

Bogomolov Revamps Pushkin's 'Boris Godunov'

By [John Freedman](#)

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Zbuyev plays 17th-century ruler Boris Godunov in a compelling modern take on Pushkin's verse tragedy.

In "Boris Godunov" at the Lenkom Theater, director Konstantin Bogomolov somehow found a way to do what probably should have been impossible. He combined his trademark penchant for kitschy excess with a sense of deep and considered understatement.

The result is a powerful, outspoken modern take on one of the first classic Russian plays ever written.

Alexander Pushkin wrote his verse tragedy "Boris Godunov" in 1825. It took a couple of decades to pass the censor, but this retelling of the power struggle leading to Russia's Time of Troubles in the early 17th century became an acknowledged masterpiece virtually the moment the ink on it dried.

Bogomolov treats the piece with the kind of back-handed reverence that any contemporary

upstart would be proud of. He inserts wacky transitions, radically adapts scenes to his needs and adds a character when one is needed. The scene of the poet Pushkin chatting by Skype with his relative Pushkin (indeed a character in the play) is only one of the many witty, yet low-key, innovations that the director introduces.

The action begins with a wickedly staged television interview in which an aggressively loud, acid-tongued reporter (Yelena Yesinina) unleashes her fury primarily on the poor couch potatoes watching the broadcast. This gives the production the ring of truth right from the start.

Shortly thereafter comes, perhaps, the biggest challenge that the director tosses at his audience all night long. Against the backdrop of an empty and silent stage, a half-dozen video monitors show a series of texts that, in abbreviated form, read: "The people gather on a square. They wait patiently. The people are scum."

I heard a couple of gasps when the "people are scum" text appeared — I don't know if they were offended for themselves or their neighbors. In any case, there was much more to come.

Bogomolov, keeping his stage empty and silent, put a temporary halt to the performance by methodically running the series of texts a full 10 times in a row. Somewhere around the fifth time, though, a voice in the audience began to complain. It got louder and louder each time the texts were repeated, until others joined in the revolt. Finally the disgruntled spectator appealed by name to actor Alexander Zbruyev, who plays Godunov, and who had just come on stage: "Alexander Viktorovich! You should be ashamed!"

Zbruyev/Godunov whipped out a pistol and fired it into the dark hall. A second or two later the "dead spectator" leapt to his feet again and shouted, "Finally! Some theater!"

Aside from such risky detours, the story that unfolds is that of Godunov, who presumably had the infant heir apparent Dmitry murdered in his bed years ago, and of the wayward monk Grigory Otrepyev, who passes himself off as the miraculously survived Dmitry. .

Zbruyev's Godunov is a charming, smiling man who always has his wits about him, whether he is strangling his sister to death in a convent or lording over a drunken barbecue on a Kremlin lawn with his henchmen.

Igor Mirkurbanov's Otrepyev is a dark, sinister gangster type, from whose face an arrogant sneer almost never disappears, even when he is appealing to the Polish court to support his "candidacy" as the heir to the Russian throne. He nearly ruins his chances when he admits to the cold, ruthlessly ambitious Polish Princess Marina Mniszech that he has fallen in love with her. He falls back on his own cutthroat nature quickly enough to convince her that he would never let affections undermine his rise to power.

Maria Mironova plays Mniszech with a numbingly callous stoicism that reflects much in Bogomolov's production.

For all the director's innovations — a sexy, but unisex young woman (Maria Fomina) playing Godunov's son, and newsreels of Josef Stalin, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Putin's presidential cortege passing through a deserted Moscow on March 7, 2012 — this "Boris

Godunov" is reserved in its tone and deliberate in its tempo. It repeatedly induces an audience that wants more and faster to settle for less and slower.

It is a tactic that makes you think — at least in those moments when you're not laughing or offended.

"Boris Godunov" plays Nov. 18, 19 and 30 at 7 p.m. at the [Lenkom Theater](#). 6 Malaya Dmitrovka. Metro Chekhovskaya, Pushkinskaya. 495-699-0708. Running time: 3 hours, 15 minutes.

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