

## DEAD SOULS

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Russia in the 1820s: Chichikov is an ordinary but clever man seeking fortune, who comes up with the unique idea of buying for next to nothing the deeds of property of deceased serfs who haven't been recorded as dead by the administration yet, in order to mortgage them and get a lot more than they are actually worth. Chronicling Chichikov's negotiations and transactions, Nikolai Gogol created a monumental work that takes the form of a portrait gallery whose triviality, at first amusing, soon turns unsettling. The writer seems to be saying that the worst thing about that story isn't that the living speculate on the souls of the dead... but that they all turn out to be corrupted by gambling, alcohol, and greed. Using this historic work, which attracted so much hate that his author disowned it, as a springboard, director Kirill Serebrennikov introduces us to the inhabitants of "N." against a backdrop of plywood, pointing out the flaws of humanity throughout the ages, in Russia and everywhere else. This plywood box is at once a stage for actors who, like puppets, take on the many roles of the novels, and a wretched coffin for those souls whose interests are so morbid they have lost all vitality. With its dark humour and absurd ensemble, this stage is a space-time where human relationships are doomed never to change.

## KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

Kirill Serebrennikov was born in 1969 in Rostov, in southeast Russia. Originally destined to a career in physics, in 1992 he found himself celebrating his graduation in the school theatre. Bitten by the theatre bug, Kirill Serebrennikov began directing several plays shown in Rostov. In 2001, he directed Vassily Sigarev's *Plasticine* at the Dramatic Art and Direction Center Theater in Moscow. His shows—among which Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Maxim Gorky's *The Petty Bourgeois*, Bertold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Zoyka's Apartment*, and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*—thereafter played at the Pushkin Drama Theatre, at the Sovremennik Theatre, and at the Moscow Art Theatre. Kirill Serebrennikov has also directed many operas, in particular with the Russian National Orchestra. He received an award in 1999 for his work in television and in 2006 for a feature film; he has also been the artistic director of the Gogol Centre in Moscow since 2012. His show *The Idiots*, which played at the Festival d'Avignon in 2015, was already about the cruel absurdity of human relationships.

## NIKOLAÏ GOGOL

Born in 1809, Nikolai Gogol wrote many short stories, among which the famous *Diary of a Madman*, and several plays, including *The Government Inspector*. His novel *Dead Souls*, published in 1842 after having been censured and cut by the tsarist regime, is widely considered to be his masterpiece. Celebrated for his talent early in his career, Nikolai Gogol was friends with and inspired great authors like Pushkin and Turgenev, before turning to mysticism after suffering from a deep bout of depression. He died in 1852, acclaimed by many, his books still outlawed by the regime for what they deemed his sarcastic tone towards Russia.

## INTERVIEW WITH KIRILL SEREBRENNIKOV

**Why work on a Nikolai Gogol text this time? And why choose to adapt the novel *Dead Souls* rather than direct one of his plays?**

**Kirill Serebrennikov:** Nikolai Gogol's texts, and the myths that formed around them, represent one of the most surprising phenomena in Russian culture. You can't escape them. That's why we chose Gogol for our first foray into classical Russian literature. There's no equivalent to that literature in any other culture in the world. The "Nikolai Gogol" phenomenon is entirely unique. Lucky are those who can read him in Russian. *Dead Souls* is Gogol's major work, his masterpiece, but also the work of his life. The novel tells of how Pavel Chichikov buys the property deeds of dead serfs in Russian small towns. Thanks to that book, Nikolai Gogol enjoyed fame and success among literary circles as well as the educated elite, but the book also caused him a lot of trouble. He was accused repeatedly of hating Russia. The novel was the beginning of a difficult and contradictory journey. It led to his reflection on the role of the writer in society, and it was the beginning of the torments and errors that led to the publication of *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, in which Gogol disavowed almost everything worthwhile he'd written before.

**Did you adapt the novel for it to work on the stage?**

Yes, I started by writing a play. It wasn't an easy task because I had to condense and concentrate in a rather short form a very long poetic text. Furthermore, in Russia, it's considered tasteful to use the adaptation of *Dead Souls* by Mikhail Bulgakov. I decided to follow a different path, to adapt the text differently, without modernising it or changing its temporality or its setting, but by paying particular attention to its lyrical moments, to the poetic and philosophical passages that distract its protagonist or its reader from the main plot and guide him towards other horizons.

**Do the many roles played by the all-male cast play a part in the way you seem to treat actors like puppets in this show, with a focus on pantomime?**

I wouldn't say that I treat actors like puppets. Rather, we're talking about a kind of performance. I also wanted another famous work by Nikolai Gogol to appear through the structure of *Dead Souls*, his play *The Gamblers*. Both works tackle similar subjects. In *The Gamblers*, a cheater tries to con other cheaters, but they fool him, rob him, and leave him naked. In our version of *Dead Souls*, it's the same story: in the town of "N.," cheaters con each other and play several parts. We have ten male actors who all embody or represent—or at least take on the appearance of—old women, children, drunks, ladies, horses, dogs..., of all the characters and situations of the novel, alternating in anarchic fashion, as if the actors were going through a transformation rather than simply changing roles. This principle of game/con determines the playful structure of the show.

**If all the roles are interchangeable, should we see the characters as nothing more than archetypes, or do they still have some depth?**

We aren't of course talking about a psychological theatre, since the characters are masks. But if you have several actors playing different roles, at some point the audience starts to see who's hiding behind the masks... That's what creates an effect in the show. I'm not going to tell you the whole play, but to me, it's a show about the vacuousness of Russia and about its timelessness, about the void in the Buddhist sense of the word; a void that is full, intense, that can devour us, a void from which everything is born and in which everything can disappear.

**Is the choral dimension of the play a sign of hope or an affirmation of a collective decline?**

The choir is the voice of that void. It's neither a loss nor a hope: it's the voices of the dead. That's what Heiner Müller is talking about when he says that "the mission of

the theatre is the liberation of the dead." The music of our show was written by the Russian composer Alexander Manotskov. It is based on Gogol's *Lyrical Digressions*, philosophical texts about Russian poetry, and performed by a choir made up of all the actors. It could therefore resemble the songs that punctuate the plays of Bertolt Brecht, but here the question "O Russia, what do you want from me?" remains unanswered.

**Do you think the town of "N." stands for Russia, as Nikolai Gogol himself said, or for the whole world?**

Nikolai Gogol speaks about Russia, but about Russia as an integral part of the world. I'm convinced that Russia, even if it remains unique as a country, is part of the civilised world in the broadest sense of the world, and that it experiences all the problems of our civilisation.

**Is that why the scenography you chose seems to have no exit?**

It's not exactly an impasse. Our scenography is made up of a plywood box which is indeed closed and could represent an image of the void. The ideas and meanings that are born from that space are a question of interpretation, and it's not my place to interpret my own show...

**If we laugh of the absurdity that rules human relationships and the ties between men and the law, be it divine or social, how can we hope for a change, an improvement?**

I don't think that the role of the theatre is to show you how to change the world, but rather to laugh of the absurdity of existence and of all those archetypal characters, both from a social and psychological point of view. All the heroes of *Dead Souls* are recognisable, because they exist in every country, they constitute Gogol's universalism. All those characters aren't typically Russian; you can find a Chichikov, a Plyushkin, a Sobakevich, a Nozdryov, or a Manilov everywhere, in every country, every culture, every mentality. Laughter creates a distance from ourselves which can save us sometimes.

**Do you think that Chichikov, the protagonist of the novel, is a victim?**

I see Chichikov as a smart guy, a very rational man who's looking for happiness. This aspect of the character is particularly highlighted in my direction: his attempt to reach happiness by any means necessary. All he wants is to be happy. It might be the consequence of a childhood trauma, or of his loneliness and feeling of abandonment. It's a guy who's always looking for happiness and can't ever find it. In fact, if you look at the story closely, Chichikov doesn't do anything illegal. He's just a modern manager, pretty banal, and very reasonable. But as Nikolai Gogol put it, it is because "all the Earth is a liar," because everything is but lies, that Chichikov becomes a victim of circumstances and, in the end, the victim of his own entrepreneurial spirit.

**Isn't there a single noble soul among the dead souls he encounters?**

In Nikolai Gogol's world, there's no ray of hope. There's not a single character who might have a noble soul, or be honest in the slightest. They're all bastards. When asked who the main character of his play *The Government Inspector* was, he said, "laughter." It's the same in *Dead Souls*. I'll answer you kind of like Gogol did. What matters most is the impression, the effect the show, the play, or text produces in the minds of the audience. That's the goal of my direction.

**How can we be and try to remain living souls in a world of dead souls?**

I don't have an answer to that question. You have to always remain human, try your best not to be a bastard.

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AND...

#### UTOPIA MANUTENTION

*Le Disciple* by Kirill Serebrennikov (VOSTFR / 2015 / 1h58)

Preview on July 21 at 11:00, meet Kirill Serebrennikov

#### THE NAVE OF IMAGES

*Idiots* (extract), directed by Kirill Serebrennikov (2015), July 22 at 14:40, église des Célestins

*Les Âmes mortes* de Nikolai Gogol, translation Henri Mongault, is published by éditions Gallimard, collection Folio. Books of Nikolai Gogol are available at the Festival bookshop at the église des Célestins and at the Chartreuse bookshop in Villeneuve lez Avignon

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#AMESMORTES  
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