



Farcical helter skelter sparkles in the heart of Scotland

Picture: ALASTAIR KEITH
Tom Hollander: "Foppish"

JOHN BYRNE'S sparkling new adaptation of this 19th century classic of Russian comedy is based upon the idea that local government corruption is a truly international practice. Accordingly, Byrne's new version of Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* is set not in Russia's depths but Scotland's heart. John Byrne transforms Gogol's Mayor into a Scots Lord Provost – and since some local Scottish Labour parties have recently been accused of conduct unbecoming, the play acquires a sharp contemporary tang. The laughter raised is of the farcical rather than comic kind.

Gogol's play veers tantalisingly between these two modes. It can be performed either way or both. But the director Jonathan Kent and his energetic cast attack the play at full tilt, as if it had to be pummelled into a state of non-stop farcical vigour, rising to frenzied piques and peaks of frenzy. A bearded ten Methu-arrind takes the key role of the Lord Provost, and plays him as a maestro of extreme and grotesque emotions. He swings ebulliently from fury to grinning, greasy ingratiation and flummoxed outrage in the face of the young impostor he wrongly takes to be the visiting Government Inspector.

His performance sets the tone for farcical helter-skelter. There's no place for nice shades of comedy amid this grotesquerie. And the acting, which occasionally verges on indecent exhibitionism, is sometimes so broad that it would have difficulty in suiting into some smaller theatres. I prefer farce with a subtler touch, but have to admit that on its own terms the production is staged with imaginative and theatrical gusto.

Bob Howell's stage design dramatically symbolises the rot at the heart of this Scottish city, where every scribed or mangled official from Lord Provost to Postmaster is into fiddling immorally. The set is distorted and disfigured: the floor veers up and down, the walls tilt. Bundles of ancient paper litter the place, and there is the acme of municipal squalor, an unconnected waste pipe snaking around the perimeter.

TOM HOLLANDER'S Khlestakov, the lowly young civil servant with expensive tastes who arrives in town and is taken to be the Government Inspector, emerges as an affected English Sloane amidst a bevy of antique Scots. Elsewhere too Byrne's witty writing elegantly transposes the outline and details of Gogol's original. Hollander's Khlestakov is foppish and amusingly petulant, convinced that life owes him a better sort of living, but he manages a very mild show of astonishment when, expecting to be excused from his hotel, he instead finds the Lord Provost favouring over him.

The performance continues in the same, slightly anemic vein. Treated as the Inspector, Khlestakov ought to rise to alcoholic heights of self-aggrandisement, setting bribes with relish. But Hollander's drunk and bribes scenes are too sober and when he makes play of seducing the Provost's daughter (an effectively grotesque Kathryn Howden) he goes off, typically, at half-cock. Kent though whips his troop of Scots grotesques into constant and energetic gossip, sneer, and anxiety. They are dynamically farcical.

FIRST NIGHT
by
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The Government Inspector
the Almeida



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