A Government Inspector

A Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse Production
Reviewed by Jane Turner November 2012

Eeeh by gum! A contemporary and “daft as a brush” northern adaptation of Nikolai Gogol’s ***Revizor***, jam-packed with northern caricatures and northern “blethering” with lots of “faffin’” and the quintessential oomph of a brass band. Crackin’!

Adapted by Deborah McAndrew and directed by Conrad Nelson this fantastic farce was performed by a versatile and talented team of twelve Northern Broadside actors. This classic Russian script has been transposed across time and space from a remote Russian village to a modern-day provincial Pennine town. It works well in its new setting because in essence it is about corruption, which as anyone knows is translatable into any language, any history, any

culture and right into the present day. The new setting – “so remote that even the residents don’t know whether they are in Lancashire or Yorkshire” – could be where you or I live.

The characters are just like any of today’s politicians, journalists, bankers, celebrities, and ordinary mortals like us who avoid tax, take or make payments in cash, fiddle expenses, creatively account or break the legal and moral laws of society. Gogol’s perceptive observations of power and corruption and their impact on human behaviour, written in a different era, are just as pertinent today.

The fun and games begin when the corrupt town officials mistake an upper-class foppish pen-pusher for a government inspector, who they fear will uncover their corrupt ways. Snapper, the flashy, self-regarding civil servant from London takes full advantage of this mistake as the officials try to ingratiate themselves through a range of bribes and “hospitality”, all strangely familiar in the modern day. Jon Trenchard plays Snapper in a superbly exaggerated and frenetic manner, as he revels in the attention and flits and flirts around the stage outrageously.

The crooked town council leader Belcher is played by Howard Chadwick, who has the bloated and red-faced looks and blethering sounds of many a council official and is totally believable, so much so that I suggest he stands for election. A bully and a blusterer, he squeezes his underlings for all they are worth and is enraged at his humiliation when the mistaken identity is finally revealed.

The characters are all played with side-splitting comic genius and there are some impressive gurn-worthy facial expressions and hyper-agitated performances from the actors; Kraig Thornber as Bob Sidebottom, Andy Cryer as Bob Longbottom, Clara Darcy as Philippa Strawberry, Susie Emmett as Annie Belcher and Jill Cardo as Belcher's daughter to name just some of them. However, top marks go to the brass band. By playing an array of brass instruments, the versatile and capably orchestrated cast add that little extra something to this performance, firmly rooting it in the here and now and adding an authentic flavour to the whole show.

In one moment of theatrical expertise, the brass instruments become "the people" who vent their anger at Belcher, the corrupt council leader. In typical Marx-brothers style, the instruments are also used to complement the jokes, adding a squeak, a whistle, a boom, and a beep-beep here

and there, without which I fear, some of the old-jokes would have struggled a bit.

The narrative moves at an invigorating speed and in an ensemble effort with cast members doubling up to play more than one role, picking up, and playing various brass instruments throughout; there is a hyperactive feel which exaggerates the whole farcical feat and tops it off with a dose of OTT, northern style.

A dark masterpiece that held a mirror up to corruption in Russia has been turned into a saucy “carry-on style” satire of modern day corruption and incompetence. It would be funnier if it were not so uncomfortably near to the truth.