



Michael Giltz, Contributor [BookFilter](#) creator

# Theater: Bribery Is Easy But Comedy Should Be Harder in "Government Inspector"

06/02/2017 02:24 am ET | **Updated** Jun 02, 2017

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

RED BULL THEATER AT THE DUKE ON 42ND ST.

In comedy, the stakes are always higher. Sure, in drama people can die. So what? In comedy, you can be *embarrassed*. And ashamed and mortified and shown to be the vain, venal fool that deep down you know you truly are. And that's much much worse. When you're caught in the act and thoroughly humiliated, you think, "Kill me now!" because death is nothing compared to being seen once and for all.

Indeed, the more something matters to a character, the funnier it is. The Three Stooges can yuk about for hours on end and it's never more than mildly amusing. They're just slapping each other around and the plot doesn't matter in the least. The stakes are less than zero because they aren't invested in anything except poking each other in the eye. But when W.C. Fields wants to take a nap — just a simple little nap on the couch — and the *entire world* seems to conspire against him, when his frustration mounts and mounts and mounts until he's ready to kill for just a minute's uninterrupted peace, we're helpless with laughter.

Perhaps that's why director Jesse Berger's amiable, too-soft revival of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* remains this side of great, despite some strong lead actors and a classic text. This is my first time seeing it so I can't make any useful comparisons between Jeffrey Hatcher's 2008 adaptation and the original. (To start with, I'd have to learn Russian.) But an essential tension, the desperation that drives the best comedy is lacking here. Quite simply, the cast is having too much fun. It means we have fun too, but not as much fun as we'd have if every member of the cast feared for their life.

The story is sadly familiar to anyone living in any country in the world: their government is hopelessly corrupt and incompetent, with officials only out to line their own pockets. In this case, it's a small village in Russia in 1836. They're no more corrupt or incompetent than any other village in Russia (which is to say, spectacularly so). Still, it's a relief to get an early warning that a government inspector is headed their way to make sure everyone is doing their duty. But wait! The strange gentleman staying at the local hotel is in fact that very same government inspector! He's been in the town for days now! Dear god the gig is up...unless perhaps they

can bribe him into looking the other way?



PHOTO © 2017 CAROL ROSEGG

Talene Monahan plays the mayor's daughter, and Michael Urie plays Hlestakov in *The Government Inspector*.

---

The inspector, of course, is not the feared inspector but a hopeless, bankrupt fop (Michael Urie), a young man considering suicide without too much enthusiasm. He's delighted when the mayor pays off his hotel bill, he's thrilled when people shower him with gifts and he's quite happy to have the mayor's wife and daughter flirt with him shamelessly. When the fop (or rather his savvy servant) realizes the mistaken identity that's taken place, he's perfectly happy to fleece a few more townspeople before fleeing for his life.

That's it. When the fop realizes what's going on, he takes off pretty quickly, though his desire to desperately get away might have clashed more with his desire to get more bribes. The businessmen who slip him money worry a little about how to do so, but their timid efforts are successful. The mayor's wife needs to sleep with him. The mayor's daughter wants to sleep with him. Both are happy to do their duty and he's happy to oblige. Doors are slammed and a sense of anarchy builds, but the sense of characters under siege does not. When the real government inspector is unmasked at the end, we just chortle at the reveal. The more comedic feeling of "My God, their every sin has been witnessed!" — or even "uh-oh" — does not arise.

I say this and yet I have a clutch of performers to applaud. Michael Urie has gone from strength to strength in recent years and this comedy amply demonstrates why; he's an appealing center to this storm. Michael McGrath as the mayor comes closer than anyone to capturing the on-edge hysteria of a character out of a

Preston Sturges movie that this production lacks. Mary Testa as his wife is simply too good to ever not be funny — she spins every line with a wicked aplomb. Talene Monahan also has fun as their depressive, parent-despising daughter.

Most everyone else, however, fades into the background. Those four dominate the show and when they have a moment to claim a scene from the madness, they manage to make the moment matter. Too often they're overwhelmed by what feels like a cast of thousands. The exception is Arnie Burton who is both good and bad. He's good as our hero's smart servant. But he's bad as the tired gay cliché of a postman who reads everyone's mail.

Berger is surely responsible for the too-friendly atmosphere that reigns. The tech elements are strong, especially a two-tiered set by Alexis Distler. Act One takes place on the lower level, housing an inn and local offices. Act Two takes place on the upper level which is the mayor's household. They get off a few good laughs about being higher up...and that's it. You can't help waiting (and waiting) for both levels to come into play at some key moment. Yet it never happens, not even during chaotic scenes of peasants and city officials running in and out of every room imaginable, including a closet they pop out of with blithe illogic. The sense of dead space, of a chunk of the stage remaining dormant grows a little oppressive. It feels like an almost shocking lack of imagination (or logistics) on the part of Berger. One can't help thinking of Chekhov's dictum that if you introduce a two-tiered set in Act One, you better use both levels at the same time during Act Two.

Compare this show to the brilliant episode of *Fawlty Towers* loosely adapted from Gogol's play and called "The Hotel Inspector." In it, Basil believes he knows that one of the guests is in fact the dreaded hotel inspector. He goes to maniacal lengths to make sure the man is happy, other guests be damned. Then he decides *another* guest is in fact the hotel inspector and ignores the first, leaving both bewildered as Basil seems like a fickle god who giveth and taketh away with no rhyme or reason.

At the finale, Basil realizes *neither* man is a hotel inspector and sends the more annoying one off in a manner only slightly shy of tar and feathers. Of course, this final travesty is witnessed by the *actual* hotel inspectors, which Basil realizes and despairs over as the credits roll. (You can purchase the full episode [here](#).)

Again and again, Basil switches on a dime from craven to dismissive, from bowing and scraping to high-handed contempt. He displays every trait he fears in others. He is as desperate as a cornered animal. And his sheer terror is almost palpable. “Never let them see you sweat” is good advice when facing your adversaries. But it’s terrible advice for performing comedy. Unfortunately, the cast of *The Government Inspector* remain cool as cucumbers.

## Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public’s UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public’s UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public’s UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

The Liar \*\*\* 1/2

Jitney \*\*\* 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann’s) \*\*\* 1/2

Significant Other \* 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth \*\*\*

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) \*\* (third visit, but \*\*\* if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) \*\* 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) \*\*\* 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) \*\*\*\*

The Light Years \* 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) \*\*\* 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

Miss Saigon \*\*

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba \* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s \*\*

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) \*\*\*

Latin History For Morons \* 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) \*\*\*

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

War Paint \*\*

In and Of Itself \*\*\*

Indecent \*\* 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) \*\*\*

The Antipodes \*\*

Anastasia \*\*

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory \*\*

Oslo \*\*\* 1/2

The Little Foxes \*\*

Groundhog Day \*\* 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) \*\* 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra \*\*

A Doll’s House, Part 2 \*\*\* 1/2

Bandstand \*\* 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) \*\*\*

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) \*\*

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) \*\* 1/2

Rooms \*\*

Arlington \*\*\*

All The President’s Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) \*\* 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) \*\*\* 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret \*\*\* 1/2

The Whirligig \* 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau \*\*

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 \*\*\*

The Boy Who Danced On Air \*\* 1/2

The Government Inspector \*\* 1/2

---

## **REGISTER TO VOTE!!**

It's easy, it's fun, it's empowering.

Here's a nonpartisan site that will allow you to easily access your state's voter registration site.

Are you in New York? You can register online right here.

If you don't register and vote, you don't get to complain.

---

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.*

***Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.***