. And it's a beautiful frozen tableau. Nobody moving, nothing, as it all dawns of what, the con, what's been going on. And the real inspector general is going to come the next day. And what are they going to do and what's just happened? And that gives the audience a minute and a half to realise what on earth has happened, what on earth has gone on. And the full impact of the play

ironically hits us in the last minutes and a half. It's an ingenious device invented by Gogol right at the end of the play to reflect back on the... So the audience can really reflect back. The laughter stops, the comedy stops. Athol Fugard once said about "The Island," the great anti-apartheid part play, wrote, "I want to make them laugh for three-quarters of the play, "and the last quarter, "I want them to be absolutely silent with seriousness." And Fugard hits the nail on the head. And the same with Gogol. Laugh, laugh, laugh, but in the last minute and a half, two minutes, is no more laughter. The danger, the reality really hits us. So he brings in that ironic device. And then there is a phrase, which is just before that tableau scene, where one of the, the mayor and the cronies, they stop, freeze, and they say gently to the audience, "Why are you laughing in our play? "Are you laughing at yourselves?" Pause, and then carry on with the action. So he breaks what's called the fourth wall, where the characters speak to the audience directly, gently, subtly, and then back on. So he plants the clue of what's coming in the tableau at the end. So for me it's a theatrical masterpiece 'cause irony after irony is built in. And irony is always the most powerful thing for me in all literature and drama. Dostoevsky acted in one of the versions of the play. And they gave the proceeds, a small character, and they gave the proceeds to the Society for Aid for Needy Writers and Scholars in April, 1860. So I just tried to show the link between Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Gogol, all of these characters knowing each other and so on. Obviously, it's grotesque and the absurd.

What's it really about, the play? Not only greed, corruption. Not only is it human nature and opportunism and greed. Not only sort of fairly obvious bureaucratic stuff. I think there's something deeper. It's the belief in the lie. When leaders are so desperate to not be caught out, they will construct a lie. Believe in the lie. And I'm not only referring to Trump here, but it's how it works in any society, that the lie becomes believed. They believe this is the real inspector because they're all so panicked and so anxious. The imposter character, he acts out being the inspector general, takes them for a ride. He cons them. So the ordinary character becomes the conman who cons the whole society. He's a conman. Don't we have that in so many leaders today. They're conmen ultimately. Bit of P.T. Barnum, bit of other things, but dangerous and conmen. They know how to con a society once they hook onto what will make people panic, how can we propagate the lie? And Gogol wrote about the effect of getting the lie into a society's consciousness. I'm paraphrasing it, but he talks about the lie in some of his letters and some of his writings. And of course Gogol and many of the others did as well. So what we have is the lie, the opportunistic character who has no moral, no belief in anything other than their own self benefit. In the imposter character, it's for money of course. For others it may be power and other things or just ego. So the lie, the conman character comes out. And the capacity for a society to engage with their own self delusion. And Gogol wrote about the fascination between the lie and self delusion, that you can

start to believe in the lie. Because they question, is this imposter really the government, the inspector general from St. Petersburg or somebody else? Because he's being bribed, he's taking loans, he's taking money, he's flirting with the mayor's wife. He's going to get engaged to the mayor's daughter. It becomes ridiculous. It becomes ridiculously absurd. But they go along with it because somewhere deep down they're scared, there's a hint of scared, fear. Maybe this is the imposter, maybe this is the inspector general, maybe this is the real guy, even though he is not acting in character. Or... Or that the real state power from St. Petersburg is so corrupt anyway that it's all about grabbing the money anyhow. But they're aware of it in the play. Is it real? Isn't it, is it a lie? Can he be real, can't he, et cetera. So Gogol for me is so contemporary. All these questions of today are shown in the panic of a society. And then the last point I think that really strikes me with the play, what do you do when a group panics? And Gogol writes about this, and so many plays have taken this up, when there's panic and there's mass hysteria and mass anxiety come into a nation or a community or a town or a city. We looked at Arthur Miller's before, of Salem and "The Crucible." What do you do when mass panic, mass hysteria strikes? And it's been done in many other plays. But Gogol puts it in a comic situation. And I think it's about the grotesqueness of human nature comes out, the grotesqueness of a system comes out because if the lie will be believed, delusion will become the norm. Okay, for Dario Fo it's a similar thing. Where the lie, the illusion and so on. All I want to add in Dario Fo, "Accidental Death of an Anarchist," the brilliant Italian satirist of the Nobel Prize that I mentioned, and what he does, and he takes the idea from Gogol and from commedia dell'arte, the great Ancient Roman tradition, where Dario Fo makes the conman, the trickster character, be the agent for change in the play. Now, before the comic character was always a sidekick like the fool in Shakespeare, a sidekick of the great leader, the king or whoever, therefore comic relief for the audience. But here the comic character is the agent for change and dramatic action moving in the play. And the imposter character is the agent for that. So the trickster, the con, the comic character becomes the central protagonist, if you like, who makes the decisions and propels the drama forward. And Fo takes it from, Dario Fo takes it from Gogol and commedia dell'arte. But he changes commedia dell'arte 'cause all the comic, usually there is usually sidekicks of leaders. Vaclav Havel in his great play, "The Garden Party," which is about a character who is an opportunist, and he wants to go up in bureaucracy, get a job. But he learns very quickly that it's more important to go to a garden party network and mix with the bureaucrats there and then get offered a job than have any CV or merit or study anything. It's ridiculous. Go network, garden party, that's where the bureaucrats are. 'Cause he's satirising Communist rule in the old Czechoslovakia. And the Hugo character goes and gets a job, and he becomes the director of the bureaucracy, et cetera. Go rises up very quickly 'cause he's an opportunist and no values, no morals, no beliefs, nothing. Just up the ladder, which is

what the Gogol characters are so scared of. And then "The Garden Party," you even have the opportunist character, Hugo, plays chess with himself so he can never lose. It's a brilliant, wonderful dramatic image. So all of this is inside Gogol. Opportunism, panic, anxiety, language of bureaucracy, language of corruption, greed, the greater picture of the state, the role of the state, and how it changes human nature. Caught up in a state of mass panic or mass anxiety. And Monty Python, and of course many others have used it, Kafka. Okay, I want to go on briefly to one of the, one of the other, the important short story of Gogol's, "The Nose," because this is interesting and prefigures Kafka and many others to come. The link of the grotesque and the absurd that Gogol and Dostoevsky spoke about. The link, Dostoevsky wrote quite a bit, and Gogol, on the link between the comic, the absurd, and the grotesque in human nature. And how you bring from the comic into the dangerous grotesque. So you're playing with that with the audience. But you're not hitting them on the head with the grotesque as you would in tragedy. In "The Nose," this was originally published in a literary journal owned by Pushkin. And what happens in "The Nose" is that the character wakes up one morning without his nose. And he finds that the nose has developed a life and character of his own. And the nose has gone out, and the nose has become the state councillor for that area of that province. So the nose has become a new character, a councillor for the state, who outranks the lower class major where the nose came from. And he's freaked because not only has he lost his nose, but he's freaked because the nose has assumed a character of a state councillor who will have a greater rank. His own nose will have a greater rank over himself. Through the comedy and the satire, we get the vicious comment on society, the importance of going up and down the snakes and ladders. Of all that matters is status and rank. Nothing else matters. All that matters is to go up in rank and status. And you will have the power. Merit is irrelevant, qualifications irrelevant. That's all that matters for the satire. Interestingly, it came about after Gogol wrote about Peter the Great who introduced what was called the Table of Ranks, which allowed commoners to rise through bureaucracy to gain some sort of position in state. And beginnings of the massive bureaucracy, in this case, in Russia. Not only is the ordinary character freaked out that he's lost his nose, but he's upset because how is he going to get a wife? How's he going to have a family? How's he going to get promoted in rank without his nose?

Okay. The link to Kafka and "Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa woke up one morning and discovered he was a, becomes this huge insect, et cetera. Panic and anxiety sets in for him and his family. So we get class played with, society, played with all of these ideas. But what's fascinating that Gogol adds into the story is that the character who loses the nose feels very inferior suddenly to all the other characters. And jealousy comes in and envy because my nose is going to get a better job and a higher rank and a better salary than me. Don't we all know this so well? The envy, the pettiness. Who has got

slightly more rank, slightly upper ladder power, status, earning a bit more, all the rest. Bureaucracy in business, corporations, universities, wherever. And interestingly, the nose can adapt different identities. So the nose gets attached, becomes a doctor. Then it becomes a barber, it becomes other characters, and finally the nose becomes the state commissioner in a character. The final thing that Gogol is saying is all that matters is outward appearance of status. Your own internal life and authenticity becomes irrelevant. All that matters is external image. And that's what Havel picks up on in "The Garden Party" with Hugo. Who learns the language of bureaucracy can outwit anybody through networking to become the director. That's what Dario Fo picks up on, all of them, through language and understanding the game of networking, inner authenticity is irrelevant and all that matters is external image and how to play the networking game. It's a deeper meaning that Gogol touches on in the short story of "The Nose." And we end the story with a freak out 'cause how is he even going to, he can't even marry without a Nose. So he is reduced to nothing. He can't even get married or have a family. In any culture today, the teachers have inspectors, certainly in England and other parts of the world. Nurses have inspectors, universities have inspectors. Schools have inspectors. Supermarkets have regional managers who travel around. The inspector is everywhere coming back to "The Inspector General." The lion manager is of course the great phrase of our corporatist time. So through all of this we get the idea of who is looking out on who, a state of surveillance. Now we have of course even through the internet and other things different forms of surveillance, where we can have a robot maybe, who's doing surveillance on us. We don't even necessarily need maybe a human being. Where is it going? I think what's important is the idea of the visit, the brilliance in his play is that the visit is done by a character who's incognito because that's what sets the fear in amongst all the others. But in our own times, we know the fear of when the manager, the line manager, this and that, whoever step in and take on the role of an inspector because act... And what Gogol also mentions, what does an inspector produce? Nothing. Surveillance, report, and report back to the cheese back in St. Petersburg. The inspector doesn't actually have a job himself. Inspector General. His job is to, if you like, have a surveillance on others and then report back. But he's not actually producing anything. So who's actually more corrupt? Who is more susceptible to living an inauthentic life, if you like. Okay, then at the beginning of the, of which I'm going to show now. This is what, by the way, one image from a wonderful contemporary production of "The Nose," where they turned it into a fantastic theatrical experience. Yeah, the image of "The Nose" in a very contemporary production. I have to ask Judi if you could show, this is from a very contemporary Irish theatre production of "The Inspector General." Opening scene where the panic sets in of getting the news. Sorry, it's the trailer and we get the opening scene. But you'll get how its staged in a very contemporary way.

(A video clip of a contemporary production of "The Inspector General" plays)

- Lads, there's some shocking news. There's a government inspector coming to town.
- An inspector.
- I always try to slip by incognito.
- Shh!
- Would you listen to that chatter.
- We say our hellos one by one, behind closed doors. That's how it's done in a civilised society.
- It's a dig out, not a bail out. Isn't that it?
- You're such a bloody little flirt, Maria. Do you know that?
- Stop, you're a horror for the compliments.
- God, no.
- Everything about that man is significant.
- Great bloody, man. He's only a job doing player.
- We are well, we are!
- Okay, thank you. And then I'm going to show, if we can come back.
- [Judi] David, you need to share your screen again.
- Okay, I'll do that, thank you. Share the screen and come back. And here. Okay, I'm going to show, this is from a fantastic film of the play by Danny Kaye. I'm sure many people know, one of the great British comedians. And it's a fantastic film of the play.
- [Guard] Halt, halt! Halt!
- You can't go in here.
- I have to see the mayor!
- He's in a council meeting, he can't be disturbed.
- I demand that you let me through. I've ridden all night, 80 miles.

- That's orders.
- Get out of my way.
- [Guard] You heard what the man said, now stop! I said stop! I said stop!
- I'm going to see the mayor!
- But the mayor's engaged in a council meeting.
- Let go of me, you'll be sorry if you don't! I'm allowed to go to the mayor.
- So am I, so is the whole council.
- Where's the council room?
- I won't talk.
- Cousin Vero, cousin Vero!
- Don't make so much noise, they're in a meeting. Keep quiet.
- What is this commotion?
- Cousin Gregor.
- Cousin Vero.
- This is my cousin, the mayor.
- [Guard] I'm sorry, uncle, this man, he tried to get in the room.
- Cousin Vero, terrible things have happened.
- Come in here.
- Cousin Gregor.
- What happened?
- [Gregor] I've been riding all night. It's a disaster, I'm ruined.
- Come and sit down. Fetch brandy and water.
- No water.
- No water. Now what is it? Come on, man, speak up, what's happened?

- Like the thunder, he appeared among us. The postmaster was hanged. The chief of police was let off with 200 lashes. I was sentenced to the firing squad, and luckily my own fur made the rifles, they blew up. I escaped. I need a fresh horse, I must be off at once.
- A fresh horse for our cousin. Sit down, sit down.
- But I must go. Even now, he may be here in your midst.
- Who?
- [Official] Speak up man, who?
- The Inspector General. Yes, he has full power from the Emperor himself. And wherever he finds bribery and corruption, there the gallows and a firing squad go to work. More.
- What does he look like, this Inspector General?
- who knows, a man of mystery. Five days he was in our midst and no one even suspected it. He went everywhere, saw everything, and uncovered such corruption that even I was shocked.
- Don't get excited.
- Don't get excited. How I envy you to sit here in your clean town and fear no one.
- [Nephew] The horse is ready, Uncle Vero.
- I must be off.
- [Official] Poor Gregor, where will you go?
- Away, far away, anywhere. Africa, China. Goodbye, Cousin Vero. Farewell, Uncle. Goodbye, goodbye, cousin.
- You need any money?
- You're very kind, Cousin Vero.
- I have a few crowns.
- Thank you. Farewell.
- I would like to take this opportunity to tender my resignation, effective.
- [Mayor] Sit down!

- What would you do? Go back to rolling pills in that stink hole of a chemist's shop, you, you poisoner!

- [Official] Well, I promised my wife, I... I'd talk to my sister about something.

- Stay where you are! Nothing's to be gained by rushing around blindly. We must proceed according to the system. You, Laszlo, clean up the square. See that all the public buildings are spotless. Put patients in all the hospital beds.

- [Laszlo] Yes, Uncle Vero.

- [Mayor] You Telecki, get the children back into school. Start teaching them, something, anything.

- Yes, brother-in-law.

- You two deliver the mail. All of it, whether you've read it or not.

- I never read the mail.

- Yes, you did. Don't you remember?

- [Mayor] Hey!

- [Official] Goodbye, Uncle Vero.

- Come back, come back here! I want all roads policed day and night. I want a report of everyone who has entered this town in the past 24 hours.

- Okay, hold it there. What I wanted to show is just, this is one version of course of many ways to stage it. The Irish production is doing a much more physical, exaggerated comedy style of performance. And we get the comedy, it's almost a caricature, character as caricature and very physical, almost choreographed, dance-like. This is a more, a kind of realism using realism for comedy. So totally different approaches to staging exactly the same piece. They've slightly adapted the language and the dialogue and so on in the Irish in the trailer. The Irish production done at the Abbey Theatre, it was about five, six years ago. And this of course came way back into the 1950s with Danny Kaye. So two totally different approaches. I don't think it's either wrong or right. It's a question of taste, which one one prefers. The one is more obviously comic, and the other is using a kind of realism, which this, the Danny Kaye version does. But the main idea is that it opens so many different ways of staging it. And it can be spectacle, it can be more realistic, more choreographed, dance-like, movement-like, and so on. And it's part of the rich tradition of staging satire that we can do it in these wide variety of ways. Also,

the Irish, this production is much more obsessed, the Danny Kaye one, with trying to show the costumes sort of a bit accurate to Russian times. And so with the Irish one, of course, quite different. And the use of the body, much more physicalized and very different in the Irish one compared to the Danny Kaye. So we get two different approaches to staging. I want to just mention one last thing as a final point, which is the literary critic Belinsky, who was so important, regarded as the main critic and sort of you're like literary expert of the times, who pronounced judgement on the great literary figures that I've mentioned in Russia. And he had an interesting comment, which he wrote a long letter to Gogol. And he was attacking Gogol for a whole lot of things. And he was, but more than that, Belinsky I think gets to the heart of what Gogol and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, many of the others, are trying to grapple with in the mid-1800s. And he writes in the letter to, Belinsky writes in the letter to Gogol, "You misunderstand the Western obsession "with the Enlightenment and its superiority "and the Western intelligentsia of Western Europe. "The most vital problem facing Russia today "is the abolition of serfdom and corporal punishment. "But more than that, "you must look at Russia and its history." He's writing obviously to Gogol. "You must look at the people, the roots of culture, "which are still warm with our Russian past. "This strong bias towards Western civilization "and their boundless prejudice in what they call us "as Russian barbarians has made it impossible "for Western Europe to understand Russia. "They have the same old prejudices, my friend. "Russian culture is totally different "from the culture of the European peoples. "The European peoples do not have a spiritual core. "The Englishmen, the Frenchmen, the German "have never stopped being European and nationalistic. "The Russian, on the other hand, "has had to destroy his national personality "so that he can assimilate the Western civilization, "which flows from an entirely different fountainhead "to the Russian one. "Our Russian identity has three historical points, "which is different to our Western European neighbours. "It is number one, the form in which Christianity "has reached us and them. "Second, how ancient civilizations of Rome and Greece "were inherited by our Western Europeans compared to us. "And lastly, our political organisation. "We differ in three crucial elements, peculiar to the West. "The Roman Catholic Church is for them. "We have our Orthodox church. "The civilization of Ancient Rome and Greece "is very different for them as it is for us. "They became great through violent conquest, "alien to old Russia. "We are of the land. "Christianity penetrated Russia. "The Slavic world did not create obstacles to it. "It incorporated it. "We have the essence of Russian civilization, "which lives on in the people "and our Russian Holy Orthodox Church." And he goes on to talk about this distinction between the church and how it became centre in Russia compared to the battles of the Catholic and the Protestant, all the rest of it in the Catholic church in Western Europe. The influence of the Enlightenment. The difference between the land and Russian identity. The ideas of the enlightenment coming in. Even the Russian nobles of the time had to

learn French because the language of the Enlightenment, et cetera. So it's the obsession with land, nationalism, identity is articulated by this literary critic Belinsky in a long letter to Gogol. And I don't want to go into the whole thing, but he goes into it in great detail. And it helps I think with a bit of understanding from a cultural, mythical, historical point of view, the understanding of Russia in a way. And there's this constant obsession with trying to distinguish between Russia and Europe, superior, inferior, which Belinsky mentions right at the beginning. He accuses Gogol of regarding Western intelligentsia and Enlightenment as superior. So I throw that out as a final thought and how it obviously echoes all the way down to our own times today, and how it's used, obviously in propaganda, but how it's perhaps embedded in some notion or isn't. Is it pure mythical nonsense? Or is it embedded in some sense of a Russian identity? Who knows? Okay, so I wanted to share this. I was going to go on to a little bit of Milos Forman's brilliant film, but I'll do that another time. The great satire, "The Fireman's Ball," 1968, brilliant film of Milos Forman, one of my favourite directors, and how he is influenced by Gogol and so many others. Let's rather hold it here. Thank you, everybody.

– [Judi] Thank you, David. Do you have time to go through some of the comments?

– Q&A?

– Yeah, sure, thank you. Thank you.

Q & A and Comments

– Myrna, "Danny Kaye," yes. Did a movie based on the play with the same name. Exactly, thank you.

– From... Sorry, just getting it up here. From T,

Q: "Did Gogol write satirical short stories?"

A: Absolutely. "The Nose" and many others that I mentioned.

– Sheila, "Dead Souls," fantastic. I know, I would love to have gone into "Dead Souls" as well, but I chose to go into more depth with "Inspector General" and "Government Inspector." "The Inspector General" and "The Nose."

– Sandy, "The Nose." A wonderful production by the Metropolitan Opera. Absolutely. It's been, these have all been turned into operas, plays, films, TV series. The two in particular of Gogol, "Diary of a Madman" as well, most recently a Chinese production. So those three absolutely global in influence.

- Sandy, "Taras Bulba." It was a novel, early novel that he wrote.

- Romane,

Q: "Can satire transcend Anti-Semitism?"

A: Fantastic question, Romane. Whew. That is a wonderful one to really think about and look at. If we think about the "Life of Brian" and the effect on devout Christians, "The Satanic Verses" where they're mostly unread of course, and the effect... It's that constant tension between the satirist and I suppose the more devout beliefs usually of religion, but it can be of the state or despots. And it's always a satirist to attack first.

- Bobby, "I thought I heard Trudy Williams say the Russian serfs were not emancipated until 1861." Yes, 1861. Absolutely after Gogol's death. But the momentum is building towards it before the actual act itself, the proclamation in 1861. The ideas are fermenting, which Gogol obviously would've known about earlier on.

- Gail, how are you doing in Jo'burg? Hope you're well. "The Fawltly Towers" episode, "The Hotel Inspector," absolutely. John Cleese, "Fawltly Towers," the "Monty Python." Everyone, not only in theatre, but in any sense of literature, will have read "The Inspector General" and maybe some of the stories of Gogol.

- Romane, "Something of "'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.'" Absolutely, the allusion, idiocy, the satire, Stoppard, they all write about the influence of Gogol.

- Mona, I thought "The Garden Party" entire time reading "The Inspector General." Thank you, exactly, Mona. And Havel and the Czech writers, Hasek, Kafka and all of them, Capek, the great Czech writers, satirists, absolutely linked to Gogol's "Inspector General."

- Richard,

Q: "Could you see a connection with Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco's 'Rhinoceros.'" Peter Sellers. Yes, "The Mouse That Roared," "Being There."

A: Yeah, I want to do a session on Peter Sellers at some point, would love to, and Theatre of the Absurd. And Gogol wrote in a letter to Pushkin that he was trying to understand the link between the absurd, the concept of the absurd in theatre and its link to the comic and the grotesque and the satirical. So he's the first to link these words, which have become just part of everyday parlance in literature. Romane, "Gogol has a powerful sense of human frailty." Absolutely, opportunism, corruption, greed, jealousy, all of these things going

in. And that's what, the Czar, the Czar went against his censors who recommended that the play be banned. The Czar said, "No, it's not about us and our bureaucracy. "It's about human frailty and human folly. "Of course, it's not about us." So he let the production carry on. Fascinating historical fact in literature.

– Jerry, was Gogol's "The Nose" the basis of an opera. Yes.

– Monty, in Woody Allen's film "Sleeper." Oh, I want to do on Woody Allen as well, can't wait. The segment where there's an attempt to clone someone using only his nose. All that remains after is the explosion. Absolutely, Woody Allen, all of them. Everybody knows "The Nose" and how it has been taken up. I recommend a lecture about Vasily Grossman. Yes, the Ukrainian Russian Jew wrote a novel, "Life and Fate." Thank you, fantastic. Thank you, Monty.

– Judith, thank you so much. Ron. Ron, how you doing? I hope you're well.

Q: "Why do you say Gogol was the first important satirist? What about Moliere, Voltaire, Swift, Sheridan?"

A: For me in theatre, he... In a sense, in terms of modernism and theatre, he is, if you like the father or brings it all back, possibly together with Alfred Jarry. But Jarry comes later in French theatre, in the early 1900s. So for me, he is doing it in theatre, but absolutely. Swift, Sheridan, Moliere. But Moliere is more, closer to a couple of hundred years ago. I'm looking at the more contemporaries, the last 150 years. And I think he kickstarted it basically. But Moliere, of course, one of the greats of all time.

– It's Bev, on the subject of Russian nationalism.

Q: "Do you think Gogol's satire is affectionate?"

A: Lovely question. Yes, and that's what he wrote about in the letter which Sholem Aleichem took up in, that Sholem Aleichem took up. And Sholem Aleichem talks about it. How you combine the grotesqueness and danger, but how you do it through a comic or satirical lens. And obviously "Fiddler" and some of the other stories of Sholem Aleichem.

– Okay, let's just jump a bit here. So it is affectionate in that way 'cause we're laughing and having fun, but at a certain point the mirror turns back on us, the audience.

"Do you think," Bev,

Q: "Do you think he's saying that all humans have the foibles of greed, corruption, status, but this is our Russian way of having it?"

A: Yes. That's what the Czar said, that it's all human being. It's not the system, it's the human being. That's why the Czar let the production carry on. Didn't ban it. It seems to me that nationalism is usually associated with glorifying positive aspects of a country, not satirising the negative. Lovely way of putting the question, thank you. Yes, but to satirise is very different than how you deal with nationalism. So the satirist combines human foible together with the system, in this case, the mass explosion and proliferation of bureaucracy and state power.

- Romane, thank you. Marcia, hope you're well in Canada. And hope your family's well. So staged in Toronto in a dance theatre, a hybrid version of "The Inspector General." Great.

- Mitzi, Danny Kaye. You can find it on YouTube or I can send a link if you want through Lockdown. You can find or IMDB, you can find a version of the movie.

- Okay, Nicki, thank you. Avron, thanks.

Q: "So is there evidence of him having personal contact with Jews?"

A: Interesting question. A little bit growing up apparently in Ukraine and in St. Petersburg. But there's no hard evidence of him talking about contact with Jewish people or engaging in any interaction really at all. There's no hard evidence, if you like. Natasha, thank you. Brilliant, of different Russian mentality, which is present with us today. And I think it is important because, when you read Belinsky's letter, and it's a long letter he wrote. He wrote like a 10-page letter to Gogol. I'm just giving you a few paragraphs here. But they're, and he is the literary critic of the times. He writes to Dostoevsky, he writes to Gogol, he writes to... He's engaged with all of them, and he crystallises it in that way. The obsession with Russian identity, and how it's different to Western Europe. And of course the influence today.

- Barbara, William's. I'm sure William with "The Nose." William being brilliant with his work and being a fantastic person. Susan, thank you.

- Bobby, the name,

Q: "Who was the name of the literary critic?"

A: Belinsky, you can find it online. B-E-L-L-I-N-S-K-Y. Or sometimes spelled with an I at the end, not a Y. B-E-L-L-I-N-S-K-I or Y. And it's a letter to Gogol.

- Iva, thank you. "I've just finished 'The Nose.'" Great. Stanley, "There's a Goons song, 'Only A Nose.'" Of course, thanks for reminding

me. It comes straight from Gogol's story.

– Elliot, thank you. Barbara, thanks so much. So thank you very much everybody for getting together and your wonderful questions.