

RadioDoc Review

Volume 1 • Issue 1 • 2014

2014-04-03

Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: Review 1

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Abstract

This finely wrought fusion of fiction and realism is an illuminating, enchanting, listening experience. On one level it can be heard as a playful riff on absurdism, on art, by a clever comedian (Tim Key) who harbours an obsession with one book and its author: Gogol's *The Overcoat*. And yet on another level it offers a wry and gentle insight into, among other things, the nature of the human condition. Key's tone is intimate and confessional as he attempts to deconstruct the meaning (or meaninglessness) of Gogol's story. The program wears its structural architecture lightly, combining the element of surprise (why *not* include an interview with a sports commentator best known for his sheepskin overcoat, in a program ostensibly about a 19th century Russian short story), with humour, subtle allusion, and intriguing interplay and blurring between fiction and fact. Like Gogol's protagonist in *The Overcoat*, Tim Key is also tantalisingly unreliable. There's a gentle warmth and brevity to the humour, so that none of the rich 'cast' of interviewees, who walk through Key's increasingly rollicking *mise-en-scene* is presented as caricature. The selection and placement of extracts from *The Overcoat* reveal a deft hand, and they work well to seamlessly build this melding of life and art. It's probably more comedy than literary feature – and yet its appeal is that it is, skillfully, *both* of these things. It's a program which could appeal to those who might otherwise be uninterested in the subjects of writing, Russian history, and the origins of absurdist humour.

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Keywords

Gogol, Russian Literature, Tim Key

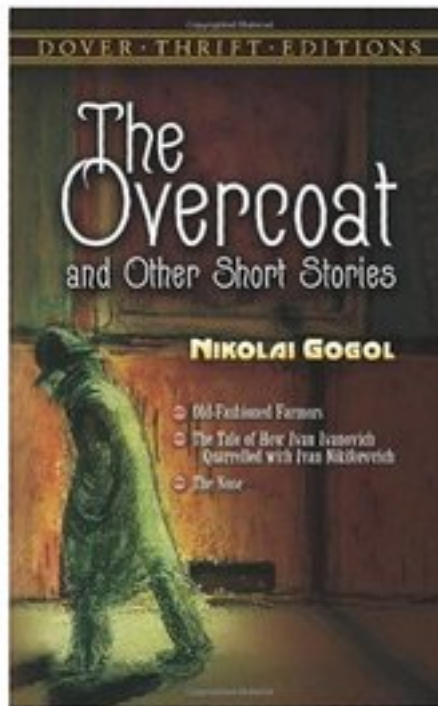
Recommended Citation

Rayner, M., (2014) "Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: Review 1", *RadioDoc Review* 1(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v1i1.11>

Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat

Writer, Tim Key, Producer, Steven Rajam, UK, BBC Radio 4, 2013, 28mins

Featuring contributions from Russian experts Donald Rayfield, Maria Rubins and Konstantin von Eggert, plus East End tailor and Master Cutter Clive Phythian, 'father of alternative comedy' Alexei Sayle and football commentator and sheepskin coat-wearing icon John Motson



Reviewer: Michelle Rayner

How could a documentary, ostensibly about a 19th century short story penned by Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, end up offering such an illuminating, enchanting, listening experience and one so richly laced with comedy? Clearly, when it involves the comedian, and master of that particularly British kind of self-deprecating humour, Tim Key – who happens to be obsessed with Gogol's slim little work *The Overcoat*.

I haven't read the story at the centre of this documentary and know only of Gogol through his novel *Dead Souls* and his play *The Government Inspector*. But Tim Key and BBC Cardiff producer Steven Rajam's audio feature does not require any prior knowledge of the Russian writer; in fact, part of the cleverness, the dexterity, of the feature lies in the way in

which its structure and exposition silkily (or is that 'sneakily'?) mirrors the events in Gogol's story, as well as beautifully echoing its absurdist tone, all the time inflected with Key's gentle humour and self-parody.

So, just like Gogol's protagonist in *The Overcoat*, the narrator in this radio documentary (comedian and writer Tim Key) is also a tantalisingly unreliable one – he's the listener's guide and our venturer through Gogol's story and the author's life. Key's tone is intimate and confessional, as he attempts to deconstruct the meaning (or meaninglessness) of the story, with which, he confides,, he is rather obsessed. It is the only memorable thing, we learn, from the Russian studies course that Key took at Sheffield University and this all-consuming interest provides the program's narrative premise. It also enables Tim Key, as narrator, to cleverly blur the lines between life and art, reality and fiction – the apotheosis of this being Key's active morphing with his literary anti-hero, Gogol's protagonist Akakiy Akakievich (which translates, we're told, into English as something like 'shit shoe' – a clear indication of the mordant humour of both Gogol and Key). This transposition between fictional character and our narrator is built up relatively subtly (although there have been, especially for those familiar with the story, a number of hints and clues scattered across the seemingly ad-libbed script) until Key, like Akakiy Akakievich, begins to harbour a desire for a new overcoat.

The program works playfully on a number of narrative levels - the primary one, the premise, if you like, being our narrator's obsession with a literary work, and the reason why this story has such a hold on him. Woven through and across the 'quest' that Tim Key undertakes in the course of the program is the life of Nikolai Gogol himself, and his protagonist, Akakiy Akakievich. Key meets a series of interviewees: scholars of Russian literature, a tailor, a contemporary Russian journalist, fellow comedian Alexei Sayle, and a sports presenter well known (in the UK) for his on-screen attire – a famous sheep skin coat (he conversely, has never heard of Gogol, nor the story in question). The 'realism' of this first layer of the program, whereby we follow Key in his daily investigation (marked out sonically for the listener through Key's use of diary-like entries, a technique which, again, mirrors the journal-like entries that Akakiy Akakievich makes, and which, like those of our fictional protagonist, become increasingly nonsensical) in order to understand the hold that the story has over him, is steadily undermined: for instance, the listener is let into the artifice of Key's own story, when the woman we are led to believe is his real-life wife or partner, turns out to be an actor. It's a surprising and artfully employed comic twist; it functions to 'bring the listener' in to the artifice and absurdity that colours this program, and yet it also acts to create a subtle 'game' between listener and narrator, as the audience works through this finely wrought fusion of fiction and realism, skilfully rendered through the powerfully imaginative capacities of the audio form.

Tim Key and his producer Steve Rajam either struck it very lucky, or else were extremely strategic, because they've pulled together a selection of interviewees, from academics to furriers, all of them metaphorically large enough to leap out of the audio ether, and appear as fully embodied characters, complete with some memorable idiosyncrasies, in their own right. They appear to be nonplussed by the occasionally obtuse, nonsensical question or comment that Key throws at them – and some of them might well have been dreamt up by

Nikolai Gogol himself (one of the literary academics has a long white Gandalf-like beard, which Key tells us, in a narrative aside, *is just crying out to be shorn off and made into mittens*).

And yet (and this is another of the program's strengths) there's a gentle warmth and brevity to the humour, so that none of the rich cast of interviewees who walk through Key's increasingly rollicking *mise-en-scene*, is presented as caricature; indeed, each person we meet seems to be in this program for a very good reason – whether it be comedian Alexei Sayle, with his Eastern European origins, or the Russian journalist, with a perspective on Gogol's relevance to contemporary Russia. There's a sense of artful ease about the way in which each person appears and their positioning in its seemingly freewheeling structural trajectory – as events and actions are driven along by Key's playfully candid narration. This sense of a lack of contrivance in the documentary's exposition is a terrific conceit; the program wears its structural architecture lightly, combining the element of surprise (why *not* include an interview with a sports commentator best known for his sheepskin overcoat, in a program ostensibly about a 19th century Russian short story?), with humour, subtle allusion, and the intriguing interplay and blurring between fiction and fact.

The selection and placement of extracts from *The Overcoat* reveals a deft hand, and they work well to seamlessly build this melding of life and art. And it's the interleaving between Gogol's story and the fairly simple one involving Key, which provides the spine for the program, and allows it to build up towards the moment when Tim Key, in his journey to understand the power of Gogol's writing upon him, starts to embody the single obsession which drives his fictional anti-hero; just like Akakiy Akakievich, Key starts to desire a new overcoat. This mirroring of the fictional story with the documentary's 'story' is built up subtly and slowly and never feels overplayed. Listeners who are familiar with Gogol's story might consider this a somewhat contrived conceit, but for me, it was a comic masterstroke. And why shouldn't Key have a new coat; after all, he tells us in a tone loaded with bathos and mock self-reproach, the one he's chosen will cost him all of the fee he that he received for the making of this documentary. It's an act, and an admission, which wryly acknowledges the universal and timeless human fallibility over material desire, our need for comfort, and yes, beauty too; the very same concerns which seem to drive the protagonist in Gogol's story.

The music, a mix of eastern Euro gypsy 'loco' punk, and well-placed *ersatz* elevator muzak, is used sparingly, but works well as junctures and to underscore the absurd, freewheeling tone of the program. It also sat well against Key's narration (which, to my ear, never slipped its comic register, and even more importantly, the humour was never over-worked). The documentary does move around too, sonically, with some location recordings – streets, shops – which help to maintain a sense of pace, as well as keeping listeners imaginatively alert to scenes, the characters, and the ideas which flow seemingly free-form across Tim Key's path.

While the tenor of Key's comedy, his self-mocking style, might grate with some listeners, it's hard to argue that it's not perfectly pitched against the central [or is that a mirroring]

sub-plot: Gogol's short story and the historical context in which it was written. There may also be criticisms of the fairly conventional structure employed: a strong, central narrator, a cast of interviewees who walk in and out of the program, the limited use of sound. But this is offset by the cleverness and dexterity of the writing, the use of surprise, of character, of the up-ending of even some of those very conventions of radio (when we learn, for example, that the scenes featuring Tim Key's real life domestic world in the program are not in fact verite audio recordings, but rather a confected fiction complete with an actor playing his wife). All these aspects, along with its beautifully pitched comic tone, eclipse any sense of being straitjacketed by the conventions of form.

The documentary walks a nimble, finely balanced line. On one level it can be heard as a playful riff on absurdism, on art, by a clever comedian who harbours an obsession with one work and its author. And yet, on another level, it offers a wry and gentle insight into, among other things, the nature of the human condition. And it's also a genuinely informative portrait of Nikolai Gogol, his short story, and the historical context in which it was written. Probably more comedy than literary feature – and yet its appeal is that it is, skilfully, *both* of these things – it's a program which could appeal to those who might otherwise be uninterested in the subjects of writing, Russian history and the origins of absurdist humour.

Finally, it's Gogol's slim little volume, *The Overcoat*, that emerges triumphantly out of this documentary as an artful, taut, and timeless piece of writing. Akakiy Akakievich's desperate, dark yearning is counterpoised against a bleak nihilism that feels very reminiscent of some contemporary literature, particularly that coming out of a once-mighty, now declining, global empire – the United States.

So, after being immersed in Tim Key and producer Steve Rajam's engaging documentary, what else is there to do but head out and grab a copy of Gogol's masterful little work. I just need to find my overcoat first.

AUDIO of Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat [HERE](#).

MICHELLE RAYNER joined the ABC in the late 1980s, and has worked across many forms of radio broadcasting, including science and arts-based programs. She's been working at Radio National's History Unit since 1995 and became its Executive Producer in 2003. Michelle took part in a producer exchange program with the BBC and made programs for Radio 4 and Radio Scotland in the UK. She has an MA in History and in 1999 she won the NSW Premier's History Audio-Visual award, for a documentary about the history of the Blue Mountains.

