Meyerhold’s many Boris Godunovs

Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold (b. Penza 1874 – d. Moscow 1940)

1898 - 1902: Member of original Moscow Art Theater troupe (together with Olga Knipper, Chekhov’s wife); plays Ivan Shuisky (uncle to Pushkin’s Prince Vasily) and then Ivan the Terrible in first two plays of A. K. Tolstoy’s Dramatic Trilogy

1905: Works in Stanislavsky’s Theater Studio on Symbolist drama

1908 – 18: Director for both opera and drama at Imperial Theaters, St. Petersburg

1911: Maryinskii Theater: Advises a production of Musorgsky’s Boris Godunov with Chaliapine in title role (not a success)

1918: Joins Communist Party

1918 - 19: Supervises Advanced Stage Design Course in Petrograd for student directors, which produces various sketches of sets for Pushkin’s Boris Godunov

1919: Arrested and imprisoned by the White Army; in his prison diary works out a theory of Pushkin’s dramaturgy. Composes a screen play Tsarevich Dmitrii and Grigorii Otrepiev (where the two boys meet)

1924-26: Rehearses Pushkin’s Boris Godunov in the Third Studio of the Vakhtangov Theater (wing of Moscow Art Theater) (not realized)

1923 – 38: Directs his own Meyerhold Theater in Moscow; devises actors’ training, set roles or psycho-types; biomechanics. Company tours Berlin and Paris, 1930.

1932: Ground broken for a modernist “total theater” on Mayakovsky Square, Moscow, built to Meyerhold’s specifications; hopes to premiere Pushkin’s play in 1937.

1936 – 37: Rehearses Pushkin’s Boris Godunov, music by Sergei Prokofiev, for the Pushkin Centennial (begins summer 1936; rehearsals dwindle by May 1937)

1938: Meyerhold Theater closed; Meyerhold shamed in Pravda article

1938 – 39: Stanislavsky appoints Meyerhold director of Stanislavsky Opera Theater

1939: Meyerhold arrested in June as a traitor and spy

1940: February 2, after half a year of interrogation and forced confession, Meyerhold shot by firing squad
From Boris Zakhava’s memoir of the 1924-27 Vakhtangov Theater Boris Godunov, “Two Seasons (1923-1925)”:

“Meyerhold wanted the construction to consist of two long, rather narrow benches, or, as he called them, ‘sidewalks,’ arranged one behind the other . . . The action will take place only on these sidewalks, which in some scenes can be connected with staircases. . . . Through chinks in the space between sidewalks, decorative details will appear (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.”

From memoirs and Meyerhold’s rehearsal notebooks, 1936:

“Pushkin did not provide for intermissions ... there mustn’t be a single break lest the thread be lost.” “... 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! Everyone is young!

From the Russian press reviews of the Princeton premiere (April 2007):

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

[ . . . ] “Since Meyerhold often worked with architects, the Princeton School of Architecture was given the job of designing the set for the production. Across the entire stage, from floor to ceiling, elastic tubing was stretched. This tubing could represent trees in a forest; they could be stretched taut and then abruptly released, like bows and arrows in the battle scene. Astonishingly flexible, this tubing could be wound around a person who at that moment was experiencing rage or despair.

“It’s worth mentioning that even this all-important tubing was not an invention of the Americans, but taken from Meyerhold’s own vast artistic workshop. Here’s how Victor Shklovsky [Russian literary critic, Formalist, and film theorist, 1893-1984.—CE] describes the set design in one of Meyerhold’s early 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 . . .

“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 proceeded to compose. . . . The musicians wore fantastical wigs, glowing with neon colors in the style of the 18th century. They (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. . . .

“In the battle scenes, Vasen made use of one of Meyerhold’s physical techniques: a rhythmic, mechanical step, toes to heel, for the soldiers’ march. Prokofiev composed something like a ‘musical caricature,’ using the carnival rhythms of the fife and drum. Technically it was 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.

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For fuller coverage of Princeton's Boris Godunov, see http://slavic.princeton.edu/events/projects/