



# KARAMAZOV

## INTERVIEW WITH JEAN BELLORINI

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**You've directed stage adaptations of Victor Hugo, Rabelais, Bertolt Brecht, Ferenc Molnár, Ödön von Horváth, and now Dostoyevsky... Would you say you're a moralist?**

**Jean Bellorini:** I don't think so. Or if I once was, I may be becoming more of a nihilist. Rabelais, then Dostoyevsky, I can see it; it's like a thread, a sequence. *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, it's more than just the continuation of a theme. It's not enough to say that there are two parts to us, that Good and Evil struggle within us; human beings are much more complex than that. Dostoyevsky asks the question of the necessity of God, which is ignored in *The Good Person of Szechwan*—gods there are seen as a fairy tale. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, that's what messes with everything, with the question of Good and Evil: the attempt to understand why we invented God to be able to stand life, to give everything meaning. That's my obsession. I think man is a creature of belief, inherently. So my question would be: why does man need to come up with those figures, those religions, in order to elevate himself, to build himself? I chose *The Brothers Karamazov* because I recognised something in the evolution at its heart, and because of the unfortunate coincidence with what's going on around us. Twenty years ago, I don't think those questions would have had the same echo. Since the 1970s, we'd broken free from them. That's no longer the case at all. It's strange to feel contemporary in a society that is less modern than thirty years ago. For instance, why is marriage on the rise again? It's very surprising. Similarly, some time ago, there was an obsession with "killing the father." It's something I never believed in, but that has always fascinated me. There are people who gave me the strength to be independent, people I see as fathers and who, sincerely, I've never felt the need to kill. I've never been an adolescent in that sense, I never had to go through that rebellious phase; or maybe I'm still going through it, and it's been the same for the past thirty-three years. All those questions seemed to have been answered definitely, but it turns out that's less the case than ever.

**When talking about Good and Evil, is it the theological aspect, with the idea of judgment, or the idea of personal morality that interests you the most?**

What's beautiful in *The Brothers Karamazov* is that it delves deeply into both. More than Good and Evil, it is Justice and Injustice that are at the centre of the novel. And moreover: what justice? The personal—what we believe, what we're ready to accept—becomes as important as religion. What I'm interested in is that contradiction: how, as a necessarily tiny being in a huge world, one can make mistakes and die of guilt—like the child Ilyusha, who discovers the feeling of sin by feeding a dog a piece of bread with a pin in it—and how, on the other hand, one can try to do the right thing, like Alexei Karamazov, one can try to be honest, without being able to escape a society that is anything but. For Dostoyevsky, the figure of Jesus is a central one, but I don't care about that, because what matters is the image of religion: God accepts to become flesh, then to abandon us. Salvation can't be won, it's a lie. It's that opposition that tells us about injustice in the realm of men and in the realm of God. There isn't any justice anywhere.

**Is our world in a similarly sad state?**

Absolutely. That violence, that void, surround us today. Without a dramatic change in education, if things remain as they are, we're headed for cynicism, for a complete disregard of human justice. That's no longer what makes us human. Everything is possible, everything is accepted, so everything happens; and I mean in all our societies. Except maybe at the theatre, which you come out of as a better person, or a "less bad" one, at the very least rebuilt, because you just shared something that is neither political—because everything in politics has been perverted—nor religious—because everything in religion is crazy—nor moral. I could have named the show *Ivan*, because in the novel, he's the true mystic, the one whose mind is suddenly set ablaze. Alyosha is convinced a little too easily, he is duped and begins a quest without ever being able to shake off his doubts. A big influence has been Dostoyevsky's desire to write a sequel to *The Brothers Karamazov*. André Markowicz told me that Alyosha would have come back as a terrorist trying to bring down the empire. It's strange to think that his path, all kindness and innocence, could be the impulse for such a drastic change. That's the genius of Dostoyevsky's epic which pretends to draw archetypes that would allow us to identify with one of them and instead shows us how we're in every single one of them. It's that humanity, in all its complexity, that is interesting and rich.

**You decided to adapt and direct *The Brothers Karamazov* after hearing Patrice Chéreau read “The Grand Inquisitor” at the Théâtre du Soleil in 2008. What happened that night?**

It was the first time I understood one could tackle the question of religion with such a degree of precision, in such a concrete manner, while also talking so openly about Man. The same way a painting from the Renaissance or a Pietà, which are works that depend so heavily on their context and are about a specific period in time, can nonetheless touch us deeply, move us more than anything else. It’s part of my interrogations about “belief.” I’ve always felt uncomfortable with piety if it doesn’t leave open the question of mystery. Listening to Chéreau, I thought: “Yes, we can talk about this being we call Jesus—who would have come down then left, who would have met us then let us go—without talking about anything but Man and its posture before the world, beyond any idea of religion.” Vertigo might be the right word here. That’s why I always come back to the children in *The Brothers Karamazov*, to naivety, to the more basic feeling you’ll find in the meeting of Smurov and Ilyusha. When Smurov comes back and witnesses the death of his friend, it’s so simple, and yet it contains all that’s come before, all the vertiginous events that Mitya, Ivan, and Alyosha have gone through... In that one scene, which is at first glance not about belief, the Christian religion, or the notions of Good and Evil, you can see, standing so close to the smallest people, the many big questions asked by other passages like “The Grand Inquisitor”.

**Will there be children on the stage?**



At first, I thought about having several children that would represent the chorus of characters from the novel, the ones who throw stones, like a recurring motif. Then I thought the entire troupe could play the children. Finally, I decided to have the troupe play Ilyusha’s family: the mother, the captain, the two daughters, Ilyusha himself—the dying son—and the children that surround them, Smurov and his friends. I feel like this chorus of little people, humble and not yet perverted nor conscious of a rotten inner world, could tell the tragedy of the loss of the child—the brother, the son, the friend—and, through that, remember his encounter with Alyosha, then Alyosha’s story about Ivan, and Mitya, and their father, up until the murder of the father... We’d enter through Ilyusha’s family to experience the whole saga of the Karamazov. Within that family that tells that story in the present tense, Ilyusha, the dying son, is indeed played by a child. As if everything about the captain’s house, its poverty, its humbleness, almost a smallness of mind, had to be seen “for real.” The idea of glass, of transparency, is everywhere. That’s me exploring another one of my obsessions: can people see what’s inside me, or are they more interested in how I try to describe it, in the living soul of the character who thus becomes a poet? For now, we’ve built glass cabins, either a dacha or a prison. They create a feeling of imprisonment while also letting us see everything because the characters exist almost in a vacuum. My feeling is that we can have both neutral boxes where human feelings will be exposed as well as a glass room in which the captain’s family will be, where narration will be unnecessary, where there will be no need to feed the audience’s imagination because everything will be visible. To caricature a little, the chorus will be cinema, the other characters theatre. As if we wanted not to tell but to show this world and, conversely, tell rather than show the rest.

**This idea of chorality is often at the heart of your direction. Why’s that? “Does the individual not matter?”**

That’s when the individual matters most, but the one who hears rather than the one who speaks. When the chorus comes together, the spectator is no longer part of a group. I’m reversing the usual pattern that has a group of spectators in the room and individuals on the stage. When you put a chorus on the stage, everyone in the room feels more alive.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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