For State Theatre’s contribution to Come Out and as a spritzy opening to the 2005 season, newly arrived Artistic Director Adam Cook has assembled a talented cast to stage an energetic revival of a European classic. The Government Inspector, Gogol’s tangled tale of mistaken identity and civic corruption offers plenty of chances for funny business and Cook makes the most of his opportunities.

Even before the curtain rises the cast assembles in front of the babushka doll footlights for some loony tunes klezmer. Dressed in peasant kitsch and gulag casual they give us a lugubrious rendition - on trombone, clarinet, false beard and accordion - of the Kiss standard I Was Made For Loving You. The festivities continue with some Soviet rap until someone is heard to say - we better get this party started.

Designer Dean Hills has produced a decor in faded pinks and greens that is as pompous as it is down-at-heel. The public officials are full of self-importance but their reality is as threadbare and chaotic as the dilapidated offices bursting with musty files, and drawing rooms designed for avoiding eye contact. The costuming, in colliding plaids, colours and styles, however, takes the production irrevocably into visual absurdity, capped off with the vertiginous topiary of the hair styling.

This also defines the performances, excellent though many of them are. As Khlestakov, the idler mistaken for a visiting dignitary who is at the centre of the confusion, Paul Blackwell gives a delicious performance as he chortles and minces while his pockets are stuffed with banknotes and the mayor’s wife and daughter (Jacqy Phillips and Annie Maynard in rouge and industrial strength taffeta ) compete for his affections. Blackwell’s invention is fully evident - in the scenes in the inn when he cajoles his servant Osip (performed with a tincture of Les Patterson by the resourceful Geoff Revell) and later when he gormlessly greets an especially unctuous mayor (played by Don Barker with more hair product than a Crows midfielder).
Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky, the misinformed social reporters who set off the false alarm in the first place, were reduced to the power of one when, on opening night, Michael Habib as Bobchinsky, after some very funny window-peering business in Act II, injured his shoulder in a staged prank with an unhinged door. His stoicism and presence of mind was so impressive that few guessed anything was awry until after the show. Left to do the work of two men, Jonathan Mill as Dobchinsky soldiered well, as did the rest of the cast - including David Kendall, Roger Newcombe and Peter Raymond Powell as the town officials - when faced with a revised game plan and a missing full back.

But the comic energy and crowd-pleasing set pieces in Adam Cook’s production come at the price of Gogol’s more sombre themes. “In The Government Inspector,” wrote Nikolai Gogol, “I resolved to gather into one heap everything that was bad in Russia…all the injustices being perpetrated…that cried out for justice, and tried to hold them all up for ridicule.”

Dressed in Mad Hatter costumes and fright wigs these burghers pose little threat to our or anybody else’s reality and, in a powder blue outfit, Khlestakov can be a fop but not a more nihilistic and dynamic infiltrator. In his program notes Adam Cook specifically refers to the famous Russian director Meyerhold’s dictum that actors “steer a course for tragedy” and declares his own departure from that. This is his prerogative, but Meyerhold’s is still good advice.

Satire comes from the unsettling curdling of hilarity and the recognition of impending calamity. This is central to the energy of Gogol’s text and it is not the same as topical anachronisms on electricity privatisation, frog cakes or balalaika versions of Funkytown. They are funny in their unexpectedness and everybody likes a good laugh. But they are also distractions from the black joke of human disappointment and the creepy moral to this durable masterpiece - that if God doesn’t catch you out, then surely the Devil will.