

Boris Godunov

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Covent Garden

If, like me, you think that a good conductor is the sine qua non for any vital operatic performance, you should go to Covent Garden to hear how magnificently Yuri Ahronovitch is handling the revival of Boris Godunov, mounted to celebrate Boris Christoff's twenty-fifth anniversary in the house and the role (the actual day is November 19). On Wednesday evening Mr. Ahronovitch gave comfort and encouragement to his players, phrased with his singers, and exalted everyone to ever greater heights of eloquence.

His reading was impulsive and inspirational. Tempi often fluctuated wildly (with many very slow), there were sudden pianissimo and forte outbursts, but in some he fired chorus and orchestra to make the most of both Mussorgsky's subtlety of exposition and Rimsky's glosses on it. Hugs and kisses at the end showed just how much Christoff appreciated such a strong guiding hand in the pit. Christoff himself was at his most histrionic, positively reveling in the grandest melodramatic gestures in depicting the Tsar's decline and fall. The voice, hardly touched by time, was played on like a well-loved cello for every shade of colour and dynamic.

Despite the title of the work, the protagonist is on stage for less time than the collective amount of the many supporting players. And here the Royal Opera played another trump card, with casting from strength right down to the last-act Jesuits. In the Polish act Josephine Veasey presented to the life the voluptuous, hedonistic, ambitious Princess Marina, and she was aptly partnered by Jon Andrew's mock-heroic Pretender: Mr Andrew's spinto tones have been lost to our opera houses for far too long.

As so many times in the past, John Lanigan's egregious Shuiski was an apt antagonist to Christoff's Boris, and Anne Pashley's Feodor, Elizabeth Gale's Xenia and Johanna Peters's Nurse created a sense of a disturbed yet homely Tsarist household.

Among the middle and lower orders of feudal Russia, Robert Lloyd spun a wonderful mezza voce in Shchekalove's foreboding pronouncement, Gwynne Howell was a sympathetic, adamant Pimen, Raimund Henrinx, a properly insinuating, leering Rangoni, and Michael Langdon repeated his familiarly gross Varlaam. Robert Tear did all he should with that gift of a part, the Simpleton.

At this stage of its life the old production is best forgotten, and forgotten it surely will be if and when Gotz Friedrich is invited to direct it, hopefully in one of the original Mussorgsky versions. But for the present Christoff, Ahronovitch and the rest make a visit to Covent Garden imperative on musical grounds alone.