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Karamazovs on Stage at Moscow Art Theater

By John Freedman

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Larisa Lomakina designed a sparkling, modern set for The Karamazovs, featuring shiny black leather and silver. **John Freedman**

Let's get the chaff out of the way.

A huge scandal hit the fan when two previews of Konstantin Bogomolov's "The Karamazovs" played at the Moscow Art Theater at the end of November. There were resignations, whispers of censorship, denials and backtracking. If you're really interested, that information, in all its florid detail, is readily accessible.

But the upshot is this: Essentially, nothing happened. The show is up and running. Tickets, oh yes, tickets are on sale and going fast.

I attended the third preview last week and, frankly, the characters, text and story provided by Fyodor Dostoevsky 130 years ago in his novel "The Brothers Karamazov" were the only

truly scandalous things I detected. That man knew how to put a torque in things.

Still, it's true that Bogomolov has a flair for sharp edges and sore spots. In his version, the pious Alyosha Karamazov commits suicide, Dmitry's lovers Katerina and Grushenka end up in bed together, the profligate old father Fyodor Karamazov is buried, so to speak, in a tanning bed, policemen partake in gay orgies, and the gravestones for dead Karamazovs are a line-up of toilets.

I hasten to add that these innovations, like most the director introduces, are clever and justifiable. This is, after all, the retelling of the Karamazov story for contemporary times. Make no mistake, the days of "faithful" renditions of our cultural myths are over with. Sure there are theaters that still perform Ostrovsky with samovars and hoop skirts, but will you stay awake until intermission?

Bogomolov, even while throwing down the cruel challenge of making this a full five-hour performance with two intermissions, is not one to lose an audience. At the show I attended spectators hung on every word as enthralled at the 4-3/4-hour mark as at the 15-minute mark. It's an accomplishment Bogomolov can be proud of.

Still, let me ask: Are there better theater-goers anywhere in the world? Russian audiences are tough, believe you me.

The story of the profligate Fyodor Karamazov and his three, actually four, vastly different sons is played out at the Art Theater in a sparkling modern set designed by Larisa Lomakina. It features shiny black leather, gleaming black tiling, silvery details and three huge LCD screens to keep us in close contact with every expression even when actors' backs are turned. A working bar and kitchen stand at center and there is some strange furniture such as an easy chair with a charging rhinoceros built into the back.

This is an environment of modern luxury and age-old overindulgence.

Stand-outs in Bogomolov's cast are Igor Mirkurbanov as both Fyodor Karamazov and the Devil, and Alexei Kravchenko as his middle son, the seemingly imperturbable Ivan. They embody the fire-and-ice extremes of Dostoevsky's characters. Mirkurbanov delivers sarcasm, bile, arrogance and a deep, uncomfortably veracious grasp of life's paradoxes, while the cerebral Ivan seems frozen, yet ready to explode, due to the horror caused him by understanding the same thing.

As performed by Roza Khairulina, the young Alyosha actually is less godly than struck by deep paralysis. The actress plays him as an individual who has looked into the fires of hell and will never see anything properly again.

Filipp Yankovsky's Dmitry, the eldest son, accused of murdering his father, seems to pale against the rich and craggy personalities of his siblings. That said, his angry, untruthful confession, delivered at a microphone at the edge of the stage after the police beat him to a pulp, evoked an ovation from the audience.

But most of "The Karamazovs" revolves around the brothers' illegitimate brother Smerdyakov. Devious and disgruntled, he holds the family's fate in his hands. Viktor

Verzhbitsky, who also plays the monk Zosima as a haughty conman, puts a chill in your spine with his performance of Smerdyakov.

"The Karamazovs" is a calculated case of overload. Loud, bad pop songs invariably undercut tragic moments. A similar effect is achieved by texts projected on the LCD monitors — these explanations of action spoof or bifurcate the story as much as augment it. Bogomolov doesn't offer one single story — he offers versions. The overall result, however, is clear: sex, death, God, corruption, violence and the unlikely prospect of redemption a la Russe, 2013/2014.

"The Karamazovs" (Karamazovy) plays Wed., Dec. 19, Jan. 23 and 29 at 7 p.m. at the Moscow Art Theater, located at 3 Kamergersky Pereulok. Metro Okhotny Ryad. Tel. 495-629-8760. mxat.ru*. Running time: 5 hours.*

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