

The Judas Kiss



Michael Van Duzer [Reviews - Theater](#)



Bates, Nagle, De La Cruz. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Oscar Wilde's spectacular rise and even more dramatic fall from grace has inspired countless biographies. There have also been numerous stage and film depictions of his life. Most follow the giddy trajectory of his early success while attempting to quote as many of his famous epigrams as possible before turning to his trial and imprisonment for gross indecency.

With *The Judas Kiss*, playwright David Hare deliberately chooses a microscopic approach. The first act focuses on the afternoon Wilde was forced to withdraw his libel suit against the father of his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. The trial exposed Wilde's hidden life as a man who bought the sexual favors of young working-class men, leaving the authorities no choice but to put out a warrant for his arrest. The second act finds Wilde reunited with Lord Alfred and living in Italy after serving his prison sentence.

Robert "Robbie" Ross (Darius De La Cruz) arrives at a discreet hotel with Wilde's bags packed. Their plan, if the trial went badly, was for Wilde to flee to Paris and live in exile rather than face prison. It becomes clear that "Bosie," Lord Alfred (Colin Bates) has problems with this plan.

Both men are anxious to put their cases to Wilde (Rob Nagle) when he arrives. But Oscar is distracted and shows little interest in Ross' practical solution of flight, nor in Lord Alfred's overblown ideas of changing the world by standing trial. He is much more interested in a lobster lunch served by Sandy Moffatt (Will Dixon) and his attentive staff.

A Neopolitan sun warms the second act and making love, even that which dare not speak its name, is anything but the shameful act it seems in Victorian London. Bosie is quick to take advantage of this casual atmosphere by bedding Galileo (Kurt Kanazawa), a local fisherman. However, a damaged Oscar is even less inclined to movement than before prison. He sits immobile in his chair deflecting life with witticisms.

Hare's decision to eschew the standard biography proves a brilliant device as it throws us into Wilde's life in extremis and more rapidly reveals the complexity of Oscar Wilde – poet, playwright, bon vivant, genius, and martyr. It also shines an unforgiving spotlight on the man's disastrous life choices. Or, as the play strongly suggests, his inability to choose.

Director Michael Michetti knows this world and guides his talented cast in the kind of elegantly detailed work which would, no doubt, please Wilde himself. Michetti is also well aware of the script's major challenge, a main character who seems indifferent to any kind of progression.

That is where the skill and dexterity of a performer like Rob Nagle makes all the difference in the world. He inhabits Oscar with the kind of conviction that makes every moment telling. Whether showing the hero or the coward, the lover or the artist, Nagle is effortlessly convincing. He spends 90% of the second act in a chair, but his bon mot crackle, his arguments nearly pierce Bosie's self-absorption, and his performance is so dynamic that the character's physical and mental immobility is immaterial.

Bates is an unapologetically vain and entitled Bosie. He is handsome enough to embody Bosie's "red rose-leaf lips," and he uses his physical charms to soften his endless manipulations. Dixon cuts a smooth and dapper figure as the Scottish Moffatt, a man who knows how to provide service and keep secrets for a price. Matthew Campbell Dowling's savvy Arthur has also learned the value of secrets and the tidy profit he can make with his body. Mara Klein's somewhat clumsy Phoebe is still learning the ropes, while Kanazawa's Galileo appears refreshingly open and unabashed about his loving. In the pivotal role of Robbie Ross, De La Cruz is disappointingly tentative and still seems to still be finding his performance.

Se Hyun Oh's scenic design and Dianne K. Graebner's costumes place us in the period, but it is David Hernandez's lighting that captures the dramatic soul of the piece.

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