The Pushkin-Prokofiev-Meyerhold *Boris Godunov* (1936 Moscow, unrealized project; 2007 Princeton “premiere of the unfinished concept” with non-traditional casting)

*The historical story:*

**Tsar Ivan IV** (called “the Terrible” or Awe-Inspiring) …… 1530-1584  
**Dmitry of Uglichen** (Ivan IV’s third son) 1582-1591  
**Boris Godunov** Reigned 1598-1605  

**Fyodor Borisovich**, his son the Tsarevich Reigned spring 1605  
**Dmitry**, called the Pretender Reigned 1606

*The storyteller:*

**Alexander Pushkin** 1799-1837  
Wrote his drama *Boris Godunov* 1825

*The 20th-century theater directors, composers, and rulers*

**Vsevolod Meyerhold** 1874-1940  
**Sergei Prokofiev** 1891-1953  
**Joseph Stalin** rules as General Secretary of the Communist Party ... 1928-1953  
The Pushkin Centennial Jubilee and beginning of the Great Terror …… 1937

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**SYNOPSIS** of Pushkin’s Play

[Scene 1] *1598, 20 February. Palace in the Kremlin.* Princes Shuisky and Vorotynsky discuss Boris Godunov’s feign of reluctance to accept the crown.

[Scene 2] *Red Square.* Voices from the crowd lament the specter of Russia without a ruler.

[Scene 3] *Maiden’s Field. Novodevichy Convent* [censored from the 1831 published version of Pushkin’s play]. Cynical voices from the crowd. Finally news arrives that Boris has consented.

[Scene 4] *Palace in the Kremlin.* Boris humbles himself before his boyars and the Patriarch and invites Moscow to a coronation feast.

[Scene 5] *The Year 1603. Night. A Cell in the Chudov Monastery.* The old monk Pimen is entering the criminal reign of Boris Godunov into his chronicle; Grigory the novice listens.

[Scene 6] *Monastery Wall. Grigory and an Evil Monk* Grigory complains to a fellow monk about the tedium of monastery life and a monk suggests that he assume the name of Dmitry.

[Scene 7]: *The Patriarch’s Palace.* The Patriarch complains to an abbot about this outrageous Pretender and promises to seize him and send him to a distant monastery for penance.

[Scene 8]: *The Tsar’s Palace.* One long monologue by the harassed Tsar Boris, who has consulted sorcerers to explain the disasters of his realm. “Pity on he whose conscience is unclean.”

[Scene 9]: *A Tavern on the Polish Border.* Misail, Varlaam and Otrepiev at a tavern when two policemen enter with a warrant for one “Grishka Otrepiev.” Grigory escapes through a window.

[Scene 10]: *Moscow. Shuisky’s House.* Afanasy Pushkin discusses with Shuisky in the tyranny of Boris’s reign, the omnipresence of informers, and the country’s rebellious mood.
[Scene 11]: The Tsar’s Palace. Tsar Boris’s children, Ksenia and Fyodor, with their nurse. The comforts his widowed daughter. Shuisky turns up to provide news of the Polish pretender.

[Scene 12] Krakow. Wisnowiecki’s house. The Pretender meets members of his power base: a Catholic priest, Polish magnates, Russian émigrés, disgruntled Cossacks, Prince Kurbsky.]

[Scene 13] Mniszech’s castle in Sambor. Marina’s dressing room. The beautiful Marina, being courted by the Pretender, is being dressed by her talkative maid Rozia.


[Scene 15] Night. Garden. Fountain. The lovestruck Pretender confesses to Marina his true identity. Only when the Pretender scorns her and assures her that she will be silenced should she try to expose him, does she come around; now “she hears the words of a man and not a boy.”

[Scene 16] The Polish border. The Pretender and Kurbsky on horseback at the Russian border. Kurbsky is ecstatic; the Pretender regrets the shedding of Russian blood.

[Scene 17] The Tsar’s Council. The Tsar, Patriarch and boyars meet to discuss the news of the Pretender’s invasion. The Patriarch recounts the story of a blind man whose sight was miraculously restored at Dmitry’s grave. Tsar Boris is in anguish.

[Scene 18] Square in front of the Cathedral. Moscow. Tsar Boris exits the Cathedral when a holy fool, Nikolkha, teased by a group of unruly boys, asks the Tsar to slit their throats the way he had slit the young tsarevich’s.


[Scene 20] The Pretender at Sevsk, surrounded by his men. Another comic military scene: the Pretender interrogates a Russian prisoner, a Polish officer insults a Russian prisoner, who promises him a taste of the Russian national weapon: the bare fist. The Pretender laughs.

[Scene 21] Forest. The False Dmitri has just suffered a devastating defeat and falls asleep. His companion Gavrila Pushkin wonders how this defeated commander can be so confident.

[Scene 22] Moscow, the Tsar’s Palace. After giving orders to his commander Basmanov, Boris collapses and dies, after delivering a long, moving, farewell to his son. Boris is shorn as a monk.

[Scene 23] Field Headquarters. Gavrila Pushkin tries to persuade Basmanov, now in command of Fyodor Borisovich’s troops, to defect to the Pretender.

[Scene 24] Red Square. Gavrila Pushkin addresses the people of Moscow that the True Dmitry is marching on the city to liberate it from the usurper tsar Boris, Basmanov has declared for Dmitry. =

[Scene 25] The Kremlin. House of the Godunovs. Tsar Fyodor and his sister Ksenia are slain by the Pretender’s advance guard. The crowd is ordered to cheer Tsar Dmitry Ivanovich. In the two endings to the play, the people either cheer, or refuse to respond. The Princeton production does both.