Books & arts

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Sins of the fathers

A masterful director brings Dostoyevsky's characters to life

For Lev Dodin, as for the author, Alyosha is the most important of "The Brothers Karamazov"

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ST PETERSBURG

A SPOTLIGHT SEARCHES the dark stage of the Maly Drama Theatre in St Petersburg. It picks out a young man in a monk's robe sitting on a chair, a suitcase on his lap. He rises, changes into secular clothes and steps towards a metal wall. The wall, in turn, moves towards the character; he passes through it, as if being x-rayed, and into the world of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's final novel, "The

Brothers Karamazov".

Listen to this story

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The monk is Alyosha, youngest of the three legitimate sons of Fyodor Karamazov, an avaricious "buffoon" who wallows in sin and is murdered by one —or more—or all—of his offspring. Karamazov has a fourth, illegitimate son, Smerdyakov, an epileptic servant whose mother, a homeless halfwit, he raped. The story of patricide has the outline of a country-house murder mystery. But in what became one of the world's most influential novels, Dostoyevsky, who was born 200 years ago in 1821, weaves in profound themes of faith, temptation and inherited guilt.

Of the three brothers, readers usually sympathise most with Dmitry, the impulsive, passionate and archetypally Russian eldest, or Ivan, a cold, rational Westernised intellectual who repudiates God before going insane and conversing with the devil. Alyosha, a blushing monk who shuttles between the brothers and their lovers, carrying messages and receiving confessions, can seem too wholesome to vie with his siblings for attention.

Yet in a short introduction it is Alyosha whom Dostoyevsky names as his main character. Lev Dodin, one of Europe's greatest theatre directors, agrees. "The introduction is perhaps the most important part of the novel for me," he says. Marking the author's bicentenary, his production distils the 1,000-page saga into a three-hour spectacle, sweeping audiences from breathless passion to the darkest recesses of the human condition. A gripping reimagining of an elemental tale, it evokes traumas fictional and real, in Dostoyevsky's era and today's.And here, sweet, devout Alyosha is the greatest sinner of all.

Set in the mid-19th century, "The Brothers Karamazov", wrote Dostoyevsky, was only the first part of a "life-chronicle" of Alyosha. "The principal novel is the second—an account of my hero's doings in our own times, that is to say, at our present-day current moment." The book was published in 1880; Dostoyevsky died that winter and never revealed what happens to Alyosha in the "present

day".According to some accounts, the character was to become a revolutionary and help kill the tsar before being executed himself.

Neither did Dostoyevsky live to see the real-life assassination of a tsar later in 1881 or the murder of another during the Russian revolution. But his anguished writing is widely thought to have anticipated the horrors of the 20th century. Mr Dodin, who was born in 1944 into a Jewish family that had fled the siege of Leningrad, has lived and worked in their shadows. Four years in the making, his version of "The Brothers Karamazov" is less an adaptation than an engrossing conversation with an author who has preoccupied him all his life. Almost all the words come from Dostoyevsky, but the arrangement is Mr Dodin's. In that opening sequence, he places Alyosha in the "current moment", then sends him back into the world of the novel.

Alyosha's father and brothers emerge from beneath the stage, as though brought back from the dead. A timeless heap of old chairs in the corner are the principal props. Mr Dodin dispenses with many of the book's characters, retaining only the men of the Karamazov household and two women who are the source and subject of love, lechery and hatred. Stripped down to its essence, this is strictly a family affair, the looming sense of an ancestral curse recalling Greek tragedy. There is no small talk. Played by the virtuoso actors of Mr Dodin's regular ensemble, the characters get straight down to business. "Have you come to save the world? I don't think that is possible," Ivan tells Alyosha.

Not only will Alyosha fail to save the world; in the play, at least, he discovers that it is not worth saving. He learns that all these people who profess to live, die and kill for love in fact love nobody. As for himself, "the more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular." He is the ultimate Karamazov brother, he realises, the embodiment of all three in one. "It is not that I rebel against my God," he says, echoing Ivan's views, "but I don't accept and can't accept the world He has created." Alyosha gives in to temptation, convulsing in shame and ecstasy when Grushenka—his brother Dmitry's mistress and the object of his father's lust—seduces him.

"I am the same as you in kind," he tells Dmitry, who observes this scene. "The ladder's the same. I'm at the bottom step, and you're above...Anyone on the bottom step is bound to go up to the top one." Virtue is merely a mirage, and unbridled human nature can divert even the best intentions. Afterwards, Alyosha sits between Grushenka's spread legs, the tableau suggesting a sexual

clinch but at the same time, shockingly, resembling an icon of the Madonna. As Mr Dodin summarises, in this story, "people don't just talk about Hell". They are living in it.

Dressed in period costumes, Mr Dodin's characters make no explicit comment on contemporary Russian politics. But as with all great art, the production is a cardiogram of its time, registering modern Russia's rhythms and defects. Dostoyevsky, says Mr Dodin, is always an inescapable presence, "but today he is screaming", amid "the crushing of humanism, the cliff-edge of despair". The life unfolding on stage pulsates with energy. Equally, the world of the play is devoid of kindness or mercy.

Into the darkness

The contrast with another celebrated production is telling. In 1910 the Moscow Art Theatre, under the brilliant leadership of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, put on a version of "The Brothers Karamazov" that spread over two evenings. Hailed as a milestone in Russian cultural life, it captured a widespread premonition of cataclysm yet was filled with compassion. Critics likened it to an epic mystery play. "The spirit of God is in the air," thought Alexandre Benois, a writer and artist, who was reminded of ecclesiastical light and Easter bells. For Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, the story "opened the door not so much to Greek tragedy, but to the Bible".

Mr Dodin reveres their theatre and shares its aim of excavating the truth. But he does not open any biblical doors. There are no Easter bells. There is no God and no devil here, "only destiny", as Smerdyakov says when confessing to finishing off old Karamazov. Doubling as a suicide-note, his speech is addressed as much to the audience as to his brothers: "You are very clever. You are fond of money, you are far too fond of female charms, and you mind most of all about living in undisturbed comfort."

His eyes glistening, Alyosha gets the last word. "Everyone is guilty," he proclaims, in a rare interpolation by Mr Dodin.

> *I am more guilty than all. I want to burn this city. I will set it ablaze and watch. No: I will set it ablaze and burn with it, because I am this city.*

Through the alchemy of Mr Dodin's craft, the bleakness is offset by the vitality of

the performance, which culminates in a dance that sweeps up the other characters and carries them offstage. Left alone, Alyosha passes back through the wall. The spotlight is turned off. ■

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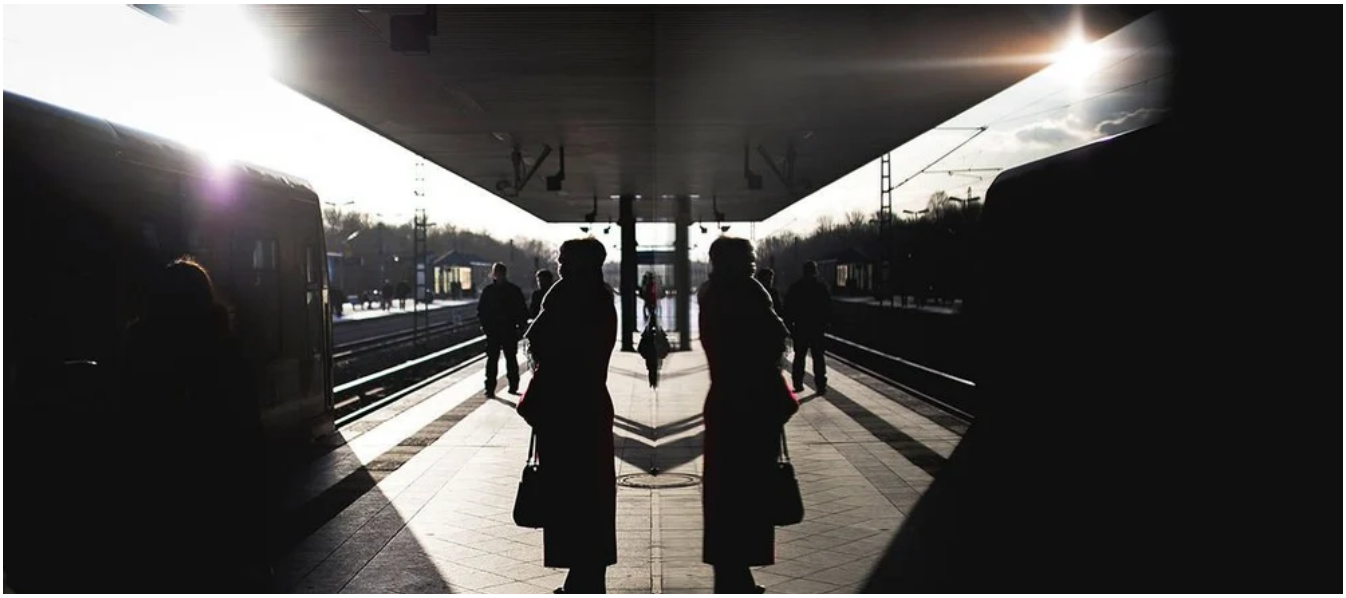

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