Russian Coverage of Princeton’s BORIS GODUNOV
April-June 2007
[highlights]

On MIXED-RACE CAST, on it being an AMATEUR STUDENT PRODUCTION, on the SET, and on the FINANCES

[not all of it correct; but no changes are made in the translation]

1. From the sound-script of Первый канал [Pervyi kanal / Channel 1, Moscow)
13 April 2007

Opening words:
“A young negro woman in the role of the boyar Vorotynsky: that’s the first thing the Russian spectator notices about Pushkin’s Comedy about Tsar Boris and Grishka Otrepiev. The Patriarch here is also played by a young woman. Incidentally, this theatrical experiment with Pushkin’s play is considerably deeper than that . . .”

Closing words:
“The costumes and the set design were also student degree work. Theater observers noted that such a large-scale non-commercial project in the USA could only be afforded by an academic institution with huge academic resources. Three performances of Pushkin’s play cost the university $140,000.”

2. From Эхо планеты [Ekho planety] The Echo of the Planet
10 May 2007

Vladimir Rogachev, NY correspondent

“Specialists managed to search out these [archival] materials, and at Princeton university the idea was born to revive the production. It turned into a large-scale scholarly project, ‘Godunov’, in which several departments and centers participated, including the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, the department of Music, the department of Slavic languages and Literature, the department of Architecture, and also the University Orchestra and Chamber Chorus. The Project was opened by upperclassmen in the Architecture department, who, in the Fall of 2006, created sets in the style of Meyerhold, which was credited as their course work . . .

“The participants in the project themselves confessed that they were very worried, laying their work out to the judgment of spectators. So much energy had been invested in it — and mostly, genuine love for Russian culture. However, all their fears turned out to be groundless — the premiere was a huge success. Even the newspaper The New York Times, by no means generous in its praise, devoted to this production two wholly laudatory articles. Of course, to the Russian ear the ‘music’ of Pushkin’s speech sounded quite unusual in English. It was remarkable to see the image of the chronicler Pimen and to hear the famous phrase ‘One record more, the last of all ...’ performed by an Afro-American, and to behold with one’s own eyes, how in the suite of the Russian tsar, there appeared representatives of the African continent. In Alexander Sergeevich’s veins there flowed African blood, of course, but he too could not have imagined that his Boris Godunov would ever be mounted in so distant and mysterious a place as America was at that time. But you quickly forget about all that, under the impression of the acting. And that wasn’t only my evaluation. The entire theater hall, which holds almost a thousand people, was smitten from the very first moment, when the spectators saw the unusual set design and heard Prokofiev’s
marvelous music. The students played wonderfully, and it was difficult to believe that only a few of them had any stage experience. The larger part of them studied in departments far from the theater arts. Thus Andy Brown, who played Boris Godunov, is a future computer programmer; Sam Zetumer, to whom was entrusted Prince Shuisky, a mathematician; Lily Cowles, who played the role of Shuisky, studies Religion. A freshman, Adam Zivkovic, played the role of Grigory Otrepiev splendidly; he already had behind him several years of stage experience and special tutoring. “Never before had I managed to act in any great Russian plays,” the young actor said. “I also study music, and Prokofiev is one of my favorite composers.” At the university Adam plans to continue perfecting his acting skills and along the way to study the Russian language.”

3. From 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 American director Tim Vasen placed a number of musicians, and the conductor Michael Pratt, on the stage. 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.

“When you watch this production, in which for the first time words and music are brought together into the unified whole of a stage performance, you understand how brilliant and captivating this forbidden show would have been at the beginning of 1937. The Princeton production was unique and very interesting, but it had the air of a memorial about it, it did not have and could not have that sharp cutting edge of the present day, which was characteristic both for Meyerhold and for Prokofiev.”

Excerpted by Caryl Emerson
20 May 2007