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Arts & Entertainment

'The Judas Kiss' Premieres At Boston Court Pasadena

By **May S. Ruiz**

[Boston Court Pasadena](#) launches its 2019 season with a rarely staged production of [David Hare's](#) 'The Judas Kiss' from February 15 through March 24. This S. Mark Taper Foundation-sponsored play tells the story of [Oscar Wilde's](#) love for Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas and follows his downfall through a brutal trial and life in exile.

'The Judas Kiss' stars Rob Nagle (Oscar Wilde), Colin Bates (Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas), Darius de la Cruz (Robert Ross), Will Dixon (Sandy Moffatt), Matthew Campbell Dowling (Arthur Wellesley), Mara Klein (Phoebe Cane), and Kurt Kanazawa (Galileo Masconi).

Artistic Director Michael Michetti, at the heels of his recent success directing his adaptation of Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' at A Noise Within, helms this play that examines a literary icon who continues to hold onto his passionate ideals of love and beauty even as his life falls apart.

Michetti, chatting with us about his fascination with the Irish playwright on a recent afternoon, clarifies how he found himself directing an Oscar Wilde play and a play about Oscar Wilde in succession.

“It’s not strictly by design, yet it’s not accidental either,” Michetti begins. “While preparing for ‘A Picture of Dorian Gray,’ I was re-reading a lot of Oscar Wilde and a lot of things about him. This David Hare play is one I’ve loved for years, so out of curiosity I pulled it off the shelf and re-read it. And I fell in love with it again. This was around the time that we were trying to refine our season here at Boston Court. We were talking about balancing our offerings and I kept thinking maybe this is the right play, so I suggested it.”

Asked what draws him to Oscar Wilde plays, Michetti responds “A lot of things really. I’ve always been captivated by his plays. Then I became enthralled with his short stories, children’s stories, and poems. And, of course, as a historical figure I found him interesting so I read several biographies about him, and his letters which reveal so much about him.

“But one thing I always felt was that, in most of his writing, including his letters, which were probably the most personal, he was always wearing different masks . . . that he was somewhat obscured by his wit, his cleverness, and his brilliant use of language. The sense of who the man was has always been a mystery to me. That’s what I love about this play – I think David Hare has crafted a very complex portrait of this man. He did a lot of research and, however conjectural it was, I think the play is pretty accurate to he was and the struggles he was going through.”

“It’s very biographical,” continues Michetti. “The play takes place during two key moments in his life. The first act happens on the day he dropped his ill-advised libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry who had accused him of sodomy. A warrant has been issued for his arrest, the police have delayed arresting him, and he’s trying to decide whether he should flee. Robbie wants him to run but Bosie wants him to stay and stand trial.

“The second act occurs two years later, after his release from prison. He’s exiled and penniless; he and Bosie are renting a villa in Naples and they’re out of money. Each of their families has offered them an allowance of income but, in both cases, it comes with conditions. And, again, Oscar has to make a decision.”

“While ‘The Judas Kiss’ was first produced in 1998, it hasn’t been performed often,” Michetti explains. “The original production starred a miscast Liam Neeson. The arguments for him playing the lead role were that he’s a brilliant Irishman and he’s tall, as Oscar Wilde was. But it didn’t get a good reception

“Because it wasn’t successful, a lot of people dismissed the play itself. It languished for a long time and only a couple of productions were done in the United States. It was revived in London a few years ago with Rupert Everett and it went on stage Off-Broadway in New York. There hasn’t been a lot of high-profile productions since and, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time it’s being done in Los Angeles.

“It has always saddened me that this play’s reputation is not greater than it is. And so I hope we will be able to crack that in this production. There’s one element which makes us poised to be able to do it. While the stakes in both acts are very high, the drama isn’t; there are no big dramatic car chases and action events. It’s all underneath – it’s in the little conflicts and resolutions, choices and decisions, and the resistance to make choices. The fact that we’re in such an intimate theatre allows us to play those with subtlety and honesty. It allows our audience to see in those delicate nuances the drama of this play.”

Michetti adds, “The challenge is that dramaturgically, Oscar is obviously the protagonist in the play and Bosie is the antagonist – the one who has caused a lot of hurt in Oscar’s life. But I think it’s critical that we understand what it is about Bosie that Oscar loves so he doesn’t look like a fool for being so devoted to him for so long.”

Because this play is close to his heart, Michetti had a hand in casting the characters for it. He discloses, “The role of Oscar Wilde is a challenging one and I knew going into it that I would need someone remarkable. There’s an L.A. artist whom I’ve known and loved for years, he’s been a friend and a colleague, but I’ve never done a full production with him, only readings previously and his name is Rob Nagle.

“When we were talking about this, Rob was one of the first people who came to mind. And rather than going through an audition process, I began teasing Rob the idea of this role. It turned out he knew the play. Rob is a big, dynamic man and because of that, he’s always playing a villainous character. But he’s the most generous, kind-hearted human being you could possibly meet. And this play is tapping a lot of things I don’t think he often gets the opportunity to play. I’m thrilled to say that my faith in him was well placed because he can be so brilliant in this role.

“It’s quite interesting that Colin Bates, who was just my Dorian Gray, is Bosie. There’s this fascinating parallel because in ‘Picture of Dorian Gray,’ which he wrote in 1890, Wilde wrote about this beautiful younger man who destroys the life of an older artist and the next year he met Bosie. It just seems preordained! Colin and I talked about ‘Was it that he had a type?’ ‘Was it a self-fulfilling prophecy?’ or ‘Was it some sense of fulfilling a martyrdom complex?’ I don’t know exactly what it was, it may have been a little of all those, but it was intriguing to see Colin in the role that is the real life counterpoint to the fictitious character he just played.”

Michetti adds, “There’s a third character in the play, Robbie Ross, who was Oscar’s first male lover. He was Oscar’s lifelong friend who remained devoted to him throughout his life. Robbie was the one who wrote to him and visited him in prison, the one who met him when he was released from prison and found a home for him to live in afterwards, and the one who was there at his deathbed. Oscar made him his literary executor and he spent the rest of his life making sure the works of Oscar Wilde were published and continued on.

“But there’s a captivating triangulation that happens between the three of them, as often happens. Robbie is very judgmental of Bosie and his influence on Oscar, and he’s trying to get at Oscar for what he thinks are the right choices for him. And to do that he’s trying to get Oscar to face that fact that he has fallen in love with someone who wasn’t worthy of his love. That’s always a tricky thing.

“Any time in real life we try to intercede in that way, it rarely goes well. There’s something about that that feels relatable and human. I relate a lot to Robbie in many ways. I’ve had dear friends who have been in relationships that I think aren’t the best for them and I’ve made impassioned arguments as to why they’d be better off making another choice, as Robbie makes to Oscar. But I’ve also heard impassioned arguments back, as Oscar makes to Robbie, as to why this is none of his business.”

One could argue that Oscar Wilde’s genius comes from all the events in his life. Concurr Michetti, “I think this play will give people a new lens as to who he was. For somebody whom we know for his witty aphorisms, Oscar was a very complex man, and sometimes in conflict with himself. There are things that he writes where he states a matter of fact one thing and then, almost in the next sentence, contradicts himself. He was a complicated man and love is complicated, and particularly love in relationships that have conflict in them.”

“All of these circumstances in ‘The Judas Kiss’ were similar to what is in ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray.’ Oscar Wilde wrote about what he knew and while he wrote it in a dramatic, sensational form, he actually did live it. I think this play humanizes him and gives us a window to understanding who the man was. Audiences will recognize the darker notes underneath his works.”

It's been said that art imitates life; Oscar Wilde personified the adage. It must be why we find his works utterly mesmerizing.

ABOUT AUTHOR



May S. Ruiz

May S. Ruiz was born in the Philippines. Her mother, a school teacher, and her father, the press liaison officer for American Embassy in Manila, instilled in their children the importance of getting a good education. Appreciation for book and the arts, and experiencing various cultures have been her lifelong pursuits. After college she immigrated to the U.S., where she met her husband. Their daughter have the same passion for learning and literature, and being a responsible global citizen.
