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Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: Review 2

Abstract
The documentary *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* is based on the short story *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol. The Ukrainian-born Russian was one of the major authors of the 19th century, who tried to demonstrate what Tsarist Russia entailed. *The Overcoat,* published in 1842, is a satire of the civil service and petty officialdom. It is about how an external object transforms a person's self-esteem and others' opinions of a man of low rank.

As the program unfolds, the boundaries between fact and fiction become more blurred, and the weave between St Petersburg and London, between Akaky Akakievich (protagonist of the story) and Tim Key (the documentary's narrator) becomes tighter and tighter. Right from the start, Tim Key's own threadbare jacket becomes part of the documentary, used surprisingly and humorously, furthermore, in that it emphasises Key's personal relationship to Gogol and his short story. He takes a small, concrete thing, which is easy to follow dramaturgically, and places the other elements along this storytelling thread. The literary text counterpointed against Tim Key's narrator creates a fine contrast within the program; it is playful and with liberatingly little intellectual discussion of a great novella. The distinction between Gogol and Tim Key, between fact and fiction, becomes increasingly blurred. Steven Rajam manages to build up his program in such a way that everything gets its due pay-off as the program unfolds. To make people laugh is harder than making them cry. *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* is bolted together in an informal, surprising, smart and witty manner.

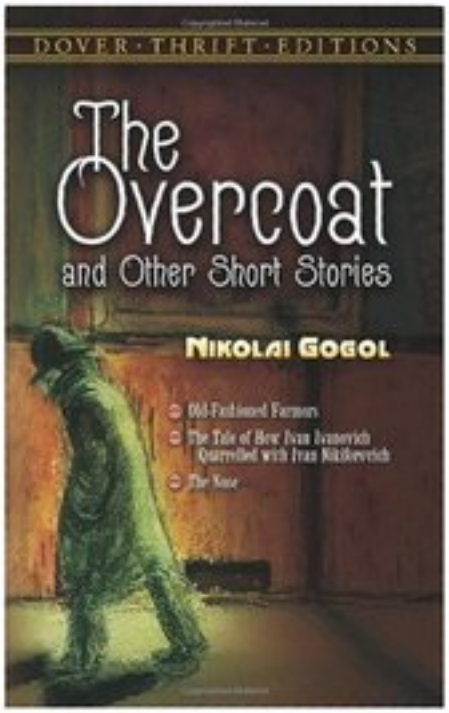
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Keywords
Gogol, Russian Literature, Tim Key

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Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat

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



Reviewer: Kari Hesthamar

I heard *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* for the first time during the International Feature Conference (IFC) in Bergen, Norway, in the spring of 2013. Steven Rajam had received the Åke Blomström Stipend for young, promising documentary makers, and therefore represented his program at the conference. It is interesting to listen to radio documentaries along with others. One immediately feels whether the program 'works' or not; programs clearly emerge with their weak and strong points and everything becomes lucid: a bad cut, a weak point in its dramaturgy – that stands out in an auditorium, even more so than on radio, which is often percolating in the background. You rapidly sense if the program seizes the audience, in the same way one feels if a film captures the audience in a movie theatre. *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* thrilled its discerning audience in Bergen. A congregation of over one hundred radio professionals from Europe, USA and Australia straightened up in their chairs (it's hard to listen to ten foreign language radio documentaries every day, while reading manuscripts translated into English), opened up, embraced it and laughed aloud.

The documentary *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* is based on the short story *The Overcoat* by Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol. Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1 April 1809–4 March 1852) was a Ukrainian-born Russian author, especially known for the so-called Petersburg short stories, among which *The Overcoat* is one of the most famous. Gogol was one of the major authors of the 19th century who tried to demonstrate what Tsarist Russia entailed and how it ought to be developed. When he was nineteen years old, he moved to St. Petersburg, where he worked for

some years as a clerk in a government office. In the evenings he studied art. He had difficulty finding his place in the social world and couldn't understand why so much emphasis was placed on a person's social background. *The Overcoat*, published in 1842, is a satire of the civil service and petty officialdom. It is about how an external object transforms a person's self-esteem, and others' opinions of a man of low rank. The protagonist buys a beautiful overcoat of high quality, but as the story progresses, he ends up mentally unbalanced.

Steven Rajam's documentary *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* has a distinct narrating voice who accompanies the listener throughout the program and introduces him/her to Gogol, while at the same time playing with the format. He takes a great Russian short story and makes it available, and surprises us with humour and unexpected turns. As the program unfolds, the boundaries between fact and fiction become more blurred, and the weave between St Petersburg and London, between Akaky Akakyevich (protagonist of the story) and Tim Key (the documentary's narrator), becomes tighter and tighter.

I write this review without knowing either Tim Key, John Motson or the other people in the documentary, since I live in Norway. I am inclined to believe an English audience gets an extra layer through their prior knowledge of some of the cast of characters. Having said this, I still get a picture of both Tim Key, East End tailor and Master Cutter Clive Phythian, 'father of alternative comedy' Alexei Sayle, and football commentator and sheepskin coat-wearing icon John Motson. They come through with charm, witty lines and tiny fine stories – much of it thanks to Tim Key's disarming way of meeting them.

Right from the start Tim Key sets the tone:

My name is Tim Key and I am a documentarist. Documentarian. I made a documentary last year, anyhow. I can't remember what the word is for someone who's done that. An important person in the Radio 4 buildings decided I could make another one and I asked if I could do it about 'The Overcoat' Not my overcoat. No, this is about Nicolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat'. A short story I read fifteen years ago that had an enormous bearing on the heavyweight Russian scribblers who followed him.

Tim Key presents himself here as a documentarist of lean experience, up against one of Russia's most significant authors. It is liberating and humorous and promises the listener linguistic pleasures as well as the fact that here anything can happen. He is also intensely concerned with *The Overcoat*: it's his favourite short story. Love of a story has strong narrative power, which means that I as a listener am willing to follow him pretty far along the road.

Then follows a short presentation of the novella and the question of what it actually is about: 'there is sufficient evidence to support almost any interpretation!', says Russia expert Maria Rubins. This underlines the absurdity and means that the documentary, like the short story, can move off in any direction. Tim Key promises to take us on an odyssey, during which he wants to find out more about *The Overcoat*:

Audio clip 1, Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: (27secs)

Right from the start, Tim Key's own threadbare jacket becomes part of the documentary, used surprisingly and humorously, furthermore, in that it emphasises Key's personal relationship to Gogol and his short story. He takes a small, concrete thing, which is easy to follow dramaturgically, and places the other elements along this storytelling thread. It happens to be

thus, that it is always easier to remember and follow what is placed along a storytelling thread, than general reflection and discussion. It is therefore smart to place the major themes among this tiny and personal history of the threadbare jacket. Additionally it presents us with a small-framed picture of Tim Key, which makes it easier for the listener to relate to him and join his odyssey.

The use of experts joins stylistically with the rest of the tone of the program.

V/O: I thought I'd go and see a professor…

PROFESSOR: It's one of these obscure saints' names and it sounds a little like shit (laughter). Literally it means 'no-shit': A-kaky

V/O: This is Donald Rayfield: Russian scholar. Gogol translator. And with a beard so white and soft you want to shear it from him and make it into mittens.

DONALD RAYFIELD: It rolls a little like Dickens: his surnames always tell you about the character. He's called Bashmatchkin: shoe

TIM: So shit shitovich shoe?!

DONALD RAYFIELD: Yes, soft shoe

TIM KEY: It's not a great start to life, is it…?

DONALD RAYFIELD: No, no…and he's doomed

The literary text counterpointed against Tim Key's narrator creates a fine contrast within the program; it is playful and with liberatingly little intellectual discussion of a great novella. To the extent the novella is discussed, it is in the form of a language in which the listener is invited in rather than excluded. Maria Rubins says that Gogol 'demonstrates total incompetence as a storyteller', while Tim Key has made only one documentary previously.

The clips with football commentator John Motson for my part are highlights. He is a surprising, funny choice – and has a passion for exclusive, tailored jackets (he finds salvation in a jacket, like Akaky, the protagonist.) So much of Motson's character emerges through these short passages:

Audio clip 2, Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: (40secs)

As an educated man, Professor Donald Rayfield evades guessing the price of Tim Key's jacket, and in the next clip we hear John Motson, who has paid 2,000 pounds for his tailor-made jacket. Gogol changed the life of comedian Alexei Sayle, well told through a concrete story from when he was 14 years old, and the school he attended staged the comedy 'A Jewish Merchant'. The documentary does not venture in depth into any of the characters, nevertheless we get a feeling of them emerging as personas in the excerpts where they appear, and not as interview objects. They present themselves both through their manner of speaking and through small stories. Tim Key makes everyone comment on his own jacket, a deliciously pervasive element:

Audio clip 3, Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat: (35secs)

The distinction between Gogol and Tim Key, between fact and fiction, becomes increasingly blurred. An example is when Key visits tailor Clive Phythian, and the scene between them is interwoven with Russia experts and excerpts from *The Overcoat*. There, the actual overcoat is turned into an object of love, and the *The Overcoat* into a love story. By this time it has also been revealed that Tim Key is single. It is a turning point and a high point in the story when Key lets himself be talked into buying a tailored coat costing 3,500 pounds.

Soon after, Russia expert Maria Rubins explains that Akaky Akakyevich has his overcoat stolen, which is an alarming and dramaturgically excellent twist just after Tim has used his pay check on his first tailor-made coat. Over all, the documentary has many fine twists and minute dramaturgies which in the end blend into a greater entity. Among others, there is a fine little line with the wife, who after a while turns out not to be the wife after all, only a hired actress, but who nevertheless in the end might have married Tim Key due to the fantastic jacket he has spent his entire salary on. I simply love these small understated turning points! Steven Rajam manages to build up his program in such a way that everything gets its due pay-off as the program unfolds. There are no leads presented that do not later get picked up.

The last third of the program says something important about Russian society today; by this point I feel a need for this depth. Konstantin von Eggert (broadcaster and Russian soul expert) says: 'I think that to understand Gogol it's enough to be born unfree.' This section shows the serious undertone in the absurd and comical and lends the program more gravity. There is a lot in *The Overcoat* which is just as true in Europe today as it was in 19th-Century Russia: about the impersonality and sometimes casual cruelty of office life; about vanity and self-delusion. That von Eggert's own tailor in fact calls and interrupts the interview is a wonderful and surprising end to this sequence.

In good films and narratives the protagonist doesn't change character through the story, but the character becomes more and more extended, revealing himself. The same applies to Tim Key:

Madrid. 30th February.
I'm a writer these days. As well as a documentarianist.
I also write poetry, comedy, text and flirtatious post-its to my cleaner. And I can see Gogol's influence on it. I try to tinker with reality; I try to tease, to cajole, and I comment and obsess with my own material: <u>his tricks.</u>

This is what he has done throughout the program. It is the program's creator who has decided on the material, not the material that has dictated to the program creator. Tim Key also demonstrates that here is a man who knows a lot about literature.

All lines in the documentary come together at the end: John Motson, 'half-man, half-sheepskin', is the incarnate expert on exclusive jackets, but not on Gogol, it turns out, and the actress /wife thinks the jacket is so fabulous that she says to Tim Key, 'I'd genuinely marry you'. Tailor Clive Phythian finishes the coat for Tim Key and is given the low-down on *The Overcoat*. He empathises keenly with Akaky and, appropriately, gets the last words in the program: 'oh, bloody hell!' - a deeply felt contemporary appraisal of Akaky's lamentable end.

To make people laugh is harder than making them cry. *Tim Key and Gogol's Overcoat* is bolted together in an informal, surprising, smart and witty manner.

KARI HESTHAMAR heads the radio features department of Norway's National Broadcasting Company. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the Prix Europa (1999, 2004, 2006) and the Prix Italia (2003), and is the author of the book *So Long, Marianne. A love story (*2008). Kari has university studies in French, sociology and journalism, and has worked for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, NRK radio and television since 1996. She often gives workshops around Norway. She lives on a peninsula on the outskirts of Oslo with her family.

