

With deadly intent

Students were inspired by a literary great to create a haunting installation, writes Alexandra Blaauw, visual arts teacher at PSI International School, Kiev, Ukraine



Getting students involved in the 'real world' outside the school environment is a great motivator.

Taking part in an exhibition

for Gogolfest, a three-year celebration marking the anniversaries of the birth and death of Ukrainian-born writer

Nikolai Gogol, meant visual arts students had to work to fixed criteria and concepts, and deal with real deadlines. Knowing their work would be publicly exhibited, each individual's contribution suddenly became a more serious commitment.

The festival started in 2007, and each year has been based on one of Gogol's works. MYP

students at PSI International School took part in 2008, with his novel *Dead Souls* as a theme.

The students began by researching Gogol and discussing the novel to generate ideas. Although important, these brainstorming sessions made them restless. They had just one aim: to get started.

To help students turn their

perceptions into artwork, we looked at the works of the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte. We also used Ken Vieth's book *Engaging the Adolescent Mind* (Davis Publications) and watched a film about Michelangelo. Students developed self-portraits inspired by the novel over the course of six weeks. Working with them was an inspiring and thoroughly enjoyable process for me as a teacher.

In our final session, the group of students discussed how their work would be laid out as an installation, according to the Gogolfest criteria. They decided on an amazing, theatrical, gothic-inspired plan, with an open coffin in the middle of the space. Their self-portraits were hung around the coffin from the ceiling, in 'a circle of death meeting life', while a bright light came from within the coffin 'to help to uncover the hidden'. In accordance with the spirit of Gogol, anonymous quotes begging for human rights were scattered across the floor.

The process of getting to know Gogol revealed how 'IB' he actually was. He was the keen observer and questioner of life that we ask IB students to be. The absurd plot of *Dead Souls* is a serious critique of absurdities in Tsarist Russian society. The fact that Gogol travelled throughout Russia, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy and Palestine, and used his writing to express what he saw, makes him a true world citizen and an inspiring resource for any IB World School.



The philosophy and structure of Gogol's *Dead Souls* inspired IB students to create a 'circle of death'