

The Nose



Arthur Reel

Based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol

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P.O. Box 1400
TALLEHAST, FL 34270

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**“The world
is full of absurdities.”**

—Gogol

The Nose

SATIRE/FARCE. In this adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's classic short story (1832), Alexey Kovalyov, a mid-level government bureaucrat, awakens one morning horrified to discover that his nose has run off. Kovalyov wanders the streets searching for his lost nose when, by chance, he spots his nose riding in a coach dressed as a high-ranking government official. Not only has Kovalyov lost his nose, but now his nose outranks him! Determined to get his nose back, Kovalyov trails the nose to a cathedral. There, Kovalyov confronts his nose, demanding that it return to his face immediately. But the nose rudely rebuffs him and escapes. Meanwhile, the runaway nose has become fodder for the town's rumor mill, which threatens to destroy Kovalyov's reputation. This adaptation preserves Gogol's whimsical and humorous writing style and pokes fun at the incompetence of bureaucrats and the superficial nature of society's "respectable" classes.

Performance Time: Approximately 35-45 minutes.

Characters

(3 m, 1 w, 1 flexible, extras)

ALEXEY ARAKCHEEV: Newspaper advertising clerk.

COUNTESS: 60, well-dressed woman, wears bird feathers; she is obviously of the gentry.

ALEXANDER KOVALYOV: Civil servant; dressed in pajamas and a frock coat.

IVAN: Kovalyov's drunken valet.

POLICE LIEUTENANT: Not too intelligent.

EXTRAS (Optional): As crowd.

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Setting

Town in Russia, 1840s.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Newspaper office, morning. There is a desk and a chair.

Scene 2: Kovalyov's room, an hour earlier. There is a bed, bureau, and mirror.

Scene 3: Newspaper office, morning.

Scene 4: Newspaper office, morning.

Scene 5: Kovalyov's room, that afternoon.

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Props

Handkerchief
Pencil
Paper
Money
3 Flasks
Large black handkerchief
Snuffbox

Sound Effects

Loud wind
Crowd noise
Knock
Door opening

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Newspaper office in a town in Russia. The clerk, Alexey Arakcheev, stands behind a desk, a pencil between his teeth. The Countess stands across from him. Alexander Platon Kovalyov, a collegiate assessor, enters hurriedly, holding a handkerchief pressed against his nose. He is wearing pajamas with a frock coat. He rushes over to the desk.)

KOV: Excuse me—excuse me—

ALEXEY: Please, sir—

KOV: One simple question—

ALEXEY: Yes, go on—just one—

KOV: Do you take advertisements?

ALEXEY: *(Smugly.)* Of course we take them.

(Kovalyov pulls out piece of paper and waves it in Alexey's face.)

KOV: I should like—you see, I should like to—

ALEXEY: One minute. *(To Countess.)* Your turn, madam.

KOV: *(Impatiently.)* I can't wait. You see—

(Countess approaches desk.)

COUNTESS: Kroobechnika. Nastasia Fedorovna—Countess.

ALEXEY: Alexey Arakcheev. *(Bows.)* What do you wish?

COUNTESS: A dog, sir.

ALEXEY: Hah?

COUNTESS: A dog. My own dog, sir. She ran away.

ALEXEY: And?

COUNTESS: Would you believe it, sir, that dog wasn't worth
80 kopecks? Not eighty.

KOV: Excuse me, I have an urgent matter—

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COUNTESS: (*Ignoring him.*) I wouldn't even give eight for that dog. But the count...he loves her. "My dog ran away!" he yells. He is still yelling. Woke the entire neighborhood this morning.

KOV: Excuse...I have—

COUNTESS: He simply loves that little dog. Don't ask me why. Now if you are a regular man, I say, keep a pointer or a hound. But a poodle...?

KOV: Kroobechnika—Countess. (*Kovalyov bows.*)

ALEXEY: (*To Countess.*) If you'll let me have the slip of paper, and the proper amount, I'll get on with inserting it...

(*Countess hands Alexey the paper.*)

COUNTESS: He simply loves her. Simply loves that dog. Can you see, sir, a man—six-foot-seven—walking down the street with a poodle six inches long? No sir, not on your life. A pointer—yes...

(*Kov pushes her aside.*)

KOV: Excuse. My affair is far more urgent...

(*Countess pushes him back.*)

COUNTESS: We all have urgent affairs, sir. I am married to a count—12 years now. That is an urgent affair. And my count has lost his little dog. Twice urgent! And right this minute, he is yelling like some madman, "Where is my little dog!" Three times urgent!

ALEXEY: The price is three rubles, 40 kopecks, Countess.

COUNTESS: Ah, yes. (*Places the money on the desk, stares at Kovalyov. To Kov.*) Something the matter with your nose, sir?

KOV: (*Sarcastically.*) Yes, it went for a little stroll.

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COUNTESS: (*Injured.*) Very funny, sir. Have your little laugh. And then may it take a real stroll!

ALEXEY: All right, here's your receipt. (*Hands her the receipt.*) You're done, Countess. (*Bows.*)

COUNTESS: Far from it. The count is still at home yelling—

KOV: Please! (*He gives her a hard push. To Alex.*) Now, if you will insert...

COUNTESS: (*Injured twice.*) Yes—may it take a stroll, sir—may it even run off to the devil the way that little dog ran! (*Exits angrily.*)

KOV: A repulsive creature.

ALEXEY: Next, sir.

KOV: A most repugnant...ah, yes. You see, sir, I've been robbed. That is, I may have been robbed. I don't know...

ALEXEY: Something the matter?

KOV: Yes, exactly. Something terrible occurred this morning...

(*Alexey looks at Kov's covered nose.*)

ALEXEY: Why not blow it?

KOV: Beg pardon?

ALEXEY: Your nose—blow it.

KOV: No...no, I can't. It's impossible...

ALEXEY: Why impossible?

KOV: Look, sir, I'd like to put an advertisement in your newspaper. It's a little on the odd side. Here...you see...I...well...anyone who brings in the thief...the robber...why, I'd...gladly...reward him...

ALEXEY: If it's a thief or robber you're after, you'd better go over to the chief of police. This is no police station. (*Smiles.*) We deal only in matters of print. However, if you've lost something...that's another story.

KOV: Exactly! I've done just that...lost it.

ALEXEY: What've you lost?

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(Kov looks around.)

KOV: Well...you see...I've lost... *(Looks around.)* ...I've lost...lost...I...I...I...

ALEXEY: Well? Out with it.

KOV: I...I...I...well...I...

(Alexey takes a pencil.)

ALEXEY: *(Impatiently.)* Allow me. What is it you wish to say in this ad? Who ran off...or what was stolen? *(Pause.)* Well? A house serf? A coachman? *(Chuckles.)* A...er...mistress?

KOV: Oh, no. Not a person. Had it been a person, it wouldn't have mattered much. You see...it's...a... *(Whispering.)* ...it's...a...nose that has run off. *(Looks around quickly, embarrassed.)*

(Alexey writes down information on a piece of paper.)

ALEXEY: What a peculiar name. And has this Mr. Nosov robbed you of a large sum of money?

KOV: I said "nose," sir. *(Bellows.)* Nose! It's my nose! My own nose...that has disappeared. Pfffffft! Gone! *(Snaps his fingers.)* Just like that. *(Alexey places his pencil between his teeth, suppressing his reaction. He resorts to staring at the madman. Pause.)* You may not believe me, but it's true. *(Snaps fingers again.)* Just like that. Pffft! Simply upped and left me—I don't know where to. The devil must have played a trick on me. *(Pause. Silence, as Alexey continues to stare at him.)* Do you fail to understand me, sir? I've just spoken.

ALEXEY: *(Restraining himself.)* But how? A nose? Well... *(Looks around to see if they are alone.)* ...let me see. *(Kovalyov shakes his head no. Alexey, still playing.)* But how...how could it disappear...just like that? *(Snaps his fingers.)* A nose just doesn't walk off every day.

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KOV: I tell you it's gone! (*Leans in closer.*) The terrible part of it is that right now...this very minute...it's driving about...all over town...under the name and title of... (*Whispers.*) ...State Councilor F.J. Nostrils!

ALEXEY: (*Nodding, seriously.*) I see...aha...but...pardon me...how would you know that...er...being you haven't seen it?

KOV: I've seen it. In the cathedral.

ALEXEY: And what was it doing there? Praying?

KOV: (*Gathering himself.*) Are you jesting, sir?

ALEXEY: (*Seriously.*) Oh no, sir. Hmm...in the cathedral you say?

KOV: Yes, in the cathedral. I followed it there...just about one hour ago. There it was...in the front pew...on its knees.

ALEXEY: On its knees?

KOV: Yes. Exactly!

ALEXEY: But how can a nose stand on its knees?

(*Kov gets down on his knees to demonstrate.*)

KOV: That's how. Like this.

ALEXEY: I see...hmmm...and it had feet? Legs?

(*Kov stands up.*)

KOV: You think I'm off, heh? Well, this may sound a bit absurd, my friend—and you may even laugh—but as my name is— Never mind. It's the truth. (*Tugs at Alexey's sleeve with desperation.*) You must believe me.

ALEXEY: I do, sir...honest! (*Yanking his arm away from the madman.*) Yes—absolutely! Every word.

KOV: Then hear me out. It began...it all began...just this morning. I'd just awoke...and my house serf...Ivan...a brute...a drunkard...

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(As Kovalyov speaks, Ivan wanders onstage wheeling a bed. He goes about changing the set SR. He hums an old Russian folk tune, stopping now and then to drink from a flask which he hides in his back pocket. Meanwhile, the lights are fading SL. Alexey slowly removes some of the props. The stage is a room at an inn now. Kovalyov removes his frock coat and slips underneath the bed covers.)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: Flashback. Lights fade up at right; Ivan takes one last swig from his flask and stares down at Kovalyov.)

IVAN: Snore... *(Turns to audience.)* Let 'im snore, degenerate...cutthroat...always floggin'...always yellin'... Him an' his schemes. He'll get it soon enough. People are talkin'...lotsa people...waggin' their tongues 'bout it.. *(To Kovalyov.)* Snore! May you lose your nose while you're at it. You'll have a regler cramp when y'try to blow it. *(Laughs and drinks.)* You...you...gangster!

(Kovalyov stirs; Ivan exits quickly. Kovalyov reaches out for his handkerchief while still on his back. He brings it to his nose and begins to blow. He jerks – once – twice. Nothing. No sound. He jolts upward, holding the handkerchief against his face. Bewildered, he begins to maneuver his free hand about his face. Jumping up from the bed, he rushes over to a small bureau. Facing a small mirror, he removes the handkerchief and immediately emits a loud, horrible sound.)

KOV: Heeeeccchhhhaaaa – baaaayyyooowwww!

(He bolts for the door, but stops, jerks back, and stares into the mirror again. He remains there, staring, mouth open wide, as Ivan enters.)

IVAN: What happened, majesty?

KOV: My nose!

IVAN: *(Ignoring the remark.)* Your best clothes have been laid out, majesty. Just like you asked.

KOV: *(In a trance.)* My...best...clothes...?

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IVAN: Yeh...like you asked...last night, you did. Got a meeting with somebody...Pavel somebody. Important you said—

KOV: Yes...almost forgot. *(Starts right, but jerks back to the mirror.)* It...can't...

IVAN: Beg pardon, majesty?

KOV: My nose?

IVAN: What's the matter with your nose?

(Kov whirls around.)

KOV: *(Angrily.)* Go! Get out!

IVAN: Going. Yeah...leaving. *(Bows, begins to leave and falls.)*

KOV: *(His nose covered.)* You've been drinking again!

IVAN: No...nooo. How could I be drinkin' sir? Maybe havin' a chat with a fine friend... But drinking? Nooo...never. *(Rises.)*

KOV: I'll take and flog you so you'll never chat with your fine friend again.

(Kov starts for him. Ivan heads for exit.)

IVAN: Oooo...yes sir...flog. Floggin' is good...an' I'll go an' find you a whip...

(He exits. Pause. Kov turns back to the mirror.)

KOV: Nose? *(Horried.)* Where did you go? *(Peeks under handkerchief again.)* This is some terrible dream. *(Emits another horrible sound.)* What a misfortune. A whole nose...gone. No! Impossible! How could...where did... *(Quivering.)* ...but it's true...and today...a most significant day. I have to step out and meet significant people—the public prosecutor, the town governor...and... *(Looks at himself again.)* ...and... *(Another sound.)* ...no nose! *(Shouts.)* Ivan!

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(Ivan enters, running.)

IVAN: Here and waiting, sir. At your service, honor. *(Salutes. Stumbles and nearly falls again.)*

KOV: Drunk! You're drunk!

IVAN: No...nooo...never. Just snacking, sir.

KOV: I'll give you snacking! *(Starting for Ivan.)*

IVAN: Oh, just hold...wait a minute, sir. Something wrong with your nose?

KOV: Nothing! Nothing's wrong with my nose. *(Brings handkerchief closer.)*

IVAN: Then why're you holdin' it, sir?

KOV: It's...it's...a pimple.

IVAN: You mean a pimple's sprouted overnight? *(Grins.)*

Not bad. Let me see. *(Kovalyov turns away.)* Reminds me o' the time you sprouted one back in Kiev, sir. That's when we escaped...left there in a big hurry, sir.

KOV: Escaped? We never escaped. We had to leave on important business.

IVAN: Yeh...important business...didn't escape, sir. Nooooo...never. Just a fast gallop in our fine 3-horse carriage—'n they nearly died, them horses, sir—that's how far 'n fast we galloped—

KOV: Enough! I told you...it was urgent business.

IVAN: Yeh...that it was, sir...urgent. So when we 'scaped...er...I mean, when we rode out on business—three in the mornin' it was, sir—that was when you sprouted that pimple. Ugh! Real ugliness. Yeh, wasn't too good to look at, sir. Aggghhh! *(He helps Kovalyov get dressed.)* That was some pimple, majesty. Worse 'n the pimple before...when we 'scaped...er...rode off...very late inna night...outta Moscow.

KOV: Never mind. Just button. Shut up and button. Is my collar straight?

IVAN: Straight, sir. Very straight.

KOV: And my hat?

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IVAN: Oh, sir...just a little crooked. (*Adjusts it.*)

KOV: My coat?

IVAN: Jus' perfect, sir. (*Hiccups.*)

KOV: And now... (*Steps forward.*) And now... (*Turns doorknob.*)

IVAN: Careful, majesty. (*Kovalyov turns back, still holding his handkerchief against his nose.*) Jus' a word of advice...careful...'cause you got this pimple, or cold, or whatever— Knowin' colds 'n pimples, they can get worse...'n sprout up bigger, like a potato...with roots 'n warts... (*Kovalyov steps forward; he is outside. There is a loud noise, a sort of wind; it forces him back against the door. He stares ahead, his eyes growing bigger, his mouth opening wide. He emits another horrible sound.*) What is it, majesty? The devil comin'? The police?

KOV: Get back in there! Stay away! (*Kovalyov moves forward again. Ivan fades back; his voice becomes lower and lower. Kovalyov continues to walk, holding the handkerchief against his face and staring ahead in sheer disbelief.*) There...there it goes. My God! Can it? No! Yes! It's...my nose! (*Calls after it.*) Wait! Stop! (*Walks faster.*) Impossible! I can't...simply cannot...wait up...nose! (*Runs off after nose. Blackout.*)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Newspaper office. Fade in Alexey, who is seated behind his desk. He is watching Kovalyov and listening closely. Kovalyov leans closer.)

KOV: So you see...believe it or not...it occurred...exactly that way. Exactly.

ALEXEY: Are you...certain?

KOV: Certain...certain...yes! As my name— Never mind. That's the way it happened...I swear it by the holy saints!

ALEXEY: *(Calmly.)* If you saw this nose—I mean, strolling about town—well, did it wear...was it...er...dressed?

KOV: Obviously! In a gold-embroidered uniform...large stand-up collar...chamois leather breeches...and... *(Grimaces.)* ...a sword...at its side.

ALEXEY: A sword?

KOV: Absolutely...a sword. And...from this mode of dress...I suspected that it was...at least...a...state councilor...a servant of the Fifth Rank.

ALEXEY: *(Considering.)* The Fifth Rank...

KOV: Furthermore...it was heading somewhere...as if to pay a visit. I trailed it awhile...until it jumped into a coach. I could hear it call to the driver, "Take me to the cathedral on Nevsky!"

ALEXEY: *(Seriously.)* To pray, no doubt?

KOV: I wasn't sure, but I followed. Once I'd got there...I pushed my way in. Luckily, there were only a few worshippers inside. I looked about hurriedly, found the nose had placed itself in a pew apart from the others...and hiding completely in its large stand-up collar...was saying its prayers—

ALEXEY: With an expression of utmost piety...

KOV: Yes...crossing itself...muttering such words as, "Forgive me O Father for all the sins I have committed."

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ALEXEY: What sins can a nose have committed?

KOV: Darned if I know.

ALEXEY: It was your nose?

KOV: Yes. Beyond a doubt.

ALEXEY: Well, you ought to know.

KOV: I don't know. I don't even know how it got away.

ALEXEY: Well, go on, what happened after?

KOV: So I approached it—rather carefully—lest it become rather violent. "Sir," I said, forcing myself to take courage. "I say there, beg your pardon...mister..." "What do you want?" replied the nose...in a bass voice. "What is it now? I am busy, as you can see." "Well, sir," I returned, "Just hear me out. I find it rather strange...I believe you should know your proper place...and suddenly you pop up in a church of all places." I waited for his answer then, "I don't quite grasp...I'm sorry, but I don't understand you. Speak more clearly...explain yourself." "Explain myself!" I nearly shouted back. "How can I—a man with my rank—walk about town without a nose? A workman sawing away at wood can do so, but for a man of my caliber—an ex-public prosecutor who may well become a governor or a judge and is constantly being received in the homes of prosperous gentlemen, tradesmen, ladies of excellent position—well, sir, judge for yourself...consider my situation...

(Pause.)

ALEXEY: Go on...and then?

KOV: Instantly, the nose drew itself up and responded, "I don't understand a word of this gibberish. Please explain yourself more exactly." So I summoned up new courage. "Now look here, brother, you are my nose. Now I demand that you return to your proper place—right here on my face. Immediately!"

ALEXEY: Obviously, it didn't.

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KOV: It merely stared back at me—in such a way that I began to feel like an old shoe. (*Draws a deep breath.*) Having said this, the nose turned away and went about its business praying. Well, I was utterly astonished. There was simply nothing I could say or do that would make it listen to me.

ALEXEY: Hmm...stubborn...

KOV: A few minutes later, prayer done, it simply upped and strolled out of the cathedral, stepped into the carriage, and was gone. (*Pause.*) So you see... why I've come here...

ALEXEY: (*Nods.*) Yes...yes, I see...and I agree. We have a serious problem. A man with a large nose—an overgrown one—well, he may be ashamed...may become petrified at seeing, let us say, an elegant lady. But one without a nose...phew! (*Shakes his head.*)

KOV: That's why I should like to place this ad, but no one must know my identity. (*Presents a slip of paper.*) Now, be a fine fellow and insert it.

ALEXEY: Impossible!

KOV: Impossible? But I've just now told you—

ALEXEY: Listen...wouldn't it be something to read in the newspaper, "Anonymous is looking for his lost nose"? Why, they'd laugh. They'd call it a prank, a fraud. (*Unseen by Kovalyov and Alexey, the Countess enters. She stops and listens at the far side of the room. Alexey purses his lips.*) Sorry, sir. I positively cannot insert such an ad.

KOV: You must! I insist!

ALEXEY: Insist all you want, sir. No name, no ad. Besides, the paper will surely lose its reputation. What if you were to read such an ad? "Looking for a runaway nose." You'd laugh. Correct? You'd find it completely absurd.

KOV: I see nothing absurd—

ALEXEY: Sure, sure, in a war perhaps. But while in bed? Asleep? Really, sir? (*Shakes his head again.*) Anyway, I don't believe it. You haven't even shown it to me.

KOV: I can't go through life without a nose. I simply can't! What am I to say to people? My nose took a stroll? It will

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return and jump up to its place at any moment? *(Alexey turns away. Kovalyov grabs hold of his sleeve with his free hand.)* I swear...it's the truth. All right, I'll show it to you... *(Begins to lift his handkerchief.)*

ALEXEY: No. Even if you showed it to me...even if you told me your name...now that I've thought it over...I couldn't insert. Why, just last week a similar incident occurred. A civil servant dropped in with an advertisement—about some poodle—with a gray coat. It had run away. Very innocent. Well, it so happened that it turned out to be a libelous statement. You see, the poodle was, in reality, the clerk in some bank who had absconded with the money. *(Turns.)* No sir! I cannot possibly insert such an ad.

KOV: *(Pleading.)* But what shall I do then?

ALEXEY: If it's really lost, go see a doctor. He'll fit you with another one. *(Chuckles at his own joke.)*

KOV: *(Resolving.)* All right...here! I'll show it! Look!

[End of Freeview]