

The libretto in brief

Prologue

Courtyard of the Novod'evič'i monastery.

The year 1598. A police officer orders the crowd to kneel and to beg Boris Godunov, who has retired to the Novodevič'i monastery outside Moscow, to accept the throne. The crowd obeys, without really understanding the situation. The boyar Andrej Ščelkalov, secretary to the Duma, addresses the assembly, announcing that Boris has so far remained deaf to their prayers and is reluctant to accept the throne. Only divine enlightenment might persuade him to do so. From a distance is heard the sound of pilgrims chanting; they exhort the population to go to the future tsar bearing the sacred icons, and warn against the satanic forces that threaten Russia. The people are perturbed but do not understand. The official orders everyone to go the following morning to the Kremlin. The crowd scatters, commenting cynically on the event.

Moscow, Kremlin square.

A few months have gone by and Boris has agreed to ascend the throne. The Kremlin bells ring, as prince Vasilij Šujskij orders the people to acclaim the new tsar. Boris makes his appearance but is plagued by sinister omens and prays for a blessing from heaven. He goes off to be crowned in the cathedral of the Archangel, inviting the population to join in the festivity. The sound of bells and acclamations from the crowd resume.

Act I

A cell in the Monastery of the Miracles.

Five years have elapsed. It is night. The old monk Pimen is finishing his chronicles of the events he has witnessed in his lifetime. The young monk Grigorij, who shares the cell with him, is woken suddenly by a nightmare, but calms down when he sees the old man writing his history. Grigorij recounts his recurrent dream: he was at the top of a tall tower overlooking Moscow, from which he could see the people deriding him, until he fell into the void. Grigorij complains of his life as a recluse, but Pimen soothes him, recommends fasting and prayer and reminds him that sometimes even the tsars themselves, weary of the world, retreat to monasteries. Then he tells the young monk about the assassination, which he personally witnessed, of the zarevič Dmitrij: the child stabbed, the tsarina's desperation and the suspicions that soon fell on Boris Godunov. If the zarevič had survived, he would now be about twenty years old, Grigorij's age. Left alone in the cell, the young monk avows to revenge the boy's murder: Boris shall not escape the judgement of God and men.

An inn near the Lithuanian border.

Two wandering friars, Misail and Varlaam, arrive on the scene with Grigorij, who has escaped from the monastery and is anxious to cross the border. Varlaam drinks and sings a song about the capture of Kazan' by Ivan the Terrible. While the two friars get drunk, Grigorij questions the innkeeper's wife, who

tells him of an unguarded path by which he can reach Lithuania. But the police have discovered the monk's escape and two frontier guards enter with a warrant for his arrest. Since neither of the two can read, Grigorij turns the suspicions onto Varlaam and has him arrested instead. The latter however reads the document and unmask Grigorij, who threatens the guards with a knife and manages to get away through the window.

Act II

Moscow, the Tsar's apartments at the Kremlin.

Boris's son and daughter, Fëdor and Ks'enija, are with their old nurse. Kšenija mourns her lost fiancé, while Fëdor studies a map of Russia. Boris enters, consoles Kšenija and asks her to leave; he then listens with interest to his son, who recites his lesson on Russian geography. Boris recommends him to study hard, for one day that kingdom will be his. Engrossed in his thoughts, Boris thinks back over the years of his reign, of its difficulties and failures. But heaviest on his mind is the vile deed whose memory torments his conscience. A chamberlain announces that prince Šujskij is asking for an audience. Boris receives him and is informed that in Lithuania a pretender to the throne has appeared. Supported by the king, the nobility and the pope, he claims to be the zarevič Dmitrij. Boris is upset and asks if the child assassinated in the town of Uglič really was the zarevič. He receives an answer in the affirmative from Šujskij, who tells him that he has himself been several times to pray at the slain boy's tomb. Now still more shaken, Boris dismisses the prince and is left a prey to his hallucinations, believing that he can see the ghost of his victim.

Act III

A square in front of St Basil's Cathedral.

The people, wretched and hungry, gather in the square. In the cathedral an anathema is proclaimed against the usurper Grigorij and a requiem is held for the zarevič Dmitrij. The congregation makes ironic comments,

since rumours have already spread that Dmitrij is alive and marching on Moscow at the head of an army. The Simpleton advances, followed by a band of robbers who rob him of his only coin. At that moment Boris comes out of the cathedral. The crowd asks for bread. The Simpleton demands justice and asks him to have the robbers killed as he had the little tsarevich slain. Šujskij would arrest him, but Boris intervenes and asks the Simpleton to pray for him. The Simpleton refuses, declaring that he is not entitled to pray for Herod, and bemoans the sad fate of Russia.

Moscow, a hall in the Kremlin.

Before the council of boyars, Ščelkalov expounds the case of the usurper Grigorij, who claims to be Dmitrij and has attempted to foment an uprising against Boris. The boyars pass a resolution that the usurper be captured and executed. After a while prince S'ujskij enters to report that he has personally witnessed Boris's hallucinations. Boris too now appears, still suffering from visions. He is informed that an old monk wishes to speak to him. He is Pimen, who tells the tsar of a miraculous tale heard from an old shepherd. The man, who has been blind since birth, hears one night in a dream the voice of a young boy, who tells him he is the zarevič Dmitrij and urges him to go and pray at his tomb. Having obeyed, the man regained his sight. This news, proving the sanctity of the zarevič's martyrdom, delivers a mortal blow to Boris. The tsar calls for his son to be brought to him, takes his leave and, after indicating him to the Boyar assembly as his successor, collapses dead.