

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."

Identification with the libertine is a key to Lévy's *modus operandi* over the years, and is shared to some extent with everyone who 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.

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