

The British Theatre Guide

The Overcoat

After Nikolai Gogol
Gecko
Lyric, Hammersmith

Review by Matt Boothman (2009)

Your rational mind may blow a fuse trying to decode a plot from Gecko's reimagining of Gogol's short story, *The Overcoat*. So disengage rationality altogether and appreciate the play's highly developed aesthetic and broad, emotional storytelling instead.

Gecko actively discourages intellectual engagement with the plot. Each of the seven ensemble performers speaks a different language for the duration of the performance, forcing the focus onto action rather than dialogue (unless you're prodigiously multilingual).

The company's onstage world is a gloomy one. Dimly downlit in stark whites and greys through copious stage fog, government clerk Akakki (Amit Lahav) and his colleagues work hunched over tiny desks in isolated pools of light. The furniture is hard iron, the walls are streaked with grime and the ensemble's faces are shaded in stylised black and white.

The only colour in Akakki's monochrome world is the rich brown of his dream overcoat, hanging out of reach as a target to strive for. Akakki believes replacing his battered old overcoat with this fantasy version will open the door to success in his career and love life. This is about the only plot point the company communicates with any clarity.

The majority of the company's effort goes into communicating emotions. Gecko's development and rehearsal process - one which is becoming increasingly popular with new companies - involves every aspect of the production throughout, creating a whole product, rather than a collection of interlocking pieces to be constructed later.

The onstage result is that Akakki's feelings infuse everything, from the lighting to composer Dave Price's Romany-flavoured musical accompaniment to the physicality of the ensemble, simultaneously. However obscure the plot may have become, this kind of



emotional holism ensures that it's clear throughout what we're meant to be feeling, and makes it difficult not to be swept along with Akakki's exaggerated highs and lows.

It's unfortunate, when the emotional trajectory is the only part of the production that comes across with any clarity, that it zigzags back and forth so much without ever really progressing.

Akakki fantasises as a way to escape his dreary workaday life. His fantasies are lit more warmly, but just as dimly, so it's sometimes difficult to follow what is real and what make-believe.

This is part of the play's barmy appeal - is anything real? does anyone know what's happening? - but since Akakki fantasises mostly about how deliriously happy the overcoat will make him, the majority of this short production turns into a rinse-and-repeat cycle of magnified (and therefore simplified) joy and despair that never seems to lead anywhere.

The play is full of the imagery of advancement. The office boss resides on a high platform, and when one of Akakki's colleagues is promoted, his desk is literally cranked up higher to meet him. Akakki climbs the walls to reach his goal, and is pushed off to dangle unglamorously by his crotch when he's found wanting.

People who enjoy theatre principally for the stories will find Gecko's *Overcoat* frustrating. But its rejection of traditional plot structures in favour of visual metaphor and emotional bombast is what makes it consummately theatrical: in any other medium it would gutter and die, but on the stage it shines.