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Festival Connect - An uneven Dorian Gray has some picture perfect moments

October 11, 2012

8:02 PM MST



The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde adapted by Neil Bartlett
The Abbey Theatre

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Rating: ★★★★★

Beauty is the beast in Neil Bartlett's current adaptation of [Oscar Wilde's](#) novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the story of a young man who keeps his conscience closeted in an upstairs bedroom, in the form of a portrait which ages while he remains youthful. Written at a time when the world supposedly knew nothing and believed everything, Bartlett has undertaken to retell Wilde's morality tale in a world that allegedly knows everything and believes nothing. In attempting to do so Bartlett makes some brave choices, and if some don't always succeed, it still makes for an intriguing and entertaining production.

Bartlett's latest incarnation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* injects several new elements into his

retelling of Wilde's masterpiece, including Jazz Age and Vaudevillian overtones. Using monologues directed to the audience and a Greek-like Chorus opened up some interesting avenues, but transitions between scenes weren't always as clear or as compelling as they could have been. Throughout, Bartlett remained true to the spirit of Wilde's language, the novella's overt exploration of youth, morality and art and its covert commentary on homosexuality. At times though it suffered from relying too heavily on Wilde's succinct pearls of wisdom and humour. Bartlett's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was often stronger when it deviated from channelling the spirit of Wilde and wandered off into its own curious territories, such as its use of repeated motifs, like the Our Father, which it used to terrific effect.

Theatrically *The Picture of Dorian Gray* hit some wonderful highs and director Bartlett created some stunning stage pictures throughout. But it also suffered from a few less than convincing moments. Scattered chairs on a pared back, black stage, tables, microphones, footlights and Dorian's eponymous picture contributed to Kandis Cook's wonderfully effective set design. Chris Davey's Light Design and, Ivan Birthistle's and Vincent Doherty's Sound Design cleverly utilised light, shadow and a crackly Chopin to create mood, texture and atmosphere. Kandis Cook's exceptionally stunning costumes captured the shift from late Victorian to early Jazz Age perfectly, encapsulating the shifts of time, society and of its changing values. But the portrait itself was far less satisfying, as was the visually disappointing ending, which, in its blatant tackiness, may not have achieved the desired effect it intended. The overall design struggled with the fact that everyone else on stage seemed to suffer Dorian's curse as no one appeared to age, effectively undermining Dorian's claim to eternal youthfulness.

If theatrically there were issues on occasion, performances were excellent throughout. Making his theatrical debut, newcomer Tom Canton was convincing as a youthful Dorian who, part devils protégé, struggles with his conscience and his licence to do anything he wants in the pursuit of any pleasure he wants. Playing Lord Henry Wotton, the tempting devil himself, as an archetypal Wilde, Jasper Britton was superb in this, his Abbey debut. Frank McCusker's conflicted artist Basil Hallward was wonderfully understated and provided the perfect foil for the hedonistic Lord Henry and Dorian, being irresistibly drawn and repelled by both men. Gerard Byrne as the butler Francis and Jane Brennan as Lady Victoria Wotton brought incredible presence and conviction to their performances, whether playing their individual roles or operating as part of an excellent chorus that provided commentary, interior monologues or contextualisation throughout.

In Neil Bartlett's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, youth is not always beautiful, art is not always useless and the play is anything but superficial. Rather it is a theatrical treat, and if it suffered from being too faithful to Wilde's original at times, it was nevertheless a visually stunning production with strong performances and some picture perfect moments.

The Picture of Dorian Gray runs at The [Abbey Theatre](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/) until 17th November. Doors open at 7.30 p.m. with a Saturday matinee at 2.00 p.m. Tickets are €18 – €40. Concessions range from €13 – €25. For more information go to <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/>



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