

# Bernard-Henri Lévy

Lapsang souchong tea on the low table in front of him. It's the only thing he and Dombasle drink, all day long and at meals. Next to the fax machine is a pile of shoe samples waiting for the couple's friend the designer Christian Louboutin.

The house was built for the Glaoui of Marrakech in the 18th century. Multiple wings and sharply angled corridors, staircases, terraces, mosaics, brick floors, roses, tall trees, and rampant lianas—worlds are enclosed in its walls. The muezzin sounds his call to prayer five times daily. The King of Morocco has just moved in next door. The palace used to belong to J. Paul Getty Jr., the reformed heroin addict, whose wife Talitha overdosed in 1971. Lévy bought it from Alain Delon, who left most of the furniture and fittings. There is a harem—all alcoves and mosaic pillars—where Marlon Brando once spent six months. Starlings go wild at sunset on a wall of red bougainvillea, and roosters are crowing beyond the sunken courtyards, out along the domed roofs and satellite dishes of Marrakech. Suddenly a bird emits a chirp that's a familiar 60s sequence of notes; Dombasle identifies it as the opening bars of the Los Bravos song "Black Is Black."

Dombasle is down by the pool, going over a musical score. She sings as well as any fat lady, despite having the smallest waist in Paris, and she is making her second record: Gounod and Fauré set to electronic music. She says, "You can re-create a true paradise in a big house for your friends, away from the static interference of big cities." She calls her husband Bernard-Henri, and uses only the formal *vous* with him in public. "Arielle is a blessing for him," says Françoise Giroud. "He was running after girls all the time, and he had an impossible wife. He needs to be loved, and to be told he's loved, all the time. She's very intelligent and knows how to handle him."

Dombasle is an odd, exceptional woman. In the course of some 40 films, she has embodied the medieval virgin and the contemporary slut, has directed herself being undressed by a lubricious Omar Sharif, and thinks nothing of going off to Uzbekistan for months to play a mute in a film where a scary father-son duo repeatedly jump her on dirty furs. Filmmaker Chris Marker, a close friend, tells me in an E-mail, "My cat, Guillaume-en-Egypte, loves Arielle and sees her as a she-cat in a fairy's disguise." Dombasle's tiptoe walk, her fragile little body with the astonishing figure, her constant good mood and crystalline singing voice are not the whole picture. She read Schopenhauer at 16 and is clear about the world as will and representation. Her grace, her retro

way of using lipstick as rouge on her cheeks, her singular, eccentric radiance may reflect her upbringing by her maternal grandmother, Man'ha Garreau-Dombasle, who lived in India, Guinea, and the United States, learned Bengali, translated the Indian Nobel poet Rabindranath Tagore, owned borax mines, wrote poetry, and died three years ago at 101.

Arielle's mother died when she was 11. "I was so traumatized by my mother's death that I wanted to have a thousand lives, and always felt I'd be myself by playing the lives of others. I wanted to be in novels, theater, movies. My father was hysterical that I wanted to be an actress, but I was aware since I was a baby that what I wanted would come true." When she was 18, she moved to Paris from Mexico to study acting, singing, and dancing. She secretly married a Jewish playboy society dentist 32 years her senior, and was cut off by her appalled father. When she saw Lévy's photograph on the paperback of *La Barbarie à Visage Humain*, she fell in love. "It was the most moving face I had ever seen—full of pain, femininity, gravity."

She found out where he was signing books, marched in wearing tight white jeans, told Lévy that she was playing Kleist's Catherine of Heilbronn onstage, invited him to come see her in it, and asked him to sign her book. He wrote, "To Arielle Dombasle, *en attendant* [waiting]."

"I went rigid with fear," he says. "I said to myself, This is impossible. She looks too bizarre, too beautiful, too this, too that. It was too dangerous, too complicated. I was thunderstruck by her beauty, her gaze, her voice, her oddness, and I didn't want to be thunderstruck—I was a libertine!" Instead, he married the woman he had been living with and continued the libertine's life.

"He'd go to a dinner party and know that he'd sleep with the hostess within the week," says an old friend. "He could start off the evening with one woman, go sleep with a second one, and join the third in her bed at five in the morning." Lévy admits he was "good at duplicity, and all kinds of women attracted me. And because I sleep only four hours a night, I have a little more time to live than most people."

Since the 18th century, the libertine has been the essential French archetype of freedom. The libertine is a freethinker, unconstrained by conventional morality, an atheist without superstition or faith, and a voluptuary—a Don Juan, a Casanova. As a youth, Lévy exercised his free will with bad-boy behavior, some of which he recounts in *Le Diable en Tête*—thefts, holdups, assaults on virtue. A friend of his says, "There were a few years there where his models were more Bonnie and Clyde than Beauvoir and Sartre."

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was around in the 60s when the Marquis de Sade's writings were first released from censorship. "The Marquis de Sade opened up the sexual revolution to us—he was our access to excess," says Lévy. *La Barbarie à Visage Humain* ends, "I believe in the virtue of an atheist spirituality against today's cowardly resignation—a kind of austere libertinage for catastrophic times." The book is dedicated to his daughter, Justine-Juliette. Asked why he named his first child after two heroines of de Sade's, Lévy says, "I was young. De Sade was the bible for my generation."

Justine, a tall, beautiful young woman with one novel behind her, says, "I hated my name. I wanted to be called Caroline like everyone else. I read *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, with the help of the dictionary, as soon as I could reach the shelf it was on. But I am uncomfortable when some leering old man wants to remind me that Justine was whipped." (Lévy signed Justine up for karate classes when she was six.)

It was two years before Bernard-Henri Lévy and Arielle Dombasle ran into each other again, in Milan. They spent the afternoon together and the evening with some Italian movie people. He confides that he was terrified by her "absolute exuberance—this uncommon creature all skinny and frail but who displaced a lot of air, who spoke four languages and fascinated everyone who came near her." They spent the night at his hotel.

He was "bludgeoned by joy," he says, when he took her back to her hotel in the morning. But he decided never to see her again. "It fell on me like lightning, and that was very bad news. There was no room for her. Not only was I a libertine, I'd just had a child—Antonin. I felt that if I saw this girl again it couldn't be some little thing like the others, in dark alleys or doorways. That went on three weeks, one month, but I thought about her day and night."

He then did something he calls "terrible." He had her investigated by a private detective. "I asked him to find out what she does, where she's from, her past, her present, whom she sees—everything." The detective told him that she had been born in Connecticut to a distinguished French couple named Sonnery de Fromental, who lived in Mexico, that her mother had died, and that her father was remarried to a painter named Laurence de Lubersac. She had been raised partly by her grandparents, aristocrats who owned silk factories in Lyon and lived in a château called Chaintré in Burgundy. The detective told Lévy that Arielle had been in Roman Polanski's *Tess* and had worked often with Eric Rohmer.

Lévy learned that she and her husband "had completely separate apartments, an important detail for me, of course."

"I found out that after that night in Milan she had shut herself in and stopped eating," he recalls. "Maybe she got a cold, or fell ill because of my silence? It was like a novel. Finally, after about a month, I had to go to Florence. I called Arielle and she joined me in the plane, and we've been together since then."

"I felt this was exactly the woman I had been waiting for, who was right for me. I understood that if I attached myself to her I would never leave her, that she would make all the others redundant, fill all the available space for passion and feelings, and that's what scared me. I didn't believe in love, did not think it existed, and if it did, that it was just an illusion, and I didn't want an illusion to be the center of my life."

Nevertheless, he ended all his other relationships, telling the "friendliest" of the mistresses that he had "fallen in love with an exceptional woman who was like none other." But he said nothing to his wife. Instead, inspired by Arielle, he set to work on his first novel, *Le Diable en Tête*.

"Bernard and Arielle are where fact and fiction meet," says their friend Diane Von Furstenberg with some accuracy.

For seven years they conducted their affair in secret. They are both fond of saying, "Elevator operators and barmen were our only friends."

"I was the Backstreet Girl for a very long time," says Arielle. "In the evenings I went to parties alone, because I didn't want to make him jealous, or put pressure on him. Once in a while I thought I was deluding myself, because he had hundreds of women. But from my childhood I had two models of women: The one who is all poetry and dreaminess, a kind of sleepwalker, without strategy, always gay, delicious, and beautiful—and who dies. That was my mother. And there was the complete opposite, just as seductive, very polite, cultivated, intelligent, theatrical, but a dark and dominating person. That was my stepmother. I told myself, I don't want to be the one who dies—I want to be the other one. But the one I loved is the one who died. So I decided to be a good little soldier."

Arielle had a way of making her will

known. Several years into their secret affair, she was the model for a massive advertising campaign for Pronuptia, a manufacturer of wedding dresses. The few Parisians in the know snickered and whispered as they watched her on TV, all done up in white, singing "*Je vous salue, Mari* [Hail, Husband]," a jingle that was a pun on "Hail, Mary."

"Seven years of secrecy when one person is a famous actress and the other is a well-known writer, and you live in Paris—that's a tour de force," says Lévy. "Arielle showed total loyalty and absolute kindness." They never discussed divorce or their eventual marriage, but when Antonin Lévy turned seven, B.H.L. left his wife and moved into a hotel with Arielle. They married in 1993 at the Colombe d'Or.

Arielle and Bernard-Henri say the only fight they have ever had was over religion. In Florence they argued about the Pope and about God. "She's a mixture of Dijon aristocracy and bizarre Mexican pagan Catholicism," says the atheist Lévy, marveling slightly. Even if he is no longer a Casanova, Lévy is still the libertine freethinker, who believes neither in the unconscious nor in God. □

## Brando vs. Kaye

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 96 *Lobby Lobster*, which was first about a depressed poet and is now about a psychotic comedian.

By 1998 his commercial reel was strong enough to earn him the job of directing a \$10 million Hollywood movie, *American History X*, about young American neo-Nazis, for New Line. The concept was daring and socially conscious to a degree—right up his alley—and his plans were huge. "I was going to make *Citizen Kane* my first time out," says Kaye. He immediately got to work proving that the enormity of his vision demanded the smashing of all conventions. At a breakfast meeting at the Beverly Wilshire with his agent and publicists, Kaye ordered a 30-egg omelette and exactly 2.7 ounces of dried oats, and insisted on weighing the oats in the kitchen when he suspected he had been given the incorrect amount. He held cattle calls, and made stars such as Ed Norton and Elliott Gould jump through hoops. "I had to read for the part over and over and over and over again," recalls Gould, a veteran of some 70 films, "until the producer, John Morrissey, said, 'I think that's enough. Decide whether you want this person or not.'" Finally, after endless debates on the casting—Kaye wanted many unknowns—he started shooting . . . and shooting . . . and shooting, million feet in all, four times the amount

usually shot for a feature film. Every detail required that Kaye make a scene—often physical. Once, when Morrissey made a suggestion Kaye liked, Kaye dropped to the ground and started kissing his feet. On another occasion, though, when Kaye decided that the lettering on the crew's jackets was "passé," he went at Morrissey with his fists.

But the results of his obsessiveness were impressive. The actors blossomed under Kaye's method of uninterrupted, marathon shooting. Morrissey, who remains steadfast in his belief that Kaye has the talent to be the next Fellini, felt that Kaye's finished edit demonstrated his unique strength—a "commitment to psychological truth." Kaye's edit of the film pleased New Line executives Michael De Luca and Bob Shaye too, and for a moment everything seemed to be going smoothly. Then Kaye allowed the film's star, Ed Norton, into the editing room to take a pass at the picture. Norton made some tiny changes, which mostly involved putting in more acting. De Luca and Shaye decided to go with Norton's cut over Kaye's, perhaps as an easy way to please the rising star.

Kaye "overreacted monstrously," recalls Morrissey, "decided that, oh no, now enormous changes have to be made in the film. Throw out half the movie, create a new character, go back to filming, take another year to work on it—stuff that he knew was a cartoonish reaction." New Line gave

Kaye eight more weeks to work on his version, but by now Kaye was too devoted to his new project—"crazy genius takes on Hollywood studio"—to deliver an actual art product. Kaye brought along a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and a Buddhist monk to a New Line meeting in which he begged for more time. He spent \$100,000 of his own money, taking out 38 ads in *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* directed at the New Line top brass and all the film's actors. One announced, TONY KAYE IS THE GREATEST BRITISH DIRECTOR SINCE ALFRED HITCHCOCK. Another one said, TO EDWARD NORTON, STOP LOOKING INTO THE LAKE AND LISTEN TO THE WIND. He lobbied film festivals not to show the movie. And he filed a \$275 million suit against New Line over its refusal to let him take his name off the film and replace it with "Humpty Dumpty." The stress of his martyrdom was too much to bear. He suddenly found himself unable to use the telephone and unable to eat in restaurants.

"I think he was scared shitless," says Marty Bauer, Kaye's agent at the time, whom Kaye unloaded when Bauer refused to get on the maniac bandwagon. "I think he was in a total state of panic." Morrissey, too, felt that the root of it all was Kaye's insecurity. "He's such an incredibly self-loathing person and compensates for this with such a powerful self-promoting technique." And these were his *allies*; the rest of Hollywood was not as understanding. An