Princeton’s *Boris Godunov*: Clips from the DVD
[with emphasis on the Afro-American roles]

+ Handout summarizing world [esp. Russian] reception
++ Handout with major dates and summary of Pushkin’s play

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Our 2007 production of Meyerhold’s 1936 torso of Pushkin’s 1825 *Boris Godunov*

An “undergraduate drama event” April 2007 that became a “world premiere” Some background about the project ... that launched Princeton’s Center for the Creative and Performing Arts ... and brought together four centuries of Russian art and culture: 1598. 1825. 1937. 2007.

- HANDOUT with important dates 17th, 19th, 20th, 21st century
- Synopsis of the play

Pushkin’s 1825 play best known as the base —> Musorgsky’s 1874 historical opera [segments of that on Thursday night]: The disturbed interregnum between Russia’s two dynasties. Ivan the Terrible dies, his feeble son dies without issue, his brother-in-law BG is elected tsar. During the reign of Boris Godunov, in 1604, an unknown man pretending to be the murdered youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, the Tsarevich Dmitry, invades Russia, marches on Moscow, Boris suddenly dies, Dmitry’s men put Boris’s own son to death, this Pretender assumes the throne, is himself assassinated a year later, followed by the scheming Prince Shuisky, who is then himself deposed and tonsured in 1607 ... casting the country into civil war, further invasion, foreign domination ... from which the nation emerges only with election of the first Romanov tsar in 1613.

This watershed date is now key for the newly-re-chauvinized Russia of Medvedev-Putin (“Day of Liberation” in November, once commemorating the Bolshevik Rev in 1917, is now celebrated as the Day of Liberation of Russia from ... western invaders in 1612).

** This basic story told by Pushkin in his 1825 drama *Boris Godunov*; re-told, with hyper-emphasis on guilt and national misery, by Musorgsky in 1872. Vsevolod Meyerhold fascinated by both the opera (which he helped stage in 1911) and the play — which he tried to stage 3 times: 1918-19; 1924-25; 1936. ALL ABORTED.

Today:
— Something about the last two historical layers of “performance history” of this story (20th, 21st c.)
— Then 5 brief clips (scenes #1, 5, 13, final 24-25) from Princeton’s production of Meyerhold’s “idea” ... those scenes where our non-traditional casting is most
effective — and caused the most excitement and agitation among our audience, especially the visiting Russians.

— HANDOUT OF RUSSIAN RECESSION:  REAd segment #1

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What we tried to do: COMPLETE a production that had been thought out but not rehearsed: “the premiere of a concept.” Allowed for a great deal of creativity — what an avant-garde, state-of-the-art stage director might have done, had he known our state of the art.

I. The aborted 1936 Meyerhold-Prokofiev collaboration

- Meyerhold writes one letter inviting SSP to do BG music (no way!)
- Prokofiev relocates to USSR from Paris in 1936. Thinks this is just a change of primary residence and he will continue to travel freely.
- Meyerhold at peak of fame; planning the construction of his new theater on Mayakovsky Square in Moscow
- SSP composes BG music very quickly: 24 repeatable, divisible modules (drunken singing, ballroom dancing, songs of loneliness, blind beggars, laments, Hollywood mood music; an untexted moan for male chorus).
- The concept (verbal and musical) for BG: “Return Pushkin to Pushkin!” Strip away the heaviness and conventionality of opera; stress not love but political conspiracy / battles (“everyone in this play is in a sweat, as if he just got down off a horse”); lightness; mobility; modes of subversion. Suicidal for 1937.
- Play rehearsed intensively summer 1936 — Nov. 1936; dropped May 1937. Most intensively rehearsed scenes: sc. 6 (Pimen), sc. 8 (“Dostig ...”), sc. 9 (Tavern); sc. 10 (“Shuisky’s house): all politically charged.
- Russia of 1604 Smuta = Stalinist USSR = became the creeping fear of 2007. Russians invited to BG: It could not be mounted in Putin’s Russia either.
- In December 1937 Meyerhold is condemned in Pravda; in January 1938 his Meyerhold Theatre is closed. Eighteen months later he is arrested; his wife is murdered in their apartment; early 1940 Meyerhold is executed by firing squad.

II. Why the production was possible

- 2005: Simon Morrison in Moscow re-connects the lost parts of the Prokofiev-Meyerhold collaboration: ms. of piano score to BG music in RGALI, orchestration
in Glinka Museum, and Meyerhold’s instructions as to the ordering of the score in RGALI. Confirms that all published and recorded documents inaccurate.

- “Turning the university into an atelier.” Architecture school graduate students designed the set. University orchestra, Glee Club and solo singers performed the music. University Dance program provided the choreography. Four academic courses plus an on-line alumni course offered.
- BUT it was still a “student show.” No drama school, no drama majors; undergraduates with senior theses due the week after. Boris was a computer science major. The Pretender and the Patriarch were freshmen.
- Totally astonished at the publicity and coverage (2 articles in the NYT; picked up by front page of International Herald Tribune and spread to all European papers, 3 minute TV clip on Moscow’s Pervyi kanal).

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**The BG PRODUCTION**  [DVD clips]

Sc. 1: Kremlin palace, 1598 (Shuisky and Vorotynsky)
Sc. 5: Night. Cell in Chudov Monastery, 1603
Sc. 13: Krakow. Wisniowiecky’s House
Sc. 24-25: the final two scenes: storming of Kremlin and murder of Fyodor

Some details about the priorities of Tim Vasen, the director

- 13-person ensemble, selected as a visual and mobile unit before the roles were assigned. 13 people filling over 80 roles.

  + two singing actors (white woman, black man for the “Songs of loneliness” at scene change, and Ksenia’s Lament. But Ksenia’s Nurse was a black man, the same actor who played Pimen.

  24 members of male Glee Club

  35 instrumentalists (divided into one chamber orchestra and two “bands”)

- Specifically recruited a mixed-race cast: Originally Boris Godunov was Afro-American, but he dropped out during the first week because of Senior Thesis pressure

- Non-traditional casting in BOTH race and gender. The Patriarch as a women (really bothered some Russians)
Two of Pushkin’s ancestors are in the play, both played by the same Afro-Hispanic American.

Russian news esp. interested in women and blacks. Nadia interviewed by Channel 1 Moscow: How can a Patriarch be a woman? “It’s not a question of gender, but a question of authority and self-confidence. Which I have.”

- The **BUNGEE set**: 150 movable pieces of surgical tubing (“bungees”) fastened vertically in 25-foot-long strips from floor to ceiling and fitted into five parallel tracks. VERY tough: stretch it, swing on it, snap it like bows-and-arrows, pull at it, if you were anxious ... an external nervous system.

*In the opening clip you will see*


Our **accidents with this treacherous elastic set**. Adam and a bungee eye-snap 2 days before premiere. Nadia’s rod caught in the groove. Dancers can’t go up on point.

**PLUS** Furniture faintly industrial like torture machines, out of steel and wood (gallows / electric chair / wheel chair); supplemented by realistic computer projections (Monastery wall, St. Basil’s, Kremlin; fabrics, lily pods, rural pub);

**COSTUMES**: Same principle of “overlay,” abstract plus realistic / period detail, with “company costume” [Malevich “boxed colors” + historically accurate robes].

- **Sc. 5**: *Pimen’s cell* (Grigory and bungees)

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At this point: sets move several hundred miles West and 300 years more modern: **Renaissance Poland**. For Prokofiev, it was everything he learned in Hollywood. Trashy, commercial, sexy, free.

Curtain rises and we see an orchestra in pastel wigs on “Hollywood squares” scaffolding.

- **Sc. 14**: *Orchestra in “Hollywood squares”*
• Sc. 24: Royal children at the window.

Ex. #6: MUSIC: Final wordless chorus

Start ... and speak through it

• Sc. 24: Guard Boris in company costume — now on Dmitry’s side

• Sc. 24: Red Square crowd

• Sc. 25: Mosalsky / Shuisky post-murder announcement

• Sc. 25: “Long Live Tsar Dmitry Ivanovich” Pushkin’s 2 endings: First, «народ безмолвствует», then the savagely mechanical cheer, then blackout.