

Michael Billington longs to be terrified by Gogol's masterpiece

Defective inspector

THE GROTESQUE

Earlier this year Jonathan Kent brilliantly unearthed the exuberant Gogolian comedy in Chekhov's *Ivanov*. Now he tackles the real McCoy: Gogol's durable masterpiece, *The Government Inspector* (£36), in a new version by John Byrne. But the results at the Almeida are decidedly mixed: the style is one of high-pitched farcical grotesquerie which, while consistently maintained, draws much of Gogol's social sting.

What kind of play is it anyway? A petty clerk from St Petersburg is famously mistaken by bent provincial officials for a visiting bigwig.

The 19th-century critic, Delinsky, praised the play for its "critical realism". Nabokov, on the other hand, said the play was a product of Gogol's fancy: "His private nightmares peopled with his own incomparable goblins." Actually the two views are not wholly incompatible — the play vividly records the paranoia, fear and corruption of Tsarist Russia, while pushing it to satirical extremes.

Here, however, there is only a thin foundation of reality on which to build Gogol's giant farcical structure. Rob Howell's set is a crazy Expressionist affair which gives the impression the local governor lives in a blood-streaked wooden stockade full of tilted furniture.

John Byrne's version also makes the local officials aggressively Scottish: a decision which would only make total sense if the whole play were to be re-cast in British terms. And Ian McDiarmid is encouraged from the start to play the Lord Provost, as the governor is now called, on a note of manic, eye-rolling frenzy. What I miss is the sense of terror that a visitor from St Petersburg would have inspired.

It is only with the arrival of Tom Hollander's petty clerk, Khlestakov, that the comedy starts to exert its mythic power. With his pouting features and reddish Brillo-pad hair, Hollander has the look of a savage infant. Left on his own, he executes dainty little



Tom Hollander as the corrupt clerk, Khlestakov
PHOTOGRAPH: SEAN SMITH

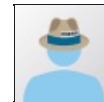
evening. When he asks, in bewilderment, "Who do they think I am?" it is as if he himself is struggling to resolve his own identity. But, though he's well supported by Brian Murphy as a grumbling servant, the lack of reality in the surrounding society works against the play.

When McDiarmid's Lord Provost turns on the audience and snarlingly enquires, "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves!" it is hard to feel any stab of self-recognition. Not many of us inhabit such a grotesquely theatrical world. Having found the element of Gogol in Chekhov, one wishes Kent had discovered the Chekhovian realism lurking inside Gogol.

At the Almeida (0171-359 4404) to January 31 and the King's, Edinburgh, from February 3-7.

twirls in front of the mirror. Once people rush in and flatter him, he enters a realm of capricious fantasy, claiming, at one point, to have written *The Marriage Of Figaro*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Three Musketeers*.

Where Scofield offered us an ageing fop and Rik Mayall a psychotic, Hollander is a babyish predator whose piggy eyes light up as the locals stuff more and more roubles into his pockets. Hollander's marvellous performance justifies the



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