

A Royal Exchange Theatre production in association with Told by an Idiot



# TOO CLEVER BY HALF

By Alexandr Ostrovsky, adapted by Rodney Ackland

*Told by an Idiot*

## RESOURCE EXTRA

Following the success of YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU in December 2011, the Royal Exchange Theatre are again working in collaboration with acclaimed theatre company Told by an Idiot to create TOO CLEVER BY HALF.

### WHY THIS PLAY?

TOO CLEVER BY HALF by Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky was written in 1868 and has previously been translated as ENOUGH STUPIDITY IN EVERY WISE MAN, THE SCOUNDREL and THE DIARY OF A SCOUNDREL. Alexander Ostrovsky was a leading figure during the Russian realistic period and his plays often addressed the conditions of the emerging merchant classes.

Told by an Idiot's Artistic Director Paul Hunter expressed the company's desire to do something completely different from YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU, a show which he described as 'full of optimism and the joy of life.' For Hunter, TOO CLEVER BY HALF is the 'polar opposite of that and is deeply cynical. At its heart is the problem of being honest in a lying hypocritical world. Therefore, it feels particularly timely to be telling this story now.'

### CREATING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

The design, by Laura Hopkins, consists of a painted floor which is an artistic rendering of the pages of the diary belonging to the main character, Gloumov, in the play. The alternative title of the play is THE DIARY OF A SCOUNDREL and the diary is almost like an additional character, pushing the story forward and creating plot points and twists. Laura Hopkin's design puts the diary centre stage and the space becomes a giant canvas on which to play. The main character, Gloumov, may even write on sections of the floor afresh during each performance.

The space is also filled with mirrors, as this is a world where characters are obsessed by their own self image and yet ironically often fail to see what is staring them right in the face. There are no permanent fixtures in the space and any set

pieces that are needed, like a nest of tables, are on wheels allowing actors to whizz the furniture in and out of the space. In this way the company of actors can create a chaotic yet fluid approach to the storytelling, creating locations as and when they need them.

The aim of director Paul Hunter is to really maximise the space and keep it as open as possible, allowing all entrances and exits to be easily accessed by the actors and for them to be used in an inventive way, 'The idea is that there should be a sense of chaos outside of the module.'

For this production the time-period has been shifted by some 100 years to the glamour of the 1960s. Placing the play in the 1960s shifts it from its classical setting and challenges an audience to think and draw connections between the play, its original time-period, the setting of this production in the 1960s and the present day world.



TOO CLEVER BY HALF model box images courtesy of designer Laura Hopkins

## Interview with Debbie Korley

Told By An Idiot have a unique way of approaching classical text. At various points in the rehearsal process we caught up with 'Idiot' Debbie Korley who plays Mashenka and Golutvin and asked her about the experience of working on TOO CLEVER BY HALF.

### AT THE END OF WEEK ONE...

Tell us about the characters you play  
"Mashenka is a young woman who wants to go out in the world but the protective element of her aunty [Madam Tourousina] frustrates her. Mashenka wants to meet people and every time there's a chance to do this the aunty is always there to scupper those plans.

Golutvin is a very mysterious character. He comes in for a couple of scenes and really monopolises situations, makes an impact and then disappears again. He likes to think of himself as sophisticated but actually he hasn't got two pennies to rub together.

What have you been doing this week?  
The first week of rehearsals has involved getting to know the building. All of us are really excited to be here. We began the week with a meet and greet where we met everyone in the building and Paul Hunter our director really emphasised the collaborative nature of this show. We also went into the space and we're all really excited about it. We got to watch THE BIRTHDAY PARTY and could see how versatile the space is and how you can use different elements. The space up and above is just as important as the floor-space on stage and Paul is really interested in using every ounce of the space, in fact he's said there are more surprises that we don't yet know about and I like to be surprised as an actor.

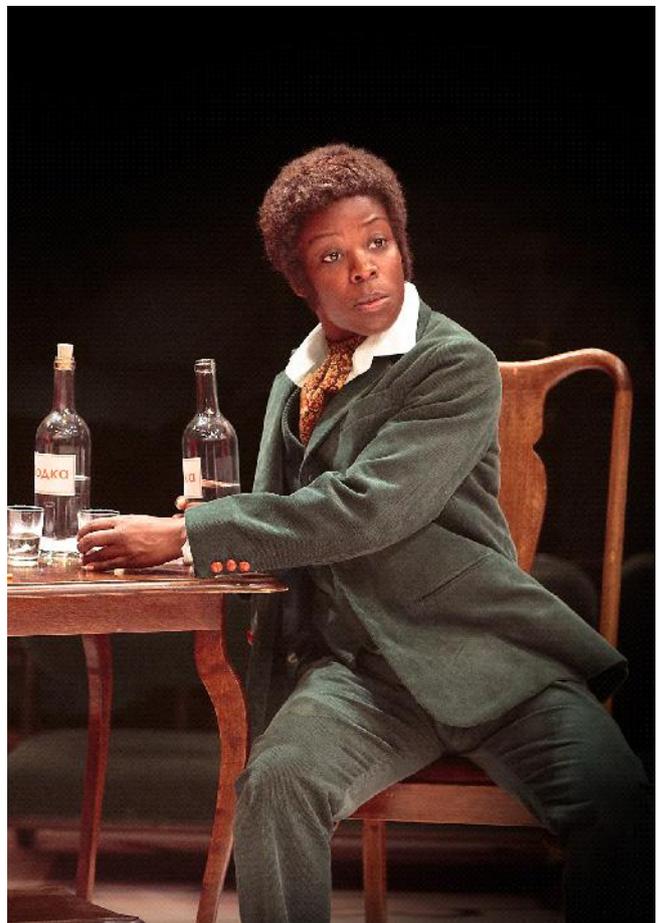
Normally you might sit down and do a read through on day one, did that happen?  
We didn't read through until the afternoon of the second day, which is very unusual. On our first afternoon we played ball games, lots of ensemble games and lots of improvisation games.

The ball games have been interesting because as well as being about coordination they've also been about influencing ideas for some of the scenes. For example, we played a game where you had to throw the ball up in the air, turn around, sit down and then try and catch the ball again. Because this production is going to be very physical, Paul is very interested in our bodies being active even when we're not speaking on stage. So, the idea of throwing the ball, sitting

down and then catching it and that space between throwing and catching and all the things that happen in between - Paul wants that energy to be in our bodies on stage even when we're not speaking. It helps us to have this embedded electricity. Also, because the play is in the round it's about making sure we're acting with our whole bodies, including our backs, so that the audience don't mind if they're looking at our backs - they should still feel connected to us.

What sort of work have you done on the text?

We don't use our scripts in the space. The stage management have been amazing and they have been feeding our lines to us so that we can be on our feet the whole time and that gives us a freedom to play. It can be a tiny bit daunting to be without the script in the first week but it does give you freedom as an actor. Paul has mapped the space and we've been working very quickly this week. We've already worked the whole of Act 1 and Act 2 Scene 1.



Debbie Korley as Golutvin (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

How are you approaching playing a man and a woman in the play, and is it significant?

At this point it isn't too significant. In terms of Golutvin, I'm playing with different physicalities. I'm playing him a bit older, and the design has given me an idea as to what kind of character he is. It's helped me think about how I'm going to speak and move across the space. He's wearing a corduroy 1960s suit and he takes himself far too seriously. I've played with lots of different versions of him and the version I'm settling on is that he has quite a funny physicality when moving around the stage and also when stationary. I'm trying to think about the way he speaks and to place that, and that's where the challenge is because the character of Mashenka is very delicate and well spoken while I see the character of Golutvin as quite brash in places. In terms of Mashenka's physicality, I'm trying to connect her to the aunt and take on some of the mannerisms of Carla [Carla Mendonça, who plays Madam Tourousina].

When you're doing physical work how does that manifest itself - do you try leading with certain body parts or find the animal for your character or is it more intuitive?

In this stage of rehearsal Paul really wants us to play and allows us freedom to follow our instincts. Sometimes we use mimicry in a scene where we simply copy each other to see what that unlocks.

Some people have been using clowning techniques. For me, Mashenka is the straight character but the situation is funny, whereas other characters have the licence to really play and be massive physically. The challenge for me with Mashenka is to stay true to what Mashenka is even though it is tempting to join in with the playful comedy that the others are exploring.

What are the challenges ahead at this stage in your process?

I need to get the script down over the weekend so that I can really move ahead. It will be difficult to go ahead with script in hand and we have to be off-book a week on Monday [beginning of week 3 of rehearsals].

#### AT THE END OF WEEK THREE...

Last time we met, you were said you were still discovering Golutvin. How is that process coming along?

I think we've turned a bit of a corner with Golutvin. The process of costume fittings has continued to help with that. We have about two or three fittings a week. Trying the mock up of the suit on - the waistcoat, the jacket - has really help me to embody his physicality much more.

The suit is quite neat, and Golutvin doesn't have much money, so I've found more of a slumped persona in the suit. Then, when he feels he has

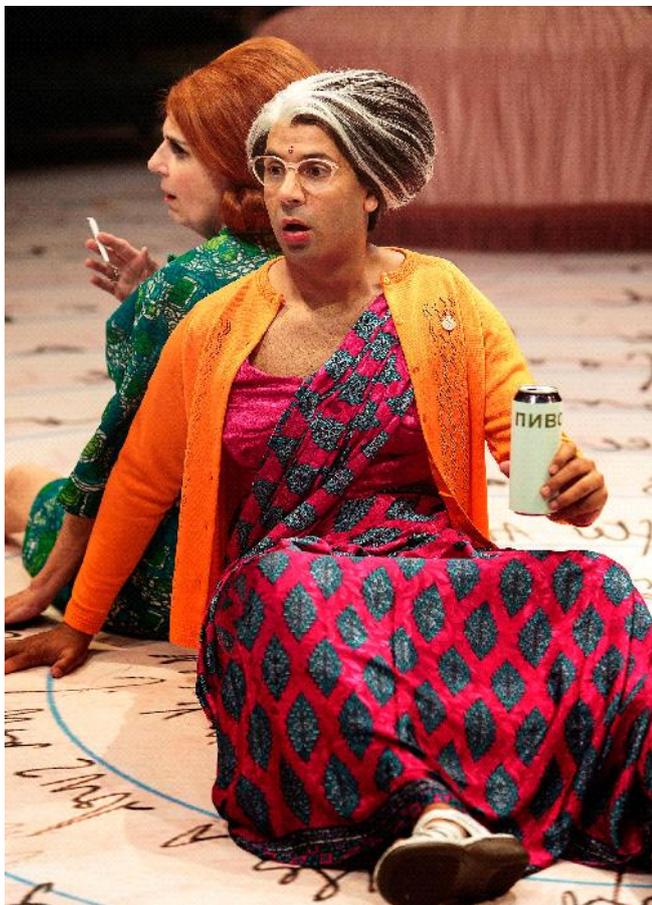


TOO CLEVER BY HALF (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

to stand up to people the shoulders come up and I think that's funny because obviously I'm 5ft 2 and I see Golutvin as 5ft 10. Playing the character with that kind of thinking - that he's very defined and dignified and that he is a tall man but the reality is that he's a small man and that's how people see him.

The fittings have helped me to play and try things out, for example, where the pockets are on his suit and what that does to Golutvin physically. The pockets on the blazer and the trousers are quite unfamiliar because men zip things in the opposite ways so I am having to think about things in the opposite way to what I would normally do.

I've really enjoyed that part of the process, investigating him through his clothes and adding that into the character. We were even thinking about having something in between his legs because I have to have the costume quick changed [quick change costumes are usually carefully made, sometimes with Velcro seams allowing the actor easy access in and out of the costume] and every time I sat down with my legs open the Velcro kept coming apart and I felt that might be quite a good thing to add in but that's something we'll have to play with in the tech and find out if it works.



(l to r) Penelope Dimond as Lubinka and Nitin Kundra as Matriosha (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

In week one you'd been into the space to watch THE BIRTHDAY PARTY. By now you will be rehearsing in the module, how are you finding it?

It's quite rare to be in the space so soon and it really helps to prepare us for the performance. [At the Royal Exchange, from week three of their rehearsal period, the company moves from the rehearsal room to the theatre module and works on top of the set of the current show, in this case THE BIRTHDAY PARTY].

It's very friendly, a very welcoming space. However it is also really disorientating. The piece is very speedy and we're placing ourselves on the stage so that everybody gets a piece of the action. Paul's using the vomms [entrances] a lot and we're moving around in the space a lot as well. A challenge has been working on a scene in detail in the rehearsal room and then revisiting the same scene in the space: you get completely disorientated.

Paul is also encouraging us to sit up in the upper circle and experience the space from up there as he really wants us all to be aware of the whole audience - so, not declaring our lines but once in a while saying 'come to my world, you're part of this show too'. I think we're starting to embrace the space into our bodies now and feeling relaxed in there.

Are you still finding time to play in the rehearsal and if so what sort of games and exercises have you been doing?

For some people, they're doing clowning exercises - opposition exercises. So for example, if someone is standing up then the other person has to be sat down. The game is about seeing how many times you can swap physicalities.

Another game is where you're talking with someone in a scene and start copying their gestures so that it looks like you're really engaged with what they're saying. We have used that rehearsal technique for specific scenes and if the exercise has really made a scene grow then Paul has decided that we'll keep it in. It makes the audience feel like both characters are really listening to each other and not listening with just the head and the ears and the brain but also listening with the whole body.

It's really delicious to see those characters doing that physical work and within that you find a natural comedy while maintaining a truthfulness to the character's emotional situation.

Last time we spoke, Paul had mentioned there might be 'surprises' for the company, have there been any you can tell us about? We've just had a note session following a run and there's a scene that has been completely changed around like a jigsaw, so instead of one character having two entrances they've joined it into one, so half of that scene has been re-jumbled. As I mentioned before, we were all off-book quite early and so now the challenge will be keeping up with that scene.

On Monday we did a first stagger through and then we did a more defined run of the first half and it was like being introduced to the play - because we work scene by scene and you only work with the people who you're in scenes with - during the run you get to see what the others have been working on and you see a set piece that's been created by other members of the company and you feel 'oh my gosh I can't believe that they've all created that'.

With regards to Golutvin, I think I've pitched it at a level now where I didn't think he was going to go. I thought he might be quite naturalistic and now he's bigger than that, I wouldn't say cartoonish but some people probably would, so that was a bit of a surprise to me that I could go there and that it seems to work from people's reactions and so now I can keep building on that.

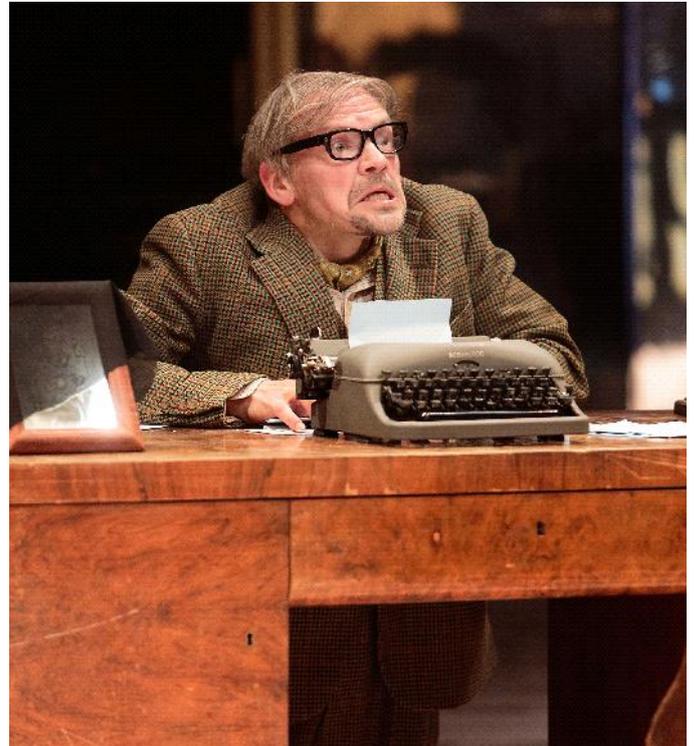
It's also been a surprise to discover how different and eclectic the company is in terms of theatrical backgrounds. Some people are quite classical, some have done lots of comedy, some have done lots of physical theatre. Paul wanted a rich diverse company and it's great to have all those skills in the room working on a classical text together. Paul is very inclusive and likes people to offer things that we can try out and hopefully they'll work. He's been very generous in that way and that's been lovely.

#### DURING THE PREVIEWS

The preview performances are a hugely important part of any rehearsal process. They are full performances that take place in front of an audience and are watched by the full creative team (director, designer, lighting and sound designer and any other creatives who have worked behind the scenes on the production). Although one might argue that the work is never finished and a production grows and develops during its entire production run, the preview performances are very much seen by the full creative team, including the actors, as a chance

to keep working and to refine the performance. This is particularly true on a show like TOO CLEVER BY HALF that really relies on its audience to complete the event."

With many thanks to Debbie Korley for her time during rehearsals. We will be speaking to Debbie Korley again following the preview performances - please check the website for this interview.



Nick Haverson as Kroutitsky (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

TOO CLEVER BY HALF runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 10 July to 17 August 2013.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833  
[royalexchange.co.uk/tooclever](http://royalexchange.co.uk/tooclever)

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INTRODUCING... TOO CLEVER BY HALF  
Wednesday 17 July, 10am - 12pm  
Pre-show workshop for schools, community groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.  
£6/£4 (concessions & group leaders)  
Book at the Box Office or on 0161 833 9833.

IN THE LOUNGE  
Thursday 1 August, 6 - 7pm  
Join TOO CLEVER BY HALF director Paul Hunter as he returns to the Exchange for another RET and Told by an Idiot production.  
Relaxed, informal and FREE.