



The Shifting Point of Fear and Trembling in Georgy Tovstonogov's "The Government Inspector"

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Abstract: *In 1973 The Government Inspector was staged by Georgy Tovstonogov at the National Theatre in Budapest as an example of the forced friendship between the Soviet and the Hungarian people. Although rehearsals were rather strenuous for the whole cast, the première achieved enormous success and started a dialogue with further mises-en-scène of Gogol's comedy on Hungarian stages from Péter Gothár's and Gábor Zsámbéki's legendary productions in the 1980's to László Bagossy's and Viktor Bodó's versions in the new millennium. The Leningradian director's reading broke and created a tradition at the same time when it tried to discover a certain "plus" that can be set against the well-known interpretation of the play as a simple farce and a satire of country life in 19th century Russia. Tovstonogov saw this "plus" in global and cosmic fear as well as fantastic realism conceived as the principal character and the main style of the production. Turning up as a manifestation of the Mayor's and his corrupt officials' viewpoint obscured by utmost fear, the strange and the visionary thrust the play into infernal circles and presented the plot as the dance macabre of conscience. However, fear with the background of an autocratic regime made different interpretations possible and the production involuntarily initiated the mechanism of doublespeak. What was the privileged point of theatre people and critics alike and how did it vanish among members of the audience? My essay tries to find an answer to this question.*

Key words: *Georgy Tovstonogov, Nikolai Gogol, the theatre of state socialism, doublespeak, reinterpretation of a comedy*

In 1973, at halftime of János Kádár's regime *The Government Inspector* was staged by Georgy Tovstonogov at the National Theatre in Budapest as an example of the forced friendship between the Soviet and the Hungarian people. Although rehearsals had been rather strenuous for the whole cast, the première achieved enormous success and had a long-lasting effect on further *mises-en-scène* of Gogol's comedy on Hungarian stages. Artists of our National Theatre found it unusual that the Russian director had arrived with a complete scenario. He intended to stage his 1972 *Government Inspector* at the Bolshoi Academic Gorky Theatre with a Hungarian cast, not as a copy – as journalists were eager to state – but on a par with his production in Leningrad. The outstanding event of socialist culture was preceded by Tovstonogov's former visits to Budapest, first alone, then with his company. On 7 November 1957, a year after the "Hungarian tragedy" (Ferenc Fejtő) *Optimistic Tragedy* premièred at Petőfi Theatre. Károly Kazimir, a committed socialist put Vsevolod Vishnevsky's play on stage, one of



the first Soviet dramas in Hungarian theatres after 1956. The production was born in a sticky political situation – and to top it all for the 40th anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution – under Tovstonogov’s artistic supervision. The Russian director revisited Budapest in 1969 with his Leningrad production of Gorky’s *Philistines* that most critics compared to Peter Brook’s *King Lear* having shown at the Hungarian capital five years before. In spite of the assertive support of state socialism Tovstonogov let artists of our National Theatre perceive the horizon of world theatre and refresh their acting techniques in the atelier of an exceptional director. He offered such a singular interpretation of the first Russian play ever produced at the National almost a century before that it had diverged significantly from its former theatrical tradition.

Focusing on the topicality of past dramatic forms with their deep and subtle relations to the present, Tovstonogov’s approach to Gogol was determined by an idea of the classic closer to Jauss than to T. S. Eliot or Gadamer. His reading broke and created a tradition at the same time when it tried to discover a certain “plus” that can be set against the well-known interpretation of the play as a simple farce and a satire of country life in 19th century Russia (cf. Tovsztonogov 1966, 51). Tovstonogov saw this “plus” in global and cosmic fear thought to be the main initiator hence the principal character of the play and in fantastic realism conceived as the main style of the production (cf. B.B.M. 1973, 9). They shed such new light on *The Government Inspector* that a critic found the production going far beyond a revival and equalling a world première of Gogol’s comedy (cf. Szombathelyi 1973, 6). In spite of “global and cosmic fear” Tovstonogov did not stage the drama of *Angst* but characterized social rather than existential fear with the background of an autocratic regime. He revealed the author of *The Nose* in the author of *The Government Inspector*, in other words, the writer of fantastic-visionary short stories in the writer of comedies (cf. Ungvári 1973, 11) and he approached Gogol from Saltykov-Shchedrin, Bulgakov and Vampilov i.e. from the rich tradition of Russian-Soviet satiric literature (cf. Molnár Gál 1973a, 7). In lieu of a tamed Gogol a wild and eerie turned up on stage in a different style spectators could expect and were accustomed to. It went hand in hand with a shift in focus on the Mayor and his company instead of Khlestakov and a reversal of the scheme of the play formerly staged as a comedy of errors in which the protagonist led officials of a small town by the nose due to a misunderstanding. Whilst in most productions of *The Government Inspector* a tattling, foppish Khlestakov aptly drew profit from some scary and imbecile officials, this time Khlestakov’s imbecility drew the most cunning and dangerous weapon of sticking to power from the officials (cf. Koltai 1973, 9).

In order to emphasize this reversal and the before-mentioned “plus” the standard translation of the play (created by Dezső and Pál Mészöly for Endre Gellért’s memorable *mise-en-scène* in 1951) was revised and the omitted word “fear” was set back in several places. Altogether some 180 corrections were made and the first version of Gogol’s comedy was also taken into account on the basis of a Soviet academic edition. Considerable omissions were only made in the last two acts: scenes of the



public general i.e. both Khlestakov's and the Mayor's dialogues with the complaining salesmen were skipped. The place and the order of some episodes were also changed e.g. the one following the visit to the hospital shifted from the Mayor's home to a half-cut landau that gave place to a spectacular ensemble scene and Khlestakov's appearance with his valet Osip in the second act was included in a series of scenes with the officials' debate in the first act. While Tovstonogov followed Stanislavski in explaining everything from the dramatic text itself, he organized all 53 scenes of the five acts into 12 episodes and gave them titles. He used this Brechtian method (originally devised for the spectators' orientation) in the spirit of Stanislavski so that his actors could keep the actual objectives (incorporated in the titles) in mind. But a special effect was dislocating the theatre of make-believe as "the voice of the author" could be heard from time to time. When the characterization of certain figures on stage (in fact Gogol's remarks for actors) were recited by Imre Sinkovits and scenes were standing still for a while, spectators could find these remarks fit for the actors so much as if they had been written into the play during rehearsals (cf. Koltai 1973, 10).

Having evolved for the Leningrad production and left unaltered in Budapest the *mise-en-scène* aimed at a subtle display of the interpretation of the dramatic text and was based on a clear-cut conception, not to say unique as regards the literary criticism and the theatre history of the play. (Fantastic realism as its main principle had been unprecedented in Hungary since our tradition of representing the abuse of power in the country had come from Kálmán Mikszáth and Zsigmond Móricz, outstanding writers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Endre Gellért's staging had obviously followed this tradition at the beginning of the 1950s. Cf. Mihályi, 1973, 775.) Occasionally turning up as the corrupt officials' vision obscured by utmost fear, a weirdly impersonal figure embodied the strange and the visionary in Tovstonogov's *mise-en-scène*, clad in black from tip to toe. He was threatening the Mayor as the inevitable fate – an attendant of his crimes, an embodiment of his remorse, an erratic authority greater than him –, until he finally entered on stage as the real government inspector. Appearing unexpectedly at Khlestakov's place or in a jolting buggy high on stage, this "phantom" became visible when the lights went out on other characters for a while as if the ghost of the government inspector on his dark carriage had arrived not into a small town but straight into the Mayor's mind (cf. Galsai 1973, 6). This game of substitution showed exactly who the aldermen really saw: a nightmarish figure in place of the weightless Khlestakov. Sudden changes and transformations had thrust the play into infernal circles and presented the plot as a dance macabre of conscience (cf. Létay 1973, 13). The *mise-en-scène* had two layers: the ridiculous as well as the terrific that had been emerging under the surface of comedy in order to make the audience feel terror as a kind of spiritual reality. Referring to the feudal conditions of tsarist Russia and to the autocracy of Nicholas I, most critics identified terror with the fear of representatives of *an ancient regime in the past*, afraid of being summoned inevitably sooner or later. However, a significant reference to the production in 1989 by director Imre Csiszár (sometime leader



of the National) lets us suppose that unbearable anxiety in Tovstonogov's *mise-en-scène* made spectators experience another fear: fear pervading the 1970s in Hungary and made them hope that representatives of *the present regime* would be summoned inevitably sooner or later (cf. Csáki 1989, 29).

As a crucial characteristic of the *mise-en-scène*, duality (of the layers mentioned before and also evident in the style of acting) involuntarily initiated the mechanism of doublespeak and largely contributed to the reputation of the production. Critics pointed out the accurate reconstruction of the text, the careful realization of stage directions, the psychological orientation and the historic sets and costumes. Mentioned as praiseworthy features of faithfulness to the author, these attributes kept the production within the limits of realist-naturalist staging while others freed it and obscured the clarity of performance style by means of circus, burlesque, tragedy etc. The *mise-en-scène* used distinct forms: its realism was coloured by the uproarious nature of avant-garde-revolutionary theatre (cf. Major 1973a, 13). It combined Gogol with the early tradition of Soviet theatre but translated both into the language of contemporary performance. Specifically Meyerhold's initiatives and his 1926 stage version of the play inspired Tovstonogov's staging in such an extent that it almost paid homage to the great predecessor liquidated by Stalin's regime. In spite of its smart pluralism the production did not become a precursor of postmodern performance since its occasional slow-down and silence as well as its visual and physical orientation did not transgress the limits of logocentric theatre. Besides the detailed and imaginative construction of even the tiniest moments, some critics condemned the decelerated flow of events, highly unusual in a comedy. But Tovstonogov's *mise-en-scène* let duality prevail in rhythm as well: not only did it frequently interrupt energetic, lively and farcical scenes but also enlarged micro situations in order to make the deep structure of interpretation understood.

Tovstonogov followed Meyerhold in the development of acting but approached him from the late Stanislavski. Seeking adequate physical actions and charging them with sufficient emotions, he tried to stimulate the inner life of characters so as to help actors find their life on stage (cf. Saád 1973, 6). Regarding words as a result of actions, he was searching for the starting deeds in all situations. Since he had not known the actors and presumed they would need much time to pick up his method, he showed them every little trick and made them rehearse the first episode for two weeks. Although the style of acting was unusually physical for the Hungarian cast, it did not become biomechanical since all actions were smoothly built in the situations and in the psychology of figures (cf. Koltai 1973, 11). They helped actors elaborate their roles so carefully that reviews referred to character building as the main virtue of the production. Khlestakov became deliberately weightless so that fear of him could become more intense and comical. Instead of a rascal or an astute cheater, spectators saw a light- and shallow-minded young man with an ability to adapt to all situations. A penniless status seeker who had hardly even realised he was taken for someone else and who was also scared, in a different way and of other things than the officials: scared of hunger, a bad run of cards, shortcomings



of social success, except for being caught. The “through line” of this medium-like upstart was based on his not playing but becoming the government inspector by means of the circumstances alone. Reviewers emphasized the bravura of becoming quasi empty and incorporeal in László Szacs vay’s *Khlestakov* though some of them disapproved it, mistaking the actor for his part. Unlike the appreciation of Ferenc Kállay as the Mayor was unanimous since the actor had successively penetrated the surface of comedy to show the awesome downfall of a guileful official but stressed the consequences of going astray instead of the a priori vile nature of his figure. Although Kállay found it rather difficult that Tovstonogov asked for a different kind of acting he had been used to, he could eventually adjust the Russian director’s Mayor to his body and his own habit as an actor. So his distinctive exclamation, pathos and even his fits of anger contributed to the subtle characterization of blindness caused by fear (cf. Molnár Gál 1973b, 40). Critics found the achievement of the ensemble equal to Kállay’s performance but the video recording of the production reveals that fantastic realism could not entirely permeate acting. Instead of fitting in an exquisite satire, some actors could not exceed constrained stylization and a gaudy colouring of his/her character.

Scenery designed by Tovstonogov himself combined visual effects of naturalist staging with others shifting them into another context from time to time. The stage showed the Mayor’s two-storey home with a large parlour and a staircase leading to rooms above, all extravagantly furnished but sometimes hidden by sliding black walls so that new places could turn up suddenly. Hence the Mayor’s house transformed into a haunted mansion in which the black phantom of the government inspector, living in the Mayor’s mind, could show up everywhere in no time, accompanied by eerie musical chords. It was Meyerhold who had abandoned naturalism and developed scenery from the perspective of the characters first, staging their pipe dream (cf. Major 1973b, 7). His 1926 *The Government Inspector* gave visual inspiration to Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* as well, similarly to Gogol’s own sketch for the last scene. Inviting the Mayor to the real government inspector, the tall, straight gendarme with a shako seems to have jumped from this sketch into the production. However, the half-cut landau fantastically full of various people, the flower-basket-like pyramid of men and women reading *Khlestakov*’s letter, the reduction of *Khlestakov*’s room to a few square meters were all showing Meyerhold’s influence. Stylistic diversity was enhanced not only by costumes, make-up and coiffure adjusted to the exaggerated characters – e.g. the Postmaster’s gigantic bowtie, the Judge’s spiky hair and overdrawn features, the frills of lavish clothes on the Mayor’s wife and daughter – but by dissonant and thunderous musical effects, distancing relentlessly from the world of comedy.

Stating that such a smart and highly elaborated production had not been seen on Hungarian stages for long, reviews praised Tovstonogov’s *mise-en-scène* without exception. However, the significance of the production had been revealed in its aftermath as it started a dialogue between *Government Inspectors* in Hungary. Some critics found Péter Gothár’s 1982 *mise-en-scène* in Kaposvár reminiscent in its approach to Gogol to the production of the National almost a decade before and Gothár’s emphases were legendarily underlined



in the 1987 production of the Budapest Katona József Theatre. This *Government Inspector* directed by Gábor Zsámbéki – read as a proof of contemporary Hungarian life in its guest performances all around the world – influenced subsequent *mises-en-scène* in such an extent that some of its ideas could be uncovered in even László Bagossy’s and Viktor Bodó’s memorable scenic versions of the play (Pécs 2002 and Budapest, 2014). They all recalled the 1973 *Government Inspector* of the National Theatre that incorporated contemporary crosstalk inadvertently and became the allegory of the Kádár-regime full of fear and trembling, capital crimes and petty vileness as well.

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