

# Crime and Punishment in Dalston

a provocation for young people and then for everyone

by David Farr

based on the novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

*Every now and then we read in our newspapers about an old man or woman who has been callously murdered in their own home for no more than twenty or thirty pounds. We are appalled. We cannot understand how someone could do such a thing for so little. This is about how someone can.*

## 1. THE INSPIRATION

Dostoyevsky's classic 19th century novel of alienated youth tells the story of a student who axes to death an elderly pawnbroker and her sister for no apparent reason beyond a tiny material gain. It is now seen as one of the most important novels of modern times, prophesying a society that becomes ever more fragmented between rich and poor, the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the disenfranchised. It is also feted as the first and possibly greatest psychological novel.

Its hero, Raskolnikov, is an icon of desperate youth, stung by the evident injustice of modern capitalism, but woefully misplaced in his desperate reaction. The murder occurs early in the book - it is deeply shocking for all its apparent inexplicability. But as the story unfolds, Raskolnikov transforms into a compelling modern anti-hero, struggling to come to terms with a world seething with injustice and also to face the truth of his own appalling action. The book is also both a moving love story and a stirring tale of spiritual redemption. The denouement is devastating.

## 2. THE PLAY

I want to take the story as a starting point for an incendiary and radical modern reworking set in Dalston, North East London. My hero is a young Nigerian man, born and brought up in one of London's poorest areas. His act of desperation, through which he mistakenly hopes to liberate himself from his plight, is the cynical and ruthless murder of an old Turkish woman who acts as an informal local pawnbroker. But as soon as he commits the crime, he knows that what he has done is a horrific atrocity that far from liberating him, will only haunt him until he confesses his sins to the very authorities he so despises.

In locating the story in modern-day Dalston, I will follow the original book in principle but will embrace contemporary themes of race, ghettoisation, and deprivation. Drugs and gangs will play a part. But the classical foundation of the novel will remain - the story of a man's journey into hell and back to discover the faintest scent of redemption.

The love story between our hero and a local girl (in Dostoyevsky she is a whore working to keep her family going) will figure strongly. Sonia is more

than just love interest - she shows our hero that the purest love offers more hope than raging acts of vengeance. She is his path to the saving of his soul.

The play will be short, provocative and startling. But it will also be a redemptive and cathartic piece of theatre, capturing the undeniable violence inherent in modern urban life, but offering hope of some kind of salvation.

### **3. THE FORM**

The play's theatricality will be utterly simple but startling. We need nothing more than a table, a bed, and a couple of chairs. Modern dress. Four or five actors. It can move anywhere, be performed anywhere. It is not dependant on lights or sound or anything but the presence of the performers and the audience.

### **4. THE AUDIENCE**

The play is aimed initially at fifteen - eighteen year olds in Hackney and Dalston. At around an hour in length, it can play in schools, clubs, whatever. I also believe that it also has a future in theatres. To me there is absolutely no conflict between theatre for schools and theatre for the public.

The play will be created through initial workshops involving actors and local schools, followed by a solitary period of writing. Then the play will be rehearsed with the cast of five in the traditional manner.

### **5. THE POINT**

In this way I hope to introduce a generation of young people to a book that they would otherwise probably not read, to show how literature and theatre can reflect and clarify their own emotions and predicaments, and to tell a story bristling with dramatic urgency, and sheer visceral emotion. More than anything I hope that using this great text as our starting point will lead us to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of our own lives.