

# Riot Police, Hipsters Star in Charged 'Boris Godunov'

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ST. PETERSBURG — Looking at one's reflection in the mirror can be a most sobering sight. This is certainly the case with British director Graham Vick's daring new production of Modest Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov."

An imposing-looking, broad-shouldered man in a silver suit digs out the Monomach's Cap, the symbol of the Russian throne, and in a somewhat shaky gesture, puts it on his head, waving away the assistance offered by a servant. Russian rulers are not in favor of formalities.

It is no coincidence that in Vick's production, the coronation scene effectively becomes a self-coronation, and this triumph of blatant cynicism hits the mark perfectly. No matter what the regime — monarchy, communist autocracy or "managed democracy" — Russian rulers do not seem to need any outside help in reaching the throne. After all, didn't Putin and Medvedev ultimately crown themselves, with the voters being reduced to dummies?

Vick stops short of ridiculing Russia. Rather, the director acts akin to a surgeon, carefully

and meticulously exposing the many absurdities and peculiarities that are key to the reality to which the country is so accustomed. From the boyars' WAGS draped in furs and oversized sunglasses to the police officers surreptitiously accepting backhanders from illegal immigrants, the action on the stage of the Mariinsky represented a microcosm of Russian life.

It would be fair to call the production politically charged, although the director explores the subject in multiple dimensions. The characters that we see on stage bear the habits, dress style and manners that surround us in real life. A young cleaner in a striptease bar where the runaway monk Grigory Otrepyev is partying looks stealthily around before making a few seductive moves. The girl clearly dreams of changing her job. The Holy Fool resembles a hybrid of a hipster bohemian — not dissimilar to some members of the crowd during the recent protests in Moscow — and the flamboyant businessman Yevgeny Chichvarkin, who was in the habit of hanging around business forums in brightly colored sneakers and T-shirts.

Mariinsky star bass-baritone Yevgeny Nikitin creates a very complex and charismatic Boris. There is nothing in his powerful rendition of the role of a misanthropic freak, which is what far too many directors make of Godunov. Rather, this is a highly intelligent and willful leader who has made too many deals with his conscience, which begins to bleed as profusely as some of the tsar's victims.

Do modern Russian leaders ever feel remorse? This question, which bothers hundreds of thousands of Russian people — and, let us be honest, quite a number of people outside the country — remains unanswered in Vick's production. Yet the show makes a competent enough warning to the more shameless members of the ruling elite that if one's ascent to power is paved with corpses and injustice, rest assured that a bill from hell will be sure to arrive.

Boris's last moments are engulfed in anger — his governed failed to appreciate any of his efforts — and remorseful hallucinations, in which the tormented tsar mistakes his own horrified son for the murdered Prince Dmitry. No less bitter are the scenes of mass protests, the demonstrators numerous but disorganized, that are violently dispersed by the riot police.

The finale sees Godunov making a speech in a hall closely resembling the State Duma. As the ill-fated monarch suffers a heart attack and begins to fall, no helping hand is offered. Rather, the crowd starts to retreat quietly from the scene. The slow agony continues in the already empty hall, with the tsar's young son desperately trying to get help. A television crew muscles in to document the ruler's final breaths. One habit that Russia's governed appear to have learned from their governors is being unceremonious: A mournful procession bearing wreaths covers the dying tsar with flowers before he has even taken his last breath, ignoring his plea "I am still alive."

Mariinsky Theater Artistic Director Valery Gergiev chose Mussorgsky's original 1869 version of the opera. It has a strong rebellion theme and focuses on Boris's inner drama, which initially frightened critics.

The Mariinsky symphony orchestra delivered a magnificent performance Friday, sensitive to both Mussorgsky's score and Vick's interpretation. The rapport with the director's take on the piece was remarkable, resulting in an intense and suspenseful drama. Vick's admirable courage received strong backing from Gergiev and his musicians, bringing audiences one

of the most thought-provoking and emotionally captivating shows the city has seen in some time.

"Boris Godunov" next plays June 26 at the Mariinsky Theater, 1 Teatralnaya Ploshchad. St. Petersburg. Tel. (812) 326-4141. [www.mariinsky.ru](http://www.mariinsky.ru)

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