

## BORIS GODUNOV SYNOPSIS

### ***Scene 1: Outside the Novodevichy Monastery, near Moscow, 1598***

Police force Russian peasants into begging Boris Godunov to claim Russia's vacant throne—but Shchelkalov, secretary of the Duma, reveals that Boris is refusing to become Tsar. Shchelkalov requests that they pray Boris relents. A procession of pilgrims passes, obediently praying to God for help.

### ***Scene 2: A square in the Kremlin, 1598***

Cheering crowds and the great bells of Moscow signal Boris's coronation. As the procession leaves the cathedral, Boris appears. Haunted by a strange foreboding, he prays for God's blessing. Addressing his people, he invites them all to a feast. The crowds rejoice.

### ***Scene 3: A cell in the Chudov Monastery, 1603***

Within the dark Chudov monastery, an old monk named Pimen is completing his history of Russia. The novice Grigory awakens from a nightmare and asks Pimen about the dead Tsarevich Dimitri, legal heir to the Russian throne. Pimen tells him of the murder of Dimitri. Boris was implicated in the murder and by now Dimitri would have been Grigory's age and the rightful Tsar. Left alone, Grigory condemns Boris and is determined to take justice into his own hands.

### ***Scene 4: An inn near the Lithuanian border***

Near the Lithuanian border, an Innkeeper welcomes three guests—two noisy, drunken friars, Varlaam and Missail, and Grigory, who has now assumed the role of the Pretender Dimitri and is hiding for fear of capture. He waits while attempting to slip across the border and rally support while hoping to expose Boris. Varlaam passes the time with a song about the siege of Kazan and then dozes off. Grigory questions the Innkeeper, and learns that sentries have been posted to intercept a fugitive. The Innkeeper assures Grigory that she knows a way around them. The guards arrive. The officer brings a warrant for the arrest of a renegade monk, and although he cannot read it, he assumes it must be Varlaam. Grigory reads the warrant on his behalf, substituting Varlaam's description for his own. But Varlaam can read. Grigory escapes, pursued by the police.

### ***Scene 5: The Tsar's apartments, The Imperial Palace, Moscow***

Tsarevich Fyodor is working on a map, while a nurse attempts to comfort his sister Xenia, who is lamenting the death of her fiancé. Boris enters and looks at the map and realm with his son. Boris realizes that although he now stands in supreme power, his reign has brought him no happiness. Prince Shuisky is announced by a Boyar who also whispers that Shuisky and others were seen conspiring that night waiting for a messenger from Krakow. Shuisky brings word that a Pretender has surfaced in Poland and has garnered the support of the Pope and the King and nobles in Poland. He is told that the Pretender is now claiming to be Dimitri and asks how a dead child can possibly be the Tsar. Boris promises to forgive Shuisky for his acts of treason if he tells the truth as to whether or not the real Dimitri was killed at Uglich. Assuring Boris that he was, Shuisky leaves. Boris is overwhelmed with terror and has visions of Dimitri's ghost. Stricken with remorse, he begs God's forgiveness for his crime.

## BORIS GODUNOV SYNOPSIS

### ***Scene 6: The Granovitaya Hall in the Kremlin, 1605***

At a special session of the Council of Boyars, an edict is being drawn up against the Pretender. Shchelkalov reads it aloud and the Boyars debate the phrasing and context. Shuisky rushes in with the astonishing account of how he observed Boris's anguish over the imagined ghost of the murdered Dimitri. The Boyars' protests are silenced by the appearance of Boris, who echoes Shuisky's description; he insists that the child lives and announces that Shuisky will be punished for saying otherwise. Shuisky distracts Boris by saying that Pimen is waiting outside for an audience with the Tsar. The old monk tells of a shepherd, blind from childhood, who miraculously found his sight restored praying at the grave of Dimitri. Boris collapses. Feeling his death near, he calls for Fyodor. Boris bids him farewell and tells him to rule wisely, upholding the Orthodox faith. As bells solemnly toll, he prays for forgiveness. Appointing his son as the new Tsar, Boris dies.

### ***Scene 7: A clearing in a forest near Kromy***

The Russian people have switched their allegiances to Dimitri and hail him as enthusiastically as they formerly greeted Boris. The unruly crowd drags in the captured boyar Krushchov and torments him. Varlaam and Missail denounce the crimes of Boris, they stir the mob into a frenzy. When two Jesuits appear, chanting their support for Dimitri, the crowd turns its fury on them and decides to have them hanged. As they are dragged away, the Pretender arrives, hailed by the monks and crowd. Dimitri grants clemency to Krushchov and summons the tempestuous crowd to take up his cause. The two Jesuits join in the triumphant procession. The Holy Fool is left alone in the clearing, with flames from a burning village visible in the distance. He sings a lament, weeping for the fate of the Russian people. All is unresolved . . . a new troubling time has only just begun . . .