



[Crime and Punishment](#), [Liverpool Playhouse](#)
Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) October 2013

An impressive display of anguish. Not easy to sit through, but worth it.

After reading the 500+ pages of Dostoyevsky's masterpiece, I wondered how it would be possible to bring so much internal anguish, inner dialogue, and grim reality to the stage and create watchable theatre, but under **Dominic Hill**'s direction, **Chris Hannan**'s contemporary adaptation of Dostoyevsky's classic is immense, intense, absorbing, and visually powerful. And, what a surprise, a Northern Irish Raskolnikov!?

I suppose there's no-one quite like an Irishman to do maniacal pain and anguish in such eloquent language and **Adam Best** gives a powerful and brooding performance, in an arduous role. With great physical presence, a shaven head, the mannerisms of a lunatic, and a constant nervous tic, he is every inch a man on the verge of madness.

Is murder ever right or is it always wrong? At the heart of this tale is the tormented character of Rodion Raskolnikov, a penniless former law student created by Dostoyevsky to struggle with this dilemma. He grapples with his anguished conscience in one of the greatest depictions of internal conflict, since Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Is it morally justifiable to kill the old pawnbroker? He reasons with himself that she is an evil person who causes misery to many, and her death would relieve them of pain and suffering, and allow him to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number by redistributing her wealth. But when he murders her, it tears him apart, his wrongdoing torments and overwhelms him, until he confesses and begins a process of moral redemption.

This is more than just a story of one man coming to terms with his terrible crime, as it also asks philosophical questions about the justification for crime. Can crime be justified due to the circumstances of its perpetrator or if it is committed for a higher moral purpose? Does crime have poverty at its roots? Is man capable of qualifying his emotions after carrying out such an immoral act? This is an articulate and respectful interpretation of an intellectually heavy piece of literature that asks questions of society and the nature of justice and is long overdue in the theatre, no doubt due to the difficulty of its subject. It is timely though, given recent discussions about crime and punishment and the failures of the modern criminal justice and rehabilitation systems to reduce and prevent crime.

Crime and Punishment was written at a time of turmoil in Russia, when he was heavily in debt and influenced by his own experience of years in exile in Siberia where he met murderers with no inner anguish about their crimes. Dostoyevsky describes the entire psychological process

that takes place in the mind of a man losing his mind and morality, due to personal suffering, tragedy, humiliation, and debt. As well as an achingly realistic and tortuous depiction of Raskolnikov's passage from life as an educated student to that of an impoverished brutal killer, there are parallels with the downfall of the bourgeois organisation of society, with the pawnbroker said to represent the cruel and evil system that robs and impoverishes, and Raskolnikov embodying the revolution that destroys it.



A poetic performance from a versatile cast on a sparsely populated stage, akin to a 1970's Oxfam window display of worn out and mis-matched bits of furniture. The realistically squalid and meagre setting of the crumbling St. Petersburg tenements was so authentic I couldn't help scratching and fidgeting at the imaginary discomfort of the spring-less, battered, and torn sofa which served as the destitute Raskolnikov's main living area in his hovel of an attic bedsit. The disturbing and agonised atmosphere of the novel is evoked by artistic use of bleak, black, and occasional red lighting, and by clever use of a series of doors that were swished in on rollers at each change of scene.

The rattle and hum from a team of background choristers who whispered, talked, sang, and echoed the many haunting voices inside Raskolnikov's head was a clever way to release the

constant internal dialogue of a man going mad and for audience assessment. A mournful and meandering Russian Folk score from Nikola Kodjabashia took you back to time and place, and the occasional burst of song from the choir like ensemble provided both useful commentary and a few rare and required uplifting moments in an otherwise depressing documentary of the psychological development of the demented.

A small cast of ten were ever present, and with quick costume changes gave the impression of a crowd in the city, an inn full of drunken customers, a vast orchestra instead of a small ensemble plucking at an array of musical instruments, and as individuals, took on various roles from the story. They observed, muttered, nagged and ranted, and acted as the voices that constantly battered the head of Raskolnikov who disintegrated convincingly before our very eyes, and added an extra layer of torture to the anguished mood by effective use of percussion instruments, piano playing, plucking on a double bass and occasional choral bursts of Russian folk songs.

The botched murder became a double murder, dramatically and colourfully staged by splattering large sprays of vivid red “blood” across the backdrop as Raskolnikov used an axe on the pawnbroker and her sister. As Raskolnikov’s behaviour changed, he attracted the attention of the local detective Porfiry Petrovich - played with a humour I wasn’t expecting, but welcome (I suppose) in such a grueling tale. I wasn’t keen on the red nose or the forehead licking during the police interrogation though, and although it got a few laughs from the overwrought audience, I think if I was editing, I might review that bit of silliness, as it spoils an otherwise enjoyable performance from **George Costigan** as the wily detective. However, the employment of black humour here and there did save the performance from too much doom and gloom.



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