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The Real Government Inspector. Gogol's comedy at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest (1987–1994)

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Abstract: In the 1980s, when Hungary was fighting its final and seemingly successful battle against the Soviet occupation, the best, bravest theatres were supporting this fight with high-quality performances of classical Russian dramas, which made a great impact on the culturally sensitive part of society. Indirectly, these performances revealed the reasons and goals of the national uprising in 1956. More importantly, the reason behind the failure of the "regime change" as well. They pointed out why gaining and accepting freedom is insufficient in itself. People need to "deserve" freedom. They must be able to practice freedom and transform it into a new, modern national identity. Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1987 at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest grabbed the very essence of this process of historical importance under the so-called Velvet Revolution. During its 7-year run, the production became a very important factor that contributed to the country's positive national identity to blossom.

"How pitiful our Russia is!" (Pushkin)
"Don't curse the mirror if your image is crooked!" (Gogol)

The above two quotes can be perceived as deliberately misleading. Even if, as I hope, sooner or later we will recognise the deeper connections hidden in them. To make matters more complicated, the bloodthirsty oppressor of the Decabrist uprising, the "honorary" censor of the court historian, Mr. Pushkin (and the indirect provoker of his later death), Tsar Nicholas I. was present at the premiere. When the curtain fell, he was the first to applaud and remarked to his entourage, "Well, this was a hit at us, especially at me!" This means that he too interpreted this tragic comedy like the people of the fairs, to whom it had been played for years, based on the scenario of an already forgotten Ukrainian writer. Certainly not in the way Pushkin did in the above quote, when Gogol read the first chapters of *Dead Souls* to him: "How pitiful our Russia is!" He might have even said to himself: "The glorious conqueror of Napoleon!"

Pushkin himself was thinking about *The Government Inspector* a lot. But only *Dead Souls* convinced him that it was Gogol who could write it. "Our hohol," as Mr. Court Historian introduced him to his friends, would keep on visiting the rehearsals in the Maly Theatre for more than a decade and wrote numerous studies with the title *How to play The Government Inspector?* Then he decided to put the unfinished second volume of *Dead Souls* on fire not long before his death. Well, in the empire of a reform-loving tsar, everything is a little different than elsewhere.

An interesting antinomy of our theatre history is that in the 1980s, when the country was fighting its final and seemingly successful battle against the Soviet occupation, the best, bravest theatres were supporting this fight with high-quality performances of classical Russian dramas, which made a great impact on the culturally sensitive part of society. The audience's willingness to purchase tickets at much higher prices is also proof of that. Indirectly, these performances revealed the reasons and goals of the national uprising in 1956. More importantly, the reason behind the failure of the "regime change" as well. They pointed out why gaining and accepting freedom is insufficient in itself. People need

to "deserve" freedom. They must be able to practice freedom and transform it into a new, modern national identity.

Gábor Zsámbéki's staging of *The Government Inspector* in 1987 at the Katona József Theatre, Budapest[1] grabbed the very essence of this process of historical importance under the so-called Velvet Revolution. During its 7-year run, the production became a very important factor that contributed to the country's positive national identity to blossom. In the very last scene of *The Government Inspector*, Zsámbéki presented us the contemporary character of the late Kádár-era, the character with whom Gogol had been coping until his death: the "благородное лицо" or to put with a slight exaggeration: the "positive hero."

This character represents the conflicts that characterise all countries in Eastern and Central Europe. The reformers masked as inspectors are actually agents of the old/new elite, and their role is to protect the elite from the botherings of businessmen, journalists, and voters. And when the elite realises that this won't work, they would apply the old, deadly weapons again.

Among the malevolent "pig faces" who are laughing at the mayor's failure appear Gábor Máté, one of the bait inspectors, a dedicated representative of the new generation, and calls them—as did Khlestakov, the "professional" courtier—to follow him one by one and give an account of their work, preferably in a tangible way. He is not a person who can be easily appeased.

However, he makes a mistake: he is convinced that the officials will follow. In this miserable basement stairwell named perestroika, he mistakes the shaft of the elevator stopped for repair for a door and enters.

The intemperate Director of Education looks around to see if everyone agrees, then politely presses the red button that unlocks the above-hung booth... The blades of the rusty fan continue to spin indifferently. Everyone thinks that the problem is solved. But it isn't!

"Russian misery is very similar to Hungarian misery",[2] explains Zsámbéki only two years before the premiere of *The Government Inspector* at a conference talking about the importance of Russian dramas, which became intellectual building blocks for the new Hungarian theatre. This realisation, even after the downfall of perestroika, had the beneficial effect of Russian dramas on our way of thinking, which, since 1956, had revolved around the torn-up street stones, but we were still not sure what to do with them.

In the summer of 1982, right after the "Polish events" the Kaposvár Theatre won the Grand Prix at the BITEF in Belgrade with the production of *Marat/Sade* directed by János Ács. The setting was based on a photo showing Corvin Lane (where severe fights took place during the revolution in 1956) with the torn street stones. "The audience's previous attitude had changed. It wasn't simply an interesting, unusual performance; it was rather a program statement. People arrived by buses and cars in long lines. It almost looked like a demonstration; the crowd was celebrating; there was standing ovation each night,"[3] the director recalled years later. The international success of the *Marat/Sade* of Kaposvár

[1] Date of premiere: December 18, 1987. Director: Gábor Zsámbéki. Set designer: Zsolt Khell, Costume designer: Györgyi Szakács. Actors: Péter Blaskó (The Mayor), Juli Básti (Anna Andreievna), Ági Bertalan (Maria Antonova), János Bán (Khlestakov), József Horváth (Osip).

[2] PETERDI NAGY László, ed., *Kortársunk a mai színpadon: Az 1984. december 4–5-én megtartott Magyar–szovjet elméleti konferencia anyaga* (Budapest: Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1985), 61. (My translation – L.P.N.)

[3] GAJDÓ Tamás, "Jelentős korszakok – emlékezetes pillanatok: A magyar színházművészet fontosabb törekvései az 1970-es évektől 1989-ig," in *Színház és politika: Színháztörténeti tanulmányok, 1949–1989*, ed. GAJDÓ Tamás, 307–346 (Budapest: Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007), 320. (My translation – L.P.N.)

made academician Béla Köpeczi, Minister of Culture, devote an analytical article to the "problematic spirit" of the performance.[4] The manager of the theatre, László Babarczy was reprimanded by Deputy Minister Dezső Tóth. Anyway, it was too late. Gábor Máté, who played the Herald, was holding a blood-stained stone in the finale of *Marat/Sade*, sobbing loudly.

This was the last thing the former producers of the "velvet revolution" needed!

Now they needed a new "theatre revolution" to catch the wind out of the sails of the Polish national uprising, so that they could feed the people even when there is no more Kádár-cooked internationalist goulash soup. First, they thoroughly analysed the "Polish events", then decided to engage people with theatre. In the end our "culture-politicians", who considered themselves experts in the field, started to believe that the Polish dock workers surrendered to Józef Szajna and Jerzy Grotowsky's "poor theatre", not to General Jaruzelski's flamethrowers. The decision was made: let's import "absurd" and "grotesque", "poor" and "director's" theatre urgently in transferable rubbles.

The President of the People's Front and Minister of Cultural Reform approved the performances. He would send his secretary to the premieres on behalf of himself. But people were reluctant to fill the basement and attic theatres for some reason. Finally, someone had an idea: what we need is newly discovered talents! Soon they managed to find two gifted Gábors: Gábor Székely and Gábor Zsámbéki. The debut was Chekhov's *Seagull*, both in Kaposvár and in Szolnok.[5] They turned out to be like some Impromptu at Versailles: a sarcastic, scratchy, and adolescently cruel indictment against the well-fed fiscals and tax collectors of art, also against the "comrade in charge," who expected gratitude, not criticism. The Gábors refused to make theatre for these cunning old folks, but for the young engineers and sore-eyed junior doctors who lived in new housing estates without grandmothers to drop off their children at on Sunday matinees. They sat in the stalls to see a new Shakespeare, a new Molière, or a new Chekhov on stage, then picked up the children from the cloakroom and walked to their one double- and one single-room flats.

Being Sunday, on the way home, they stopped at the confectionery to buy ice cream for the next generation of regime-changing inspectors. All this, in less than a quarter of a century, far beyond the original intentions of both reformer parents and cunning grandfathers, resulted in a positive outcome. When these children grew up, they had to hire a babysitter to watch their kids, but they still filled the Katona and the Örkény Theatres.

A talented generation of theatre makers was playing classical Russian dramas once again to express its views on the world. Advice from Gogol and Ostrovsky, Chekhov and Dostoevsky were conveyed by Ferenc Karinthy in Szeged, István Eörsi in Kaposvár, and Géza Fodor in the Katona József Theatre. These directorial, sometimes "merely" dramaturgical, or even set design trouvailles gradually condensed into a new ethos as well as a new aesthetic.

Well, this wasn't what the "reform secretaries" wanted to achieve. It didn't fit in Gorbachev's ideological mainstream. Meanwhile, after Wenceslas Square in Prague, tanks appeared in Tiananmen Square in Beijing too. In Hungary the miracle mill burnt down in *The Wood Demon* and the forests of *Uncle Vanya* could not be saved either.

Those young artists who conquered the National Theatre but soon after were expelled never cooperated afterward. In Tamás Ascher's

[4] KÖPECZI Béla, "A forradalom értelmezése – Marat ürügyén," *Kritika* 12, no. 2 (1983): 23–25.

[5] See Árpád Kékesi-Kun's essay „*The Seagull* that Transformed Staging Chekhov in Hungary: Gábor Székely: *The Seagull*, 1971" in this issue.

Three Sisters, which won a prize in Paris,[6] they seemed to dance as individuals, with perfect confidence and great choreography, just like the actors in Ottomar Krejca's performance in Prague. One has the feeling that these young people have somewhat grown old. That everything that was greeted as the new theatre, in fact the "director's theatre," left from the imported "regime-changing" theatre. Even the directors were troubled by this realisation. Zsámbéki's *The Government Inspector* unexpectedly splashed right into this blurry, intellectual cocktail of vodka and whisky like a political, professional, and artistic hit! It took two decades to mature, plus 7 years of extra time for the audience to fully comprehend.

Let us recall what Zsámbéki said about Russian drama (the "silent actors" of which consider Shakespeare their national playwright up to this day): "I don't know how one could summarise why people love Russian plays. I would say that Russian misery is very similar to Hungarian misery, but we never had those classic playwrights, who could have written those plays. But it's not just that. […] the most important thing for me when I was directing Russian plays was that raw, brutally honest attitude when confronting reality. Yes, this is exactly it: there is something very decent, fundamental, and natural in these plays that is able to grab and stir people. Moreover, they can resonate with us due to their self-explorational and self-digesting disposition."[7]

This statement was made less than a year after the premiere of György Spiró's successful new play, which had also been directed by Zsámbéki at the Katona József Theatre: *The Impostor* (1983) with the old Tamás Major, the leading figure of state-socialist theatre in the 1950s, in the role of the Master (Tartuffe/Bogusławski). A performance like this used to get the most support under György Aczél's system of "3 Ts" (promote/tolerate/ban).[8]

The Master, who had been superannuated from the Narodowy in Warsaw, did a guest appearance in the invaded Vilnius for a significant amount of money in the title role of *Tartuffe*. The local Poles were looking forward to the performance, and so were the Russian invaders. The Gubernator instructed the director to turn in the giant portrait of Tsar Alexander I at the end when the police officer informs Orgon about the royal pardon so that he can address his humble thanks directly to the tsar. This atmosphere of servility made Bogusławski play a joke on everyone. So, when he met the Gubernator in the interval, he informed him that the actor playing the police officer was planning not to appear to announce the royal mercy; thus, there would be nothing to say thank you for. The actor was immediately arrested, of course, and instead of poor, panicked Orgon, Tartuffe/Bogusławski recited the exaggerated, ridiculous tirades of gratitude to the portrait. The Polish audience was overwhelmed with the ending. Scandal was complete; national pride was satisfied.

Spiró and Zsámbéki gave a final twist to the story worthy of Fellini's camera. The tsar had had himself crowned King of Poland a bit earlier, and there was nothing that could be done about it. The Master took his honorarium and left for Warsaw. In the morning the stagehands were dismantling the set of *Tartuffe*, while the actors were discussing the previous night in the cafeteria. Most found it

[6] Cf. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, "Remembrance of a Landmark in Theatre History: Tamás Ascher: *Three Sisters*, 1985," in *Ambiguous Topicality: A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 177–188 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – Éditions L'Harmattan, 2021), accessed: 20.01.2025, https://real.mtak.hu/164884/1/AmbiguousTopicalityPhiltherofState-Socialist.pdf

[7] PETERDI NAGY, ed., *Kortársunk*…, 61. (My translation – L.P.N.)

[8] See Cristina CUEVAS-WOLF and Isotta POGGI, eds., *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2018).

incomprehensible, even suspicious. "It is impossible that the Master has changed that much," they said. "Why would he make trouble and then just leave?" Then a half-sober stagehand remarked, "We've been sent another Bogusławski!" Suddenly the whole story made sense. Probably it had been a Russian provocation. "We must have had too much on our account. Oranges, bananas! Expensive fur coats in Váci street, then the Solidarity in Gdansk! They had to come up with something other than cheap vodka."

And there was István Horvai, too, who had been to Moscow as a young man and realised how much more the "silent" voices of the Russian "Silver Age" a hundred years ago had known about the world and themselves than we do. He attempted to adopt these ideas on stage in the 1950s and 1960s in Chekhov's Budapest home, the Víg Theatre. Back then the Víg Theatre was called Theatre of the Hungarian People's Army, and Mátyás Rákosi had his own lodge in it. This "elite" was the one of whom he expected to have the European knowledge and "Eastern" sensibility of Chekhov's intellectual heroes. Later he realised how pointless this was, and then he would try to pass these values on to the "uncorrupted" university youth in Veszprém.

Horvai staged *The Impostor* in 1988, shortly after Zsámbéki's *The Government Inspector*. He put the "message" into Rybak's mouth (the young actor who was expelled from the theatre by the Gubernator) and it went like this: "Well, we were here once! And now we move on!" Only God knows where he was going but this sentence remained a call for those of us who remained here: "Keep going! Move on!"

About the same time, at the World Literature Institute in Moscow, similar thoughts were expressed in my fellow aspirant, Mikhail Epstein' thesis on Russian postmodernism. "The earliest postmodern tendencies appear in the semi-western, half-eastern cultures, where the New Age arrived late and was unable to consolidate. They faded away prematurely to give way to the newest postmodern order. [...] Similar vicariousness is present in America too, which absorbed architectural, literary, and artistic styles from all over the world, mainly from Western Europe."[9]

As someone who was living in a village by the Danube, opposite Paks, at the defence of Epstein's thesis, I felt entitled to ask why "mainly" from Western Europe? Why not from Central and Eastern Europe, where people had accumulated significant experience during decades of useless "competition"? After all, this was the very reason why, in that dense atmosphere of the late Kádár era, when György Aczél limited spiritual food coming from the West, we needed the Russians that much! Didn't a few things happen here, in Central and Eastern Europe, in those decades, too? Wasn't it then that we embraced the essence of the Russian version of "middle-class drama," the old/new renaissance comedy of Goldoni, that was defined as "grotesque" by Western theorists and lyrical by Gorky? The greatest Russian playwright, who emerged from Gogol's *Overcoat*, A.P. Chekhov is the one who took this essence to the level that became the standard for drama around the world.

Another fellow aspirant of mine, Viktor Yerofeev, known for his short novel *Russian Beauty*, also wrote his dissertation on Gogol and came to the same conclusion. The secret of the author of *The Old World Landowners*, Gogol, is "the smile that shines through the tears" (Yerofeev). This is what captivated Pushkin and the capital's audience. In technical terms: "atmosphere", "multivocality", "multilevelity", "subtext", and some say "self-digestion". It isn't some cheap sentimentalism or fake humanism but the art of portraying the capability of accepting one's fate that Hungarians (besides their own history) could acquire with the help of Russian writers.

[9] Mihail EPSTEIN, *A posztmodern és Oroszország* (Budapest: Európa, 2001), 66–67. (My translation after M. Nagy Miklós's Hungarian translation – L.P.N.)

Pushkin himself was a victim of a "stealth regime change." You can spot the characteristics of each East-Central European "regime changer" in *Eugene Onegin*, when the author introduces his hero: "He wears a Harold cloak and comes from Moscow".[10] Tatiana refuses him in the end, and most readers would agree with this. Still, it isn't that simple. Yeltsin, for example, did not get along with him and was forced to let Putin take his place. But this only caused more problems.

Undoubtedly, Nicholas I was the first to recognise the secret of the "velvet revolutions": everything must be mixed well so that everything remains unchanged. After sending his military officers, who once occupied Paris, to Siberia, he persuaded Pushkin to move to the capital and be his historian under his censorship. Remember the tsar applauding enthusiastically at the premiere of *The Government Inspector*? Yet, Gogol would rather sit on a "troika bird" and fly to Rome. *Dead Souls*, a new genre, a tragic comedy emerging from Russia ruled by its self-absorbed, petty, narrow-minded elite, was written in Italy. Is there an explanation for this contradiction?

There was a time when Russians and Ukrainians worked together on this contradiction. They found something that worked for a while: "the smile through the tears." This is where Pushkin spotted his "hohol" friend's genius. This is the reason he specifically wanted him to write *The Government Inspector*. And he was right. Either due to the Italian climate or the tsarist scholarship, that sad, yet life-affirming smile is there. This special smile has to radiate on stage each and every time. But Gogol was unable to make it happen again in *Dead Souls*. Simply, he couldn't find the right character. Take Chichikov, who buys up dead serfs as if they were compensation tickets. By the end we truly get to despise him. Or take the old patrician in the second volume, who tries to save this pitiful customs officer from prison. He isn't any better either.

Gogol, the eager "hohol" wanted to identify with the tsarist system at all costs, with the system whose alienation he revealed so brilliantly. He kept on looking for a "positive hero." But this could not change the terrifying truths in the least. And this is sad. "If only once, drunk, he [Chichikov] smiled broadly!" Gogol exclaims. Nevertheless, the Italian landscape, the Italian people, and perhaps the wine too, made him believe that despite all their vileness, Chichikov and his business partners had more vitality than the glorious tsarist apparatus with its opposition together. This contradiction can truly make us smile.

This contradiction is the base for Oleg Tabakov, director of the Moscow Art Theatre, to build his *Dead Souls* around in 2006. The play was dramatised by Bulgakov and took place in Tabakerka (Tobacco) Theatre. In the remake, Chichikov becomes a positive character. "He is the first capitalist born on Russian soil, who realised that one can make money not only by exploiting natural resources", Tabakov explained to the press. He stressed that doing so is more than simple fraud. At the end of the play, when Chichikov fails, it's not the old patrician he visits but his own family in the countryside. On a real troika pulled by real horses, which rumbles through the stage. This sight made the audience applaud as hard as Nikita Mikhalkov's dramatic, yet grossly comical TV version of *The Government Inspector* had, back in 1966.

Russians want to live no matter what happened or is happening to them. They still have the vitality and joy of life needed to survive and play their role in a theatre either called "people's capitalism" or "controlled democracy".

Neither Bulgakov nor Tabakov altered the last minutes of *The Government Inspector*. However, acts are not only created by authors; they are created by all participants of

[10] In Henry Spalding's English translation: "A Russian in Childe Harold's cloak," accessed 13.11.2024, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23997/23997-h/23997-h.htm

the play, too. Both in Russia and Hungary. This kind of miracle took place in Zsámbéki's *Government Inspector* during its unusually long last minutes. The shattered Mayor asks the giggling officers, "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves!" In this moment something happens between the exhausted stage and the frozen audience. On the stage, the apparatus comes to heel and quickly ensures the Mayor of their loyal cooperation. Down there, the audience is looking around puzzled to see who will start to applaud. We realise that this indecisive, speechless crowd above and below is us, and we certainly don't deserve a standing ovation. So, we start to get ready to leave in silence. This is the way we thank our stage partners who have made us realise this. They come out to the silent applause, and we do the real applause. Standing and together.

The regime change took place less than a year later; not the way we imagined. It should have taken many more years, but there was no choice. So it was what it was, cut and dried. Every beginning is difficult. The Katona's *Tartuffe* in 2001 (also directed by Zsámbéki) helped us considerably to find our way around the "real inspectors". His "inspector" arrives as a police officer to convey the pardon of Louis XIV. He is accompanied by guards in smoked glasses. It becomes clear that he is not one of those idealist university "inspectors". He is a smooth-mannered professional who has a great future ahead of him. He shakes hands with the grateful Orgon, handcuffs the troublemaker, and kisses the hand of "the lady of the house". On his way out he helps Tartuffe back on his feet almost casually. We all get the message. "He might be needed again."

I think the tendency will be going further with Zsámbéki's community theatre idea. Everyone knows the scenario, our national fate. We can display and experience it on stage together. This sacred act of strengthening common identity is referred to as "sacred theatre" by director József Ruszt.

Gábor Máté, the Katona's present director, proved to be the "good inspector" Gogol was searching for so desperately. The time has come for the descendants of the former Kaposvár audience to take over and introduce the characters of the future on stage.

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