Meyerhold’s many *Boris Godunovs*

- IMAGE #1: Meyerhold chronology

This talk is a tribute to Meyerhold’s life-long obsession with Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* — and the Russian Time of Troubles generally … an obsession that was never satisfied, and became ever more lethal.

Consider the four events on this Meyerhold chronology [and in more detail on the handout], M. circling in on Pushkin’s play:

- **1898 -1901, Moscow Art Theater:** M. plays first Ivan Shuisky (uncle to Pushkin’s Prince Shuisky), and then Ivan the Terrible, in A. K. Tolstoy’s *Dramatic Trilogy*  
- **1911, Maryinskii Theater:** Advises a production of *Musorgsky’s Boris Godunov* with Chaliapin in title role (not a success)
- **1918 - 19:** Supervises an advanced Stage Design Course in Petrograd for student directors, which produces sketches of various styles of sets for *Pushkin’s Boris Godunov* (not realized)
- **1924-26:** Rehearses Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov in the Third Studio of the Vakhtangov Theater* (wing of Moscow Art Theater) (not realized)
- **1936 – 37:** Rehearses Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov, with music by Sergei Prokofiev, for the Pushkin Centennial* (rehearsals become increasingly politicized; dwindle out by May 1937)
- **1936 – 37:** But he is arrested 1939, executed 1940. The Prokofiev *Boris* music is scattered, recycled, the whole episode enters history as one more “failed attempt to make Pushkin stage-worthy”
- **April 2007:** Princeton University posthumously attempts to realize a synthesis of all three of these uncompleted stagings of Pushkin’s play, with their most innovative techniques developed in Meyerhold’s spirit through 21st-century theater technology

Basically this is a “slide show with a handout” — traces of Meyerhold’s “Pushkin and Boris” obsession, 1911 —> 2007.
Several of these stages in more detail, beginning with the student work on set design during the Civil War:

- **IMAGE #2 1918–19 [2]:** In Petrograd, the **Advanced Set-Design Course**, which produces a set of **director’s plans for a** «Сценически условная интерпретация» of Pushkin’s **Boris Godunov**

A scenically–conditioned, or “stage-set” conditioned, interpretation” of the play: where the director starts with the set.

«Курсы мастерства сценических постановок»

- This set must facilitate:
  - rapid pace
  - precise timing
  - lack of verbal / spatial clutter
  - a sense of *striving* [стремительность] in time and space ever more quickly toward the tragic end.

[1936] “Pushkin was a great playwright, but given the chance, he would have been an even greater stage director.” Initiating an entirely new dramatic system.

- Stripping everything down, putting it into unexpected motion: Pushkin everything that Musorgsky’s opera in 1911 was not.

- **IMAGE #3** Планировка сцены . . . . . . . . Layout of the stage in five tiers
- **IMAGE #4** Народ . . . . . . . . . . . . . . The people (striving / begging)
- **IMAGE #5** Борис идет поклониться гробам . . Boris goes to “pray before the tombs”
- **IMAGE #6** Корчма . . . . . . . . . . . . . Tavern scene
- **IMAGE #7** У фонтана . . . . . . . . . Fountain scene [Stone Guest]
- **IMAGE #8** Профиль сцены . . . . . . . . Stage in profile; lighting and tiers

Three sketches represent a more naturalistic concept

- **IMAGE #9** Народ . . . . . . . The people (now a wooden fence)
- **IMAGE #10** Корчма . . . . . . . Tavern scene (the underground / ray of light that is also an escape through the roof and a road out)
WHAT to NOTICE from these early 1919 BG sketches ("Meyerhold invariants" that Princeton production will build upon):

- Tiered or “layered” stage
- Rays of light = an escape road, penetrating a thick forest or a slab of color
- Experimenting with a “mixed style”: modernist, simplifying abstraction + “shabby fence” and impressionistic green wilderness

This 1919 student show was never staged.

Meyerhold was caught by the Whites, spent some time in a Novorossiisk prison during the Civil War, and returned again to the play only five years later:

- IMAGE #12:


- This too never got to opening night, but memoirs suggest a mix of biomechanical stylization, pathos, slapstick, and vulgar street-theater farce

- Again, anti-canonical and anti-operatic: a crew of chanting soothsayers was to pursues Tsar Boris in Sc. 9 and drown out his famous monologue.

- BUT also some grotesque realism: Dead flies and spiders were to float on the surface of huge wine-goblets guzzled by Misail and Varlaam in the Inn Scene (Varlaam eventually chokes and hiccups on a huge fly).

- Beginning of a new image of Pimen: spry, mobile, restless, witty, suspicious — like the old Leo Tolstoy (whom Meyerhold had visited);

- Likewise, Grigory in Pimen’s cell was to be nervous, not at all monastic, “a hooligan, a kid with a rock in his hand.”

- The stage set again was spare and modernist: made up of inclined planes, planks (“sidewalks”) with connecting stairs

Princeton undergraduate production was pleased with this emphasis on YOUTH: the noisy soothsayers, the “layering” or “bas-relief” effect, and the bawdy drunkenness — not only the monks, but the boyars.
As Meyerhold wrote in 1936: Drunkenness is strategic. “Godunov’s police state spied less on drunken carousers” [Gladkov 202].

- IMAGE #13: Sketch of 1925 stage set by Sergei P. Isakov, “Coronation Scene”

From Boris Zakhava’s memoir on 1925: “Two Seasons (1923-1925)” [on PP and on handout]:

“Two long, rather narrow benches, or ‘sidewalks,’ one behind the other . . . The action will take place only on these sidewalks, connected with staircases . . .

“Through chinks between the sidewalks, decorative details will appear (a wall, fence, arch, door, windows) . . . through these chinks, people too can appear, sometimes visible to the waist, other times only the head . . . thus did Meyerhold hope to solve the problem of mass scenes with a very limited number of participants.”

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This production too was abandoned.

One decade later, a third try at the play, a commission for the Pushkin Death Centennial.

Meyerhold at the peak of his fame. This time, the play was to be done right. In Pushkin-friendly space. A huge mid-1930s building project: constructing a theater worthy of Pushkin's dramaturgy.

Meyerhold’s new GosTIM Theater on Mayakovsky Square, Moscow.


Influenced by the “Total theater” of Walter Gropius and Erwin Piscator (1927): “A theater-machine” that can be played on “like a typewriter . . .”

- IMAGE #15: Early plans show a modernist, International Style exterior and circular stage (1932)

A state-of-the-art, “Shakespearean” pair of circular thrust stages to accommodate plays like Boris: fast pace, no curtains, filmic projections, 15-second scene changes, multiple points of view from which action could be experienced.

- IMAGE #16: Interior circular stages in plan

No footlights; possible to bring the public up on stage in the spirit of the “proletarianized” drama of the 1920s.
• IMAGE #17: External building façade evolved into a Stalinist-Neoclassical-Neofascist imperial mode (A. B. Shchusev) but inside was to remain revolutionary.

• IMAGE #18: Façade of the old GosTIM building [upper left]; construction of the new building, 1934

• IMAGE #19: Meyerhold at the construction site, 1934 ...

[This marvelously accessible set of circular thrust stages we could NOT duplicate at Princeton]

But what emerges is a fascinating subtext: what Pushkin would have desired as theater director ... anticipated the International Style in “total theater” design.

The fact that Meyerhold “blocked out a beloved play” — Boris Godunov — in 1936-37 for a theater space that did not yet exist ... probably influenced the traces we have of the aborted production.

The torso we have hardly discusses the space. Meyerhold’s director’s notes concentrate largely on the meaning of Pushkin’s WORDS — “table work” — and on the MUSIC, not the staging or the sets.

Prokofiev’s score took the place of set design and detailed bodily movement.

Look at that construction site covered with wooden scaffolding ... the most that Meyerhold saw of his new theater ... and then consider

• IMAGE # 20 ... the PRINCETON poster. We tried several conventional advertising images (medieval tsars in red brocade, etc.) but, at the last minute, chose this recent photograph from today’s Russia, 2006:

A monastery in Torzhok, in Tver’ province (featured in Eisenstein’s IVAN THE TERRIBLE)

Symbolically, the wrecked scaffolding that never gave rise to a theater or finished artistic image ... rising out of a doomed construction pit, an “onion dome, plus threatening trash” ... an ikon for the Time of Trouble, 1606 —> 1936.

The remainder of this presentation: some photographic stills from the 2007 Princeton “revival” of the Meyerhold-Prokofiev Boris.

Emphasing what we tried to preserve from Meyerhold’s three encounters with Pushkin’s play:
1. **from 1918-19 course in stage design in Petrograd:**

   - Simplicity;
   - a sense of “striving” in external force lines
   - and at the same time loneliness, engulfment (tiny figures in a huge wilderness).

2. **from 1924-26 Vakhtangov Theater:**

   The high point of Meyerhold’s biomechanics:
   - A stage design exploiting different planes in “bas relief”
   - a few bodies standing in for the masses (Pushkin’s play has 80 roles; we had a cast of 15).

3. **from 1936-37 Meyerhold’s own troupe:**

   - Youth, restlessness, spontaneity (no beards) ... easy with a cast of undergraduate non-professionals.

   **[handout]** From Gladkov’s memoirs of the rehearsals:

   Meyerhold: “... All the people in this play are warriors, not clerks with beards and fur coats. Everyone has just gotten down off his horse. Not boyars in fur coats, but soldiers! Horseback riding! Everyone is young!”

   - Rapid pacing and fluidity

   **[handout]** **M:** “Pushkin did not provide for intermissions ... there must not be a single break, lest the thread be lost.”

   We needed an intermission to move the orchestra, but NO CURTAINS and NO scene-breaks. 7-to 15-second scene changes in full view, without a crew.

   - What is new is the MUSIC, an essential “binder” given the absence of authentic rehearsal space …

   - ... for the “ideal total theater” where “Pushkin could become Pushkin” is still under construction.

   - Music becomes the organizing principle.

   - Prokofiev incidental music consisted of 24 repeatable, divisible modules (drunken singing, ballroom dancing, songs of loneliness, blind beggars, laments, Hollywood mood music; and an untexted moan for male chorus).
The breakthrough: the discovery, in 2005 in two Moscow archives, by a Princeton professor of Music, of Meyerhold’s directions for the integration of Prokofiev’s music into Pushkin’s play ...

... made it possible for Princeton to pick up where Meyerhold left off.

- **IMAGE #21**  *Berlind Foyer / poster*

  Philicia Saunders [Vorotynsky] and Jess Kwong [who played the slaughtered Tsareviches]

- **IMAGE #22**: 13-person *ensemble*.

  **M**: the ensemble mattered more than the stars. The group was selected as a whole before the roles were assigned.

  + two singing actors
  24-members of Glee Club
  35 instrumentalists
  9 dancers

- **IMAGE #23**: The Patriarch ... with a beard.

  This “beard option phase” lasted only a day — we decided to let Meyerhold’s insistence on *youth* win out over Orthodox authenticity.

- **IMAGE #24**: The BUNGEEES. The “backbone” or “nerve system” of the set.

  **M**: the sense of “striving” in the early sketches + “externalized emotion” (a principle of biomechanics)

  Sam Zetumer (Shuisky) swinging: 150 movable pieces of surgical tubing 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*.

- **IMAGE #25**  *Sc. 1: Shuisky and Vorotynsky*

  Not only people could be nervous, but *objects too* (the uncertain, dangling throne)

- **IMAGE #26**  *Sc. 1 (later): Shuisky and Vorotynsky*  [slant shot]
Interesting that Russian reviewers of the Princeton production considered the bungees to be directly inspired by Meyerhold (even though the set was designed by the School of Architecture):

From Русский базар [Russkii bazar] No 17 (575) 26 Apr-2 May, 2007
'A posthumous Meyerhold premiere' (Elena Klepikova) 2nd paragraph:

[ . . . ] “Even this all-important tubing was not an invention of the Americans, but taken from Meyerhold’s own vast artistic workshop. Victor Shklovsky describes the design of an early Meyerhold stage sets: ‘The footlights were removed. The gaping expanse of the stage is stripped bare. On the stage a counter-relief with downward-hanging stretched tubing, with bent iron. . . .

- IMAGE #27: Sc. 4: Patriarch blessing Boris behind the scrim. The throne is now grounded.

- IMAGE #28: Sc. 4: Patriarch, boyars bowing to Boris

- IMAGE #29: Sc. 5: Pimen’s cell (Pimen declaiming his monologue; red-haired Grigory hiding among the bungees and plucking them nervously).

   A child-like, energetic, naïve Pimen, full of sap ... modeled on the old Leo Tolstoy, Meyerhold told his company.

   Our production included Scene 6: “Monastery Wall” / Evil Monk. from Pushkin’s 1825 original play. Meyerhold / Prokofiev planned to set it as Grigory Otrepiev’s dream on the road, with the evil monk in the role of demonic tempter.

- IMAGE #30: Sc. 6: Evil monk as Faust’s Mephistopheles ... Grigory grabbing at the bungees that will both propel him forward, and trap him.

- IMAGE #31: introducing Sc. 8, “Tsar’s Palace”

   Boris Godunov’s famous monologue: the entire stage becomes nervous and begins to tremble, as one of the courtiers whacks the bungees with a rod ...

- IMAGE #32: Sc. 8: Boris surrounded by sorcerers.

   A famous Meyerhold moment from August 1936 rehearsal notes: We must do something with Pushkin’s canonical speeches, they’re too well known, they go all “greasy” sand boring ... so bring the soothsayers on stage. Boris is a superstitious man of the 16th century. Have these creatures hum, clack, hiss, whisper incantations ... crowd Boris out. So we can hardly hear the famous speech. “It’s okay, it’s not one of Pushkin’s better speeches.”

- IMAGE #33: Sc. 8 Boris Godunov and the ghost of Dmitry. The unclean conscience of the tsar.
• IMAGE #34: Sc. 10  Shuisky’s house.

One of Meyerhold’s obsessively rehearsed scenes ... very political, and very drunk. The undergraduates became more raucous each night with this scene.

At the edge you see Afanasy Pushkin, played by a Afro-Hispanic student — and Meyerhold had this to say about the role:

“He’s frenzied, drunk, wild . . . with his hurt, pain, anger at Tsar Boris, no, at Borka Godunov, usurper and villain ...”

It was the anti-Stalinist intonations of this scene that got Meyerhold into trouble: he was denounced by one of his own company.

Now a switch to Poland.

Orchestra on stage in “Hollywood squares” or scaffolding ... for there was to be no pit in Meyerhold’s new “total theater”

• IMAGE #35: Sc. 14: side-shot of the tiered orchestra.

Again from Русский базар (on handout):

“For the Polish scene, Meyerhold wrote that he wanted to bring ‘the entire orchestra on stage, performing three dances: ‘Dreams,’ ‘Polonaise,’ and ‘Mazurka,’ which Prokofiev composed. The musicians were seated in layers, on different levels, framed by a giant red window frame, which played the role of Meyerhold’s beloved counter-relief. . . .

• IMAGE #36: Polish ball scene  [processional]

• IMAGE #37: Sc. 14: Mazurka  [leap]

• IMAGE #38: Sc. 17: Blind shepherd’s miracle

_Boris consulting with boyars and Patriarch about the invaders._ Patriarch tells a story about a miracle happening to a blind shepherd ... which is then acted out mid-stage.

A window on the “Hollywood Square” suddenly lights up.

It is no longer a “red window frame for a Renaissance orchestra,” but an iconostasis ... and St. Dmitri appears.  A heavenly vision.

It is in this same window where Boris’s son is murdered — in a structural and dynastically equivalent parallel to the original murder.
• IMAGE #39:  Sc. 17:  *Boris consulting with his advisors.*

NOTE the props. Furniture (the throne) faintly industrial — like torture machines, out of steel and wood (recalling a gallows / electric chair / wheel chair); this, + realistic projections (Monastery wall, St. Basil’s, Kremlin);

Clothes likewise a mix: “company costume” inspired by Malevich + realistic robes.

• IMAGE #40:  Sc. 18:  *Red Square; Holy Fool.*

Played by the same actress who played Marina.  Wraps the bungees around her ... like penitential chains.

Coming up:  *Pushkin’s battles.*

*Most difficult to choreograph. Three different armies; one back-stage orchestra and two military bands, four languages. Scraps of music from various battlefields. Military chaos.*

• IMAGE #41:  Sc. 19:  *Germans enter*

Again from  Русский базар review:  [see handout]

“In the battle scenes, [again] we see Meyerhold’s physical technique: a rhythmic, mechanical step, toes to heel, for the soldiers’ march.  Prokofiev composed a ‘musical caricature,’ using the carnival rhythms of the fife and drum.  Technically a very inventive scene, when a row of soldiers march ponderously down to the edge of the stage and begin to spin in place on the very edge, portraying an army on the march.”

• IMAGE #42:  Sc. 23:  *The death of Boris*  [Patriarch on one side, seditious Shuisky and wavering Basmanov on the other ...]

... which seals the fate of the royal children and the Godunov dynasty.

• IMAGE #43:  Sc. 24:  *Red Square crowd*

Stage bathed in red. The production respected both of Pushkin’s endings, from 1831 and 1825:

  o Meyerhold’s desire to use the famous «народ безмолвствует», “the people are silent”;

10
But our desire to reflect 20th-c. politics with the savagely mechanical cheer, “Long Live Tsar Dmitry Ivanovich,” accompanied by forced clapping, then blackout.

- Final IMAGE #44: Sc. 25, final scene. Guard Boris. One of the production’s most frightening moments, and very Meyerholdian.

Tsar Boris is already two scenes (and three months) dead. But at the beginning of the final scene he reappears, dressed not in his tsarist robe but in the Malevich-modernist “company costume” as a guard for “the other side,” the Tsarevich Dmitry’s troops.

You are whatever your outer clothing says you are. This is a play full of such pretenders ... and therefore

Boris can re-emerge guarding the men who will murder his own children.

Meyerhold remarking to his troupe in November, 1936:

“... a presentation of historical events is so much more terrifying from Pushkin than from any other writer of the period ...”

And for this reason — one Russian citizen remarked, who saw the production — “your production of this play would not be allowed in Moscow today, either.”