



CURRENT THEATRE REVIEWS by Travis Michael Holder

### THE JUDAS KISS



*Photo by Jenny Graham*

#### **Boston Court Performing Arts Center**

Late in 1897, only months following his release from prison after two years spent at hard labor serving out his conviction for gross indecency, the great Irish poet and dramatist Oscar Wilde shared a dilapidated, rat-infested villa in Naples with Lord Alfred Douglas, the socially-privileged lover who got him into trouble in the first place.

As the second act of Sir David Hare's overlooked masterpiece *The Judas Kiss* begins, Oscar (Rob Nagle) is seated in a padded wing-backed chair sipping brandy on the patio of the villa, a place from which he hasn't moved in the span of one full day. "As you know," he later tells his concerned old friend and visiting former lover Robbie Ross (Darius De La Cruz), "I've always distained unnecessary motion."

As David Hernandez' evocative and potentially award-winning lighting reveals more of Se Hyundai Oh's starkly embellished set on the chameleon-like stage of the Boston Court, we see Lord Alfred (Colin Bates) naked on a Victorian chaise lounge cuddling the equally naked body of a young Italian fisherboy (Kurt Kanazawa) ironically named Galileo—a crafty theatrical device that allows Sir David to be able to give the sharp-witted Oscar plenty of *double entendres* about

Bosie seeing stars to add to the festivities.

Although Wilde isn't adverse to appreciating Galileo's beauty, something that the disgraced literary giant says has made his ordeal bearable and his life less troublesome, it's not hard to see how hurt and abandoned he feels underneath as he watches his lover spooning with someone else right next to him—especially when Galileo asks him in Italian if he would leave them alone so he could bugger his boyfriend one more time.

When *The Judas Kiss* transferred from London's West End to The Great White Way in 1998, it took a beating from critics who couldn't get past how physically miscast Liam Neeson and Tom Hollander were as Oscar and Bosie. Personally, I was in the minority there; Neeson and Hollander knocked me out. I immediately fell in love with the play and, once again, the wise yet gorgeously lyrical wordsmithery of Sir David Hare.

Still, the first thing I remember about that original Broadway production at the austere 1,150-seat Broadhurst Theatre was Bob Crowley's magnificently massive set, including an expansive, glittering ocean view in the aforementioned second act and a two-story tufted red velvet headboard framed by lush crimson drapery at the play's opening, the bed occupied at lights-up by a naked, gleamingly white-skinned young hotel valet named Arthur as he goes down on an ecstatic chambermaid standing spread-eagled against the headboard.

The long overdue LA debut of *The Judas Kiss* is in the best of hands under the inventive leadership of our town's *wunderkind* director and the Boston Court's co-artistic director Michael Michetti, who keeps things far simpler than the original with a backdrop of basic black curtains, properly ornate furnishings scattered about the otherwise bare playing space, and exposed metal poles holding theatrical lighting fixtures unapologetically visible on either side of the stage.

This leaves room for Sir David's remarkable script to take over instead of letting the original grandness of the design overshadow the production, a flaw I clearly remember from my view seated in the Broadhurst's nosebleed seats where the actors resembled tiny figures moving around Colleen Moore's dollhouse at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry—something which also made the voyeuristic side benefit of appreciating some exotic naked beauty a daunting task.

*The Judas Kiss* works far better in this powerfully simple and more intimate setting, where even the rising sun over the Gulf of Naples featuring prominently in Oscar's dialogue in the second act is startlingly evoked with minimal lighting effects projected on a huge and completely blank rear panel.

The incredible Nagle is at his best as Wilde, a role written chockfull of traps to easily plunge into headfirst. As the crushed man desperately tries to appear brave and dispassionate, the actor playing him must still successfully land a continuous barrage of thrown-away Wildian *bon mots*, which Nagle utters with a dry comic timing so perfect it would amaze Chaplin himself.

And a sad clown he is, this Oscar Wilde. The character pontificates throughout the play about life, love, honor, courage, trust—and the courage to trust—with the entire audience privy to the tragic facts about his impending doom. Only an actor as smooth and honest as Nagle could possibly pull this off; in lesser hands, the entire production would fall flat.

Michetti certainly knows this and, in the signature style of his visionary gifts, stages the action around Nagle as the frightened, failing Oscar. All other actors at one time or another converse with the character keeping their backs directly to the audience, carefully and stealthily blocked to stand near the theatre's aisles to not obstruct anyone's view of Nagle's uncanny ability to assay both stoicism and despair at the same time.

One thing I missed was a hint of dissipation and fragility when Oscar appears post-incarceration at the beginning of Act Two, returning a broken man both physically and emotionally after two years in a dank cell suffering the censure of the entire world. Even losing stylist Shannon Hutchins' beautifully styled wig from the first act, which takes place two years before on the eve of Wilde's arrest, would help, as the writer's well-known locks were sheared off during his time in

Reading Gaol and, at this point, had not yet grown back.

Bates offers fine support as the self-serving, cold-hearted Bosie, who exhibits not a moment of decency as he throws his lover to the lions mainly in an effort to hurt his father, the Marquess of Queensberry, and later to save his own damaged reputation.

His best work comes at the end, however, as Bosie awards his lover the title kiss before leaving him despondent and alone. In contrast, Bates' first scenes are played too frantic, when keeping his uppercrust British composure would let Hare's dialogue stand on its own to expose Lord Alfred's selfishness and insidiously evil nature without the actor having to work so hard to convey it.

De La Cruz is touching as Robbie, the man's lingering love for and devotion to his ex heartrending to observe, although in his final scene, I missed what I believe to be a necessary approaching sense of giving up on Wilde as his friend stubbornly continues to sabotage himself.

Matthew Campbell Dowling as Arthur, the randy Cadogan Hotel valet who doesn't seem to discriminate by gender, and Will Dixon as Mr. Moffitt, his superior who has a very special activity in mind to punish the lad for his dalliance with the compromised chambermaid, are both perfectly cast, able to maintain their professionalism as servants while never losing their humanity and genuinely caring for their celebrated, demanding charge.

Klein is a scene-stealer as the cockney maid Phoebe, unsure whether Arthur and Moffitt's generosity in refusing Wilde's excessive tip is a stance she wishes to share and, as Galileo, Kanazawa is nice to look at without him feeling the need to scratch and pose and make puzzled faces to tempt anyone to look his way when turning his back to the audience is more than enough to pull focus.

Let me point out, as was true with the original production, the extensive nudity and graphic sexual imagery are not just gratuitous here. Hare's point is that, while members of the lower classes back then were shagging each other with great abandon on a regular basis regardless of gender, and while Sir Alfred's behavior was protected by his family's nobility, the prominent Irish intellectual and social butterfly Oscar Wilde was systematically raked through the proverbial coals strictly because of his celebrity and bold denial of popular hypocritical Christian-based morality.

You know... like today.

This is the quintessential mounting of a magnificent, long-buried potential future classic which heralds one of our time's greatest playwrights, whose ability to evoke Oscar Wilde's genius with words seems as though he is channeling the man himself. The production is both lavish and austere, the simplicity of it exquisite as it allows a world-class ensemble and director to shine through at every moment, something accentuated by Diane Graebner's lavish, lovely period costuming.

So, here's the thing. Not only do Oscar Wilde and I share the same birthday 100 years apart, I have played the great dramatist several times over the years and have won some major honors doing so, most notably in a 75-minute monologue as the dying Wilde in the premiere of the lategreat Leon Katz' incredible *Beds* in 2000 and soon after in the debut of C. Robert Holloway's *Oscar & Speranza* in Washington, DC.

In 2001, after seeing Liam Neeson and Tom Hollander reprise their London performances on Broadway in 1998, then playing the role myself in a workshop production opposite Christian Martin as Bosie at the Egyptian Arena, Jer Adrienne Lelliott and I tried to get the rights to bring Sir David's masterwork to El Lay for the first time. We were turned down then because they were holding out to see it produced at a larger house like the Taper or South Coast Rep, which for some reason never happened.

Aside from the fact that Jer is no longer the same gender, Wilde died at age 46 and I am now 72. How agonizing is it to realize one is too old to play a role that means so much to him? Not easy—that is unless the role is being assayed by an

actor as gifted, as magical, as absolutely perfect and heartbreaking as LA treasure Rob Nagle.

If someone else had been cast who was not as breathtakingly brilliant as he, I would have been grinding my teeth and ready to scream out in my seat. As it is, instead I was transported. I was more than content; I was mesmerized by his golden, gossamer portrayal of poor Oscar.

In all honesty, as I age into acting obscurity, here's something I've never said before: I was actually glad it was Rob Nagle up there moving us all to tears and not me. His is a performance I will never forget.

**THROUGH MAR. 24: Boston Court Performing Arts Center, 70 Mentor Av., Pasadena. 626.683.6883 or bostoncourt@com**