

# STUDY GUIDE

## THE GRAND INQUISITOR

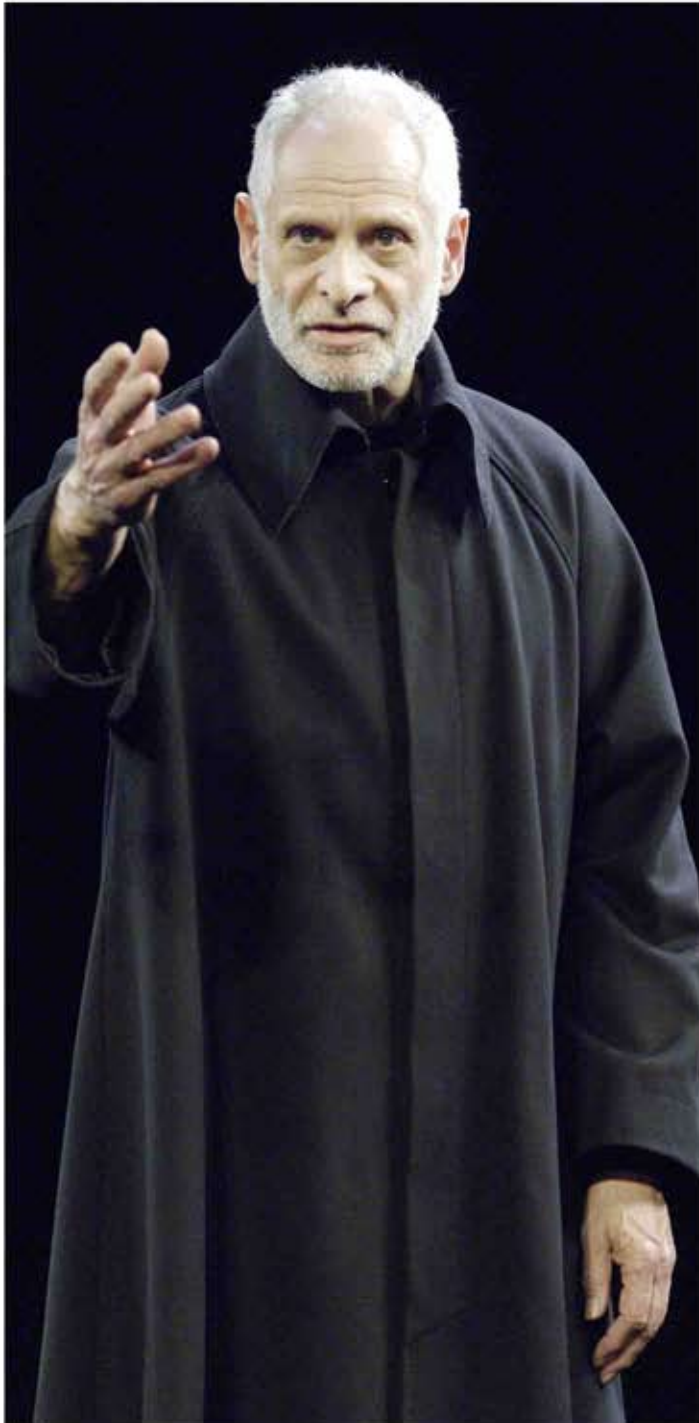
From **Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov"**

Adapted by **Marie-Hélène Estienne**

Featuring **Bruce Myers**

Directed by **Peter Brook**

**NEW YORK  
THEATRE  
WORKSHOP**



Bruce Myers in *The Grand Inquisitor*.  
Photo by Geraint Lewis.

### **SYNOPSIS of *The Grand Inquisitor***

In a town in Spain, during the sixteenth-century Spanish Inquisition, Christ arrives, apparently reborn on Earth. As he walks through the streets, the people gather about him, staring. He begins to heal the sick, but he is interrupted by the arrival of a powerful Cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, who orders his guards to arrest Christ.

Late that night, the Grand Inquisitor visits Christ's cell and explains why he has taken him prisoner. Throughout the Grand Inquisitor's lecture, Christ listens silently. The Inquisitor reminds Christ of the time, recorded in the Bible, when the Devil presented Christ with three temptations, each of which he rejected. The first temptation Christ rejected was bread, though he was hungry after forty days of fasting; the second temptation was to perform a miracle to prove that he was really God's son; and the third temptation was power over all the kingdoms in the world.

By rejecting these three temptations, Christ emphasized the importance of free will. But the Grand Inquisitor argues that free will is a devastating, impossible burden for mankind. The Grand Inquisitor says that Christ should have given people no choice and, instead, taken power and given people security instead of freedom.

As the Grand Inquisitor finishes his indictment of Christ, Christ walks up to the old man and kisses him gently on the lips. The Grand Inquisitor suddenly sets Christ free, but tells him never to return again.

## Peter Brook: A Short Biography of a Director Who Changed the Theatre

Peter Brook is one of the legendary directors of the 20th century. Over the course of his career, he has directed both stage and film, and has written several books on the subject, including his most familiar work, *The Empty Space*, published in 1968. Favoring ensemble playing and experimentation over star actors, Brook shook the foundations of theater and bridged the gap between audience and actor. "The audience does not have a passive function," he wrote in *The Open Door*, "it is a constant participant through its awakened presence." He also brought avant-garde techniques into the mainstream, introducing audiences to spare sets that revealed the mechanisms of the theatre and physically rigorous performances by highly trained ensembles.

Brook was born in London in 1925 and educated at Oxford University. At the young age of 22 he was the first Director of Productions at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. He soon became the Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company where he became famous for revitalizing classic theatre. The influence of Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" was evident in his direction of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* at the RSC in 1967, in which actors transformed themselves into inmates in a mental asylum. His groundbreaking production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1970 was set in a white box, where the actors spoke from scaffolds and fairies performed on trapeze. Brook would also go on to direct many film versions of his plays, including his haunting production of *King Lear* in 1971 starring Paul Scofield.

In 1974, Peter Brook and Micheline Rozan created the International Centre of Theatre Research at the Theatre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris, which he founded to pursue his search for a "universal theater." Known for his internationalism in casting, he assembled a culturally diverse group of performers, including actors Yoshi Oida, Helen Mirren, and Bruce Myers. They traveled through West Africa, and set about to investigate theater in remote villages, sometimes using simple mats for a stage and cardboard boxes for props. He would produce many shows with the Center, including an adaptation of *The Mahabharata* in 1989, and *The Tempest* in 1990. Brook's legacy is a focus on ritual and simplicity in the theatre, stripping the theatrical moment down to its bare essence. *The Grand Inquisitor* reunites Peter Brook and actor Bruce Myers once more.



Director Peter Brook.

**"I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all I need for an act of theatre to be engaged."**

**Peter Brook, *The Empty Space***

**Before the performance:**

Ask students to write in their journals in response to the following prompts:

- 1) What are some things that you normally expect to see when you take a trip to the theatre?
- 2) What might you expect to see at a production directed by Peter Brook, based on the quote above?



*The Temptation on the Mount* by Duccio di Buoninsegna

## The Three Temptations

In the play you will hear the Grand Inquisitor refer to “the three questions” or “temptations” presented to Jesus Christ by the Devil in the New Testament. The New Testament of the Bible tells the tale of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, sent to earth to save mankind from sin. The New Testament says that after Jesus began preaching salvation in the land of Israel, he went into the wilderness to pray and fast. After forty days and nights, the Devil appeared to Jesus and tempted him three times to prove he was the Son of God by performing miracles. Jesus refused to satisfy him.

First, the Devil asked Jesus to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger, to which Jesus replied, “Man does not live on bread alone.”

Next, the Devil brought Jesus to Jerusalem and set him at the pinnacle (highest point) of the Temple, telling Jesus to prove his divinity by throwing himself off the peak. As it says in the Old Testament, if he is truly the Son of God, God will send down angels to break his fall. Jesus refused and answered, “It also says, you shall not test the Lord your God.”

Lastly, the Devil took Jesus to a mountain top and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, saying, “All this will I give you if you worship me.” Jesus answered, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” With that, the Devil left him, and God sent angels to tend to Jesus in the desert.

Christians see the rejection of these temptations as miracles themselves: proof of Jesus’s divine wisdom and obedience to God. However, the Grand Inquisitor says that by refusing the three temptations, Christ refused three forces that can control humanity: miracle, mystery, and authority. By miraculously transforming stones into bread, Christ could have controlled the masses by satisfying their hunger. The fall from the temple and recovery by angels would be a mystery, leaving mankind captivated by Christ’s supernatural works. With power over the kingdoms of the world, Christ would free the people from the oppression of moral choice, which they are too weak to handle, and unite all humanity under his authority. With these forces, Christ could secure mankind’s salvation, but not without sacrificing their free will. The Grand Inquisitor argues that humanity would rather have security than freedom of conscience, and so the church must do what Christ would not: take power over humanity in order to save them.

### Freedom vs. Security

**“They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.”**

**Benjamin Franklin**



### After the performance:

Divide students into teams and ask them to debate the issue of freedom vs. security. Ask one team to take the role of the Grand Inquisitor - justifying the use of power over the people for their own safety. Go further - ask students to debate again, applying these ideas to issues facing the United States today.

## Context & History:

### What Was the Inquisition?

The Spanish Inquisition, legendary for using torture to expose heretics, was established in 1478 by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain.

Spain has a rich and complicated history, and many different types of people lived and ruled there over the centuries before the Inquisition. Wars and power struggles alternated with periods of peace between the Christians, Jews and Muslims from Africa who all inhabited Spain. Before Isabella and Ferdinand's reign, anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) laws started being passed in Spain and many Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or leave the country.

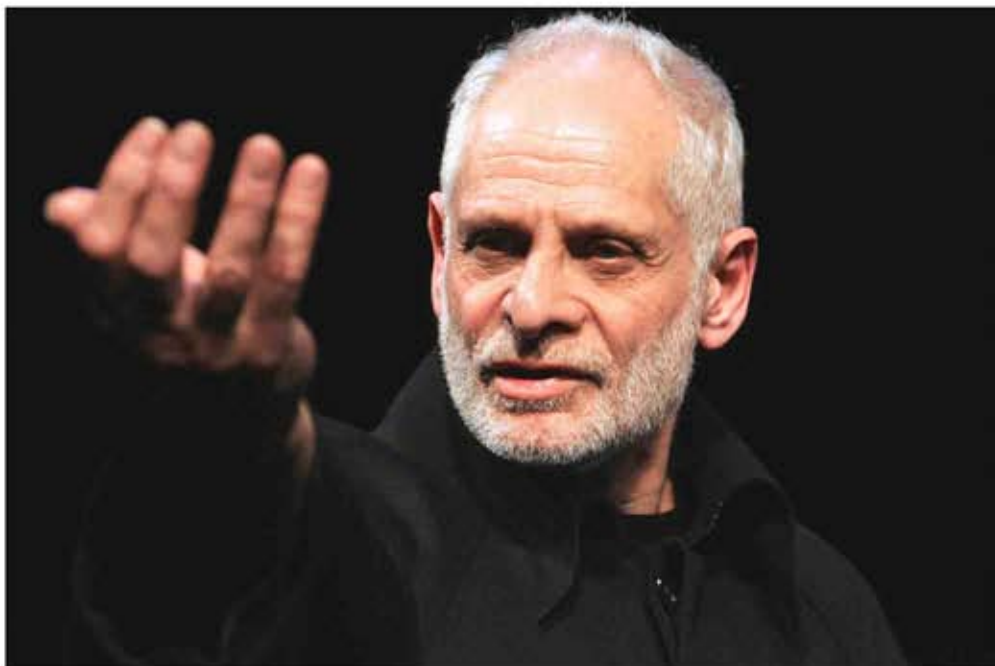
When Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand took power, they dreamed of a Spain united under Christian rule. They believed that political unity could only be achieved through religious unity. They conquered the last Muslim stronghold, Granada, in 1492, and officially became the Catholic Kings of Spain.

(Incidentally, 1492 is also the same year they sponsored Christopher Columbus's voyage.) In the same year, they decreed that all Jews would be expelled from Spain. About 200,000 people fled the country. Many Jews converted to Christianity in order to avoid persecution, and some continued to practice Jewish law in secret.

Isabella and Ferdinand began to worry that insincere converts were undermining the authority of Christian rule, so they got permission from the Pope to establish The Inquisition, which was a religious court. It focused on forcibly testing the sincerity of Jewish converts to Christianity. Physical torture was used to extract confessions out of the accused. Eventually the Inquisition expanded to accuse Muslim converts, as well as political opponents of the crown and those accused of witchcraft. Many of the accused were forced to go through a public ritual of penance, and for many, the state seized all of their assets. Others were executed, often by being burned alive at the stake. The city of Seville was one of the main sites of the Inquisition.

The Grand Inquisitor was the head of the Inquisition. The most famous and most ruthless Grand Inquisitor, Tomás de Torquemada, was actually descended from Jewish converts. He was a close advisor of Queen Isabella and was one of the main voices to call for the expulsion of the Jews. He led the bloodiest period of the Inquisition from 1483 until his death in 1498.

The Inquisition lasted for many centuries. Historians debate the number of prisoners who were actually executed. Current estimates range from 3,000-5,000, though the true number will probably never be known. The Inquisition changed and diminished over the years, but was not officially abolished until 1834.



Bruce Myers as The Grand Inquisitor. Photo by Tristram Kenton.

## What's the Source Material? The Brothers Karamazov

Marie-Hélène Estienne adapted the script for *The Grand Inquisitor* from the most famous chapter of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian writer, considered to be one of the most influential novelists of the modern era. *The Brothers Karamazov* tells the story of three brothers who are each implicated to varying degrees in their father's death. The novel contends with philosophical questions about the problems of free will, morality, and religious faith versus doubt.

In the chapter "The Grand Inquisitor," the oldest brother, Ivan, tells a story to Alyosha, the youngest. Ivan is an atheist, someone who believes God does not exist. Alyosha is about to become a monk and devote his life to the church. Ivan's tale is about Christ coming to earth during the Spanish Inquisition. Christ is arrested and questioned by the Grand Inquisitor. This chapter is widely read and admired, partly because of its ambiguity—it can mean many things to many people, and Dostoyevsky asks big questions about the nature of religion without providing easy answers. Estienne, Peter Brook and Bruce Myers have brought this tale to life on the stage.



Fyodor Dostoyevsky

## GLOSSARY

**Blasphemy:** The disrespect or defamation of God.

**Caesar:** Referring to Julius Caesar, the masterful military leader who took power over ancient Rome. "The sword of Caesar" is a symbol referring to his military might and power. "Caesar's purple" refers to his royal gowns, another reference to his authority.

**Cardinal:** A senior official of the Catholic Church.

**Cassock:** A long, close-fitting, ankle-length robe worn by clergymen.

**Dixit:** A Latin word which translates to "he said it." The Grand Inquisitor closes his speech to Jesus with this word.

**Grand Inquisitor:** The lead official of the Inquisition.

**Heretic:** Someone who goes against the accepted beliefs of a religion. During the Inquisition, people accused of heresy were arrested and sometimes tortured and executed.

**Hosannah:** A cry of praise in Christianity and Judaism.

**Pinnacle:** The highest point.

**Pope:** The holy elected leader of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the leader of the Vatican City.

**Talitha Kumi:** An Aramaic phrase that means "Little girl, I say to you, get up." Jesus uses this phrase when he raises a little girl from the dead.

**Tower of Babel:** In an Old Testament story, God destroys the Tower of Babel because it was built for the glorification of man, and not God.