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**Nikolai Gogol's**

# **THE OVERCOAT**

**Adapted for the Stage**

**by**

**TIM KELLY**



**Dramatic Publishing**

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TIM KELLY

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(THE OVERCOAT)

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# THE OVERCOAT

A Play in One Act  
For a flexible cast of 4 Male, 4 Female  
Or 5 Male, 3 or 4 Female

## CAST OF CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

PERSON OF CONSEQUENCE	.....a police inspector filled with self-importance
DUNYASHA	.....cleaning woman
AKAKY AKAYEVICH	. copying clerk in a government office
HEAD CLERK	..... minor bureaucrat
ANNA	..... tailor's wife
PETROVICH	..... tailor
LUKERYA PRALINSKY	.....Akaky's landlady
RUFFIAN*	.....a thief
SONYA**	..... Person Of Consequence's wife

PLACE: The city of St. Petersburg in 19th Century Russia.

TIME: Winter.

\* PETROVICH can double in the role of RUFFIAN

\*\*ANNA can double in the role of SONYA

Running time: Approximately 40 minutes.

## STYLE OF PRESENTATION

*THE OVERCOAT* is designed for very simple production. There are only a few stage properties—small desk and stool, optional clothes tree, a shabby chair. Most everything else, from hand props to Akaky Akayevich's overcoat, is pretended, imagined. Period clothing is only suggested or done away with. [See Production Notes.]

## STORY OF THE PLAY

Here's Nikolai Gogol's eccentric little masterpiece adapted into a lively story-theatre presentation. Period costumes aren't required. In 19th Century Russia, a humble clerk in the Ministry of Legal Records, Akaky Akayevich, scrapes and saves to purchase a handsome new overcoat. The garment, trimmed in cat fur, transforms him into a person who matters. The future is most promising. When the overcoat is stolen by a ruffian, Akaky is driven nearly mad and dies of pneumonia. But wait! Does Gogol have a surprise! Akaky refuses to accept his fate. He returns from the grave and takes out his anger by snatching fine overcoats from the backs of good citizens! No wonder St. Petersburg will never be the same. Gogol, who gave the world *The Inspector General*, mixes comedy, farce and drama with amazing skill. The characters, from the pompous Person Of Consequence to the tailor's fish-frying wife, are delightful types and great fun to portray. Excellent contest choice. Because the production requirements are practically nil, it's ideal for touring. Bare stage.

## THE OVERCOAT

**SCENE:** *UC is a desk and stool [or chair] in an obscure government office. Optional clothes tree by desk. DR is a shabby chair that indicates a room rented by AKAKY AKAYEVICH. The rest of the open stage represents various locales in the city.*

**AT RISE:** *The audience notices a man standing DC facing UR. This is PERSON OF CONSEQUENCE, a rather pompous police official, filled with self-importance. He seems to be watching for something. Senses the audience watching him. Turns.*

**PERSON OF CONSEQUENCE.** Ah. I thought I heard someone. No need to tell me why you're here. You've come to inquire about the ghost. It's usually about this time that the apparition appears. (*Points UR.*) Over there, in the dimness. The Kalinkin Bridge. Not much fun meeting up with a walking corpse, I can tell you. Still, in my position, I must keep up with all things. It's expected with a person of consequence. And, indeed, I am such. I even have a medal from the Czar. My wife Sonya keeps it shining bright. If you must know, I have a special interest in this "peculiar" situation. You see, I've met the ghost. Twice. That is, I met him once when he was alive, and again when he was not alive. Have I made myself perfectly clear? I am a man of few words. Mostly I say "How dare you? Do you know

to whom you are speaking? Do you understand who I am?" Such brevity is the mark of a person of consequence. (*Shivers.*) Brrrrrr. The air is biting and the wind is whipping up. Coldest winter St. Petersburg has known. The elements have no mercy. (*Another shiver.*) Brrrrrrr. (*Takes out pocket watch, checks the time.*) Almost teatime. My dear friend Karolina Ivanovna is at home on Tuesdays. Splendid. I shall drop in and pay my respects. She is always eager for news of the horrid specter. He doesn't seem anxious to appear today. Ah, well, we must be patient. (*Puts away pocket watch and casually strolls out, L.*)

(*As he exits, DUNYASHA, a charwoman, enters from R, supposedly carrying a mop and pail. She sings as she sets to work.*)

DUNYASHA.

A LITTLE SPREAD OF EARTH, MY GIRL  
I'LL BUY FOR THEE,  
AND PRETTY LOVELY FLOWERS, MY GIRL  
I'LL SOW FOR THEE.

(*AKAKY AKAYEVICH, a copying clerk, enters from R. A rather nondescript young man. He has one overriding passion—his work.*)

AKAKY. Good morning, Dunyasha.

DUNYASHA. Good morning to you, Akaky Akayevich.

AKAKY. It's bitterly cold outside. (*Blows on his hands.*) My fingers feel like icicles.

DUNYASHA. No wonder. You're not wearing gloves.

AKAKY. I must have lost them in the street. A horse almost ran me down. When I'm thinking about my work everything else suffers.

DUNYASHA. That's all you ever think about. Your work.

AKAKY. I'll go to the flea market on Sunday. I should be able to find a new pair of gloves for a few kopecks.\*

DUNYASHA. For a few kopecks you might find a pair of gloves, but they won't be new. (*AKAKY takes off his coat and hangs it on the clothes tree.*) Your coat, young sir.

AKAKY (*brushing garment with his hand*). What's wrong with it?

DUNYASHA. Why, it's hardly more than a worn-out blanket held together with a few threads. It isn't even serviceable. It's all tired out. I heard the head clerk say he was going to speak to you about it. (*Anxious to avoid the subject, AKAKY sits behind the desk and begins to copy some document.*)

AKAKY. I'm a busy man, Dunyasha. I can't waste time in idle conversation.

DUNYASHA. If you say so, young sir. I suppose you'll be having your usual thing for lunch? Cabbage soup.

AKAKY (*attention on his copying*). Yes, yes. Of course. Why not? It's hot and it's cheap. What a question.

DUNYASHA. Would you like a piece of beef in it? Or a sliver of red onion?

AKAKY. Doesn't matter. I never notice the taste.

(*DUNYASHA shrugs and, with her mop and pail, exits, passing HEAD CLERK who enters from L. He holds some documents/papers in his hands.*)

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\* Coins of small value.

HEAD CLERK. At your desk before anyone else. I admire your dedication, Akaky Akayevich. Bravo!

AKAKY (*without lifting his head*). Good morning, sir.

HEAD CLERK. Good morning, good morning. See what I have for you. (*Puts papers in front of AKAKY.*) I know you enjoy copying documents when they're addressed to an important person.

AKAKY. It gives me great pleasure, sir.

HEAD CLERK. Not only are these documents addressed to an important person, you'll find them a challenge. An interesting little case. (*AKAKY studies the papers for a moment. HEAD CLERK moves to clothes tree, runs his hand over the coat, frowns.*)

AKAKY. These documents are *definitely* a challenge, sir. Better let me copy something else.

HEAD CLERK. Come, come. That's no way to get ahead in the world.

AKAKY. I trust you have no reason to be dissatisfied with my work.

HEAD CLERK. On the contrary. No one can copy letters as wonderfully as you. You've never made a single mistake. But you could do with a splash of ambition. Surely you think of promotion?

AKAKY. Not really, sir. I am content with my fate.

HEAD CLERK. Extraordinary. The other clerks find you something of a novelty. They're always teasing you, aren't they?

AKAKY. Yesterday Leonid Trofimov threw shredded paper over my head and shoulders and told me it was snowing. Day before that Michail Ilyich put water in my ink pot. Why can't they leave me alone?

HEAD CLERK. I shall speak to them.

AKAKY. I would prefer that you didn't. I don't wish to make trouble.

HEAD CLERK (*not unkindly*). Forever the humble little clerk, eh?

AKAKY. Why must you insult me, sir?

HEAD CLERK (*offended*). You misunderstand. You have me all wrong. You must think of me as your brother. I am delighted you are here in my department. No clerk loves his work as you do. I appreciate that.

AKAKY. I request only to be left alone. To think only of my clear, evenly written lines.

HEAD CLERK. As you wish. (*Another look at the coat hanging on the clothes tree.*) You must do something about this. It won't do, I'm afraid.

AKAKY. Sir?

HEAD CLERK. This coat of yours. Why, it looks like nothing more than a dressing jacket. Shabby, too. Each clerk in a government office should look his best. It's a reflection on the department. It reflects on his immediate superior. I don't like you telling people you work here when you're wearing something as disreputable as this. No, no, it won't do, Akaky Akayevich. I have my position to think of.

AKAKY. I hadn't noticed it was so shabby.

HEAD CLERK. You seldom notice anything practical. (*The coat.*) So thin. It can't give you much warmth. (*Picks up documents/papers he brought in.*) I'll take back this "interesting little case" and give it to another clerk. One with ambition. I'll find you something more routine. (*Moves L.*)

AKAKY. Thank you, sir.

HEAD CLERK. You really are an unusual fellow. (*Insists.*) But you must do something about that dressing jacket. (*AKAKY finishes some line with a flourish. He stands, steps to the clothes tree and puts on his coat.*)

*(AKAKY moves D as ANNA PETROVICH, the tailor's wife, enters from DL.)*

ANNA. Ah, it's you, Akaky Akayevich. I haven't seen you in some time. Not since my husband mended your overcoat.

AKAKY. That's why I am here, Anna Petrovich. *(He coughs, waves a hand in front of his face.)* It's so smoky. What are you frying?

ANNA. Only fish. *(Calls offstage.)* Client!

PETROVICH'S VOICE. Coming!

ANNA. I never mind the smoke from cooking fish. It gets rid of the black-beetles.

*(AKAKY coughs again. PETROVICH enters. Tailor's measuring tape around his neck, toothpick in his teeth.)*

PETROVICH. Why do clients always show up at dinnertime?

Ah, well, can't be helped. What can I do for you, Akaky Akayevich?

AKAKY. This overcoat I'm wearing—

PETROVICH. I hope you don't want me to mend it again.

ANNA. I'd recognize that coat anywhere. You've had it a very long time, haven't you?

AKAKY. We're old friends. *(As conversation plays, PETROVICH circles AKAKY, eyeing the coat. He's dubious.)*

PETROVICH. You should part company with this old friend. He's fast becoming an enemy.

AKAKY. It's a little worn on one shoulder.

PETROVICH. A little?! You're making sport of me.

ANNA. Looks worn all over.

PETROVICH. Take it off. *(AKAKY starts to remove the coat. PETROVICH assists.)*

AKAKY. It shouldn't take much work. It's a good coat.

PETROVICH. Might have been at one time. Years ago.

AKAKY. It's just a bit dusty.

ANNA. Dusty? It's downright dirty. Hardly fit for a cleaning rag. A good washing and it would fall apart.

AKAKY. The cloth is good.

PETROVICH. You're easily convinced. (*Holds up coat.*)  
Look at this, Anna. You can see straight through the cloth.

ANNA. Tsk, tsk. You really should have something better. A man in your position, working for the government.

PETROVICH. No, it can't be repaired. Pointless. It's a wretched garment. The stuff is quite rotten.

ANNA. If you put a needle in the cloth, it would give way.

AKAKY. Well, then, uh, strengthen it with something. A patch or two.

PETROVICH. No! There is nothing to be done. Take it back.  
I'm a tailor, not a miracle worker. (*Returns coat to AKAKY.*)

AKAKY. Nothing to be done? Then, what am I to do!

ANNA. It's as clear as the nose on your face. You must have a new one.

AKAKY (*horrified*). A new coat!?

ANNA. I don't mean a new nose.

AKAKY. Where am I to get the money?

PETROVICH. Where does anyone get money these days?

ANNA. You must have savings. A little something put away.  
You make a decent salary, don't you?

AKAKY. A pittance. Barely enough for one. (*Uneasy.*) How much would a new overcoat—

PETROVICH. Cost?

AKAKY. Yes.

PETROVICH. In my shop, one gets value for a ruble.\* Hmm-mm. Let me think. An overcoat of the best quality—you'd want no less. Hmmm. Fifty rubles or more. (*Horrified, unable to control himself, AKAKY screams and drops to his knees as if taken with a heart seizure.*)

AKAKY. *Auuuuugh!* (*ANNA and PETROVICH assist him back to his feet.*)

ANNA. Now, now. There's no need to carry on.

PETROVICH. You're making a spectacle of yourself. The world isn't coming to an end.

AKAKY. Fifty rubles or more! The world might as well be ending. *Oooooohhhhh...*

ANNA. Would you like a glass of hot tea? I won't charge you for it.

AKAKY. Repair it somehow, Petrovich. I beg of you.

PETROVICH. Repairing that pitiful garment would be a waste of my time and your money.

AKAKY (*a deep sigh*). So there it is...it really is so unexpected...what a circumstance.

PETROVICH (*sniffs*). Something burning?

ANNA. Merciful heavens! The fish! (*She exits DL. PETROVICH follows. AKAKY puts on his "old friend" and crosses toward the chair, R.*)

(*LUKERYA PRALINSKY, his landlady, enters below chair.*)

LUKERYA. You won't be as comfortable in this room as you were in your old room. (*Indicates chair.*) The chair is stained and the bed in the sleeping alcove is only a cot.

AKAKY. My needs are modest, Lukerya Pralinsky.

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\* A silver coin, worth 100 kopecks.

LUKERYA. This is a room for a monk. Not for a promising young government clerk.

AKAKY. You always flatter me.

LUKERYA. Someone has to. You need more spirit.

AKAKY. I am content the way I am.

LUKERYA. You'll have to climb more stairs.

AKAKY. A small sacrifice. By taking this room I'll be able to save several rubles a month.

LUKERYA. This overcoat you're having made must be something quite special.

AKAKY. It will be. Petrovich has promised. It won't come cheap.

LUKERYA. Quality never comes cheap.

AKAKY. That's why I must be careful with my money. Every time I spend a ruble I put aside two kopecks. Every kopeck helps.

LUKERYA. So they say.

AKAKY. I won't burn candles in the evening and I'll walk on tiptoe when I come to cobblestones.

LUKERYA. To save the leather on the soles of your shoes?

AKAKY. It will be a small sacrifice.

LUKERYA. If you don't mind looking a bit foolish.

AKAKY. I'll send my linen to the wash less frequently. It won't hurt me to skip lunch now and again. The savings will add up.

LUKERYA. I hope so. For your sake.

AKAKY. There's rumor of a government bonus. The head clerk is certain it'll come through. I'll have the money when the overcoat is ready.

LUKERYA. Still you ought to get out more. Play cards and gossip, like the other clerks. It'll do you good.

AKAKY. I am content—

LUKERYA. —the way you are. Yes, I know. Mind the stairs when you climb in the dark. The top two steps are shaky. *(She exits R. AKAKY crosses to clothes tree and hangs up his shabby "dressing jacket" of a coat. Sits behind his desk and begins to copy some document.)*

*(HEAD CLERK enters from L.)*

HEAD CLERK. Scribble, scribble, eh, Akaky Akayevich?

AKAKY. I think of it as painting, sir. Painting fine lines of letters on canvas.

HEAD CLERK. A rather lofty sentiment coming from you, I must say. I imagine this overcoat you're having made has something to do with it. There's nothing like a new overcoat to make one feel like a new man. You'll see, you'll see.

AKAKY. A month ago I went to the shops with Petrovich the tailor. We bought some calico for the lining. Stout quality. Handsome to look at.

HEAD CLERK. Don't forget to purchase a fine pocket handkerchief to go with the overcoat. It will give the garment tone. *(He turns to exit.)*

AKAKY. Sir?

HEAD CLERK *(turns back)*. Yes, what is it?

AKAKY. Is there any news of the government bonus?

HEAD CLERK *(glum)*. Oh. That. Didn't I tell you? I thought I had.

AKAKY *(crestfallen)*. You mean there's not to be a bonus?

HEAD CLERK. Well, uh, that is to say...*(Suddenly breaks out in a wide smile.)* Ha! Ha! You really are a goose. No wonder you get teased. Of course there's to be a bonus. In fact—it has arrived.

AKAKY *(excited)*. Arrived?! You mean it's here, sir?!

HEAD CLERK. In my pocket. Ha, ha. (*Produces some coins, tosses them atop the desk.*) Rubles, Akayevich! Rubles! God bless the Czar! Ha, ha. (*He exits. Quickly, AKAKY picks up the coins. He's in a frenzy.*)

AKAKY. It's more than enough! More than enough! (*He shoves the coins into a pocket and quickly gets into his "dressing jacket."*) I must go to Petrovich at once. My overcoat! My overcoat! My fine new overcoat! (*He crosses DC.*) Petrovich! Petrovich!

(*ANNA enters DL.*)

ANNA. Oh, it's you again. I've told you before—you can't have the overcoat unless we're paid in full. You're an honest man, I have no doubt. Still, business is business.

AKAKY. But you don't understand, Anna Petrovich. I have the money!

ANNA (*doubtful*). All of it?

AKAKY. Yes! Yes!

ANNA. We don't accept partial payment. It's all or nothing with the firm of "Petrovich and Wife."

AKAKY. See! See for yourself! (*He digs into his pocket and holds out the money. ANNA can hardly believe her eyes.*)

ANNA. Husband! Husband! Quickly! An important client!

PETROVICH'S VOICE. Coming! (*ANNA is almost as excited as AKAKY. She scoops the coins from his hand.*)

ANNA. Payment in full!

AKAKY. Yes! Yes!

ANNA. Marvelous!

(*PETROVICH enters.*)

PETROVICH. Important client? It's only Akaky Akayevich.