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“It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors”: Dorian Gray 2.0¹

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Cusp: Late 19th-/Early 20th-Century Cultures (2024)

Abstract: A review of Sydney Theatre Company’s production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, starring Sarah Snook and directed by Kip Williams, at London’s Theatre Royal Haymarket

Oscar Wilde’s famous preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891) suggests that “there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.”² And yet, Dorian’s lurid fate would seem to suggest that Wilde’s story is a morality tale about the perils of vanity and hedonism. There is “nothing in the whole world [he] would not give” for Basil Hallward’s painting of him to grow old, and for him to be always young:³ a Faustian pact that proves horribly portentous as his wish becomes reality and he is cursed with the fate of watching the visible manifestation of his soul become riddled with rot.

Sydney Theatre Company’s lauded adaptation for the stage wrestles with this moral ambivalence. It premiered at the Roslyn Packer Theatre in Sydney in November 2020 with Eryn Jean Norvill playing all twenty-six of Wilde’s characters to great acclaim, although she was replaced by Sarah Snook for its run at London’s Theatre Royal Haymarket in the spring of 2024. Snook is best known for playing Shiv Roy in the HBO drama *Succession* (2018–2023), but one

would be hard pushed to find much of Shiv in this mercurial performance—other than ousting her predecessor, perhaps, who is now credited as a “Dramaturg and Creative Associate.”

The key to understanding Wilde’s preface comes in a less cited line that precedes his famous anecdote about the morality or immorality of a book. For Wilde, there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book—but there are meanings to be found in the casting of judgement. To judge a work of literature as “immoral,” to find “ugly meanings in beautiful things,” is a form of charmless corruption, but to find “beautiful meanings in beautiful things” is a sign of cultivation.⁴ This astonishing production by director Kip Williams encourages the audience to consider just this—the beauty to be found in the craft of manifesting Dorian’s downward spiral—albeit in a way that retains something of Wilde’s own moral ambivalence.

The theatrical scenarios at the heart of Wilde’s novel and the similarity between his characters’ witty *répartie* and that found in his social comedies, like *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) and *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), have led some to suggest that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is well-suited to dramatic adaptation.⁵ However, the more descriptive passages that play such a crucial role in charting Dorian’s downfall present more of a challenge for stage directors. This is one of the reasons why the British playwright John Osborne’s adaptation that premiered at the Greenwich Theatre in London in 1975 was not well received.⁶ It was adapted for the BBC’s *Play of the Month* series a year later with a new director (John Gorrie replaced Clive Donner) and a new cast that included John Gielgud as Lord Henry, Jeremy Brett as Basil Hallward, and Peter Firth as Dorian Gray. While their performances are exceptional and do much to capture the spirit of Wilde’s characters, Osborne’s slashing of key narrative content and his favoring of Wilde’s “ready-made” dialogue results in a dramaturgical structure that is fundamentally flawed. There are too many holes in the story of Dorian’s decline for it to make any real sense, let alone for it to capture the heady atmosphere of the underworld that ultimately secures his fate.⁷

A successful theatrical adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* needs to consider not just Wilde’s dialogue and witty aphorisms, but the world and atmosphere that he depicts through

descriptive prose. Sydney Theatre Company do just this. The performance is protean: it is a story well-told, but it is also part vaudeville, part satire, part melodrama, and at times bordering on farce in an intermedial embrace of live and recorded film, inventively staged by video designer David Bergman. Its dramaturgical and intermedial composition plays no small part in resolving the complexities involved in adapting Wilde's novel, while at the same time ensuring that the possibilities of stagecraft are not only embraced, but foregrounded.

Rather than masking its technological wizardry, the stage designer Marg Horwell reminds us of the theatre's means of production. As the audience takes their seats they are confronted with a bare stage and a gigantic black screen hanging from the rafters—which is to say, without a set to speak of. Colorful taped “spikes” are dotted about the stage floor to assist the correct placement of actors and camera operators. In time, this stage becomes populated with things and people. Stagehands move on and off, costume and wig changes take place in front of our eyes, the screens enable Snook to dialogue with herself as she plays Wilde's characters, each denoted by extraneous aids and carefully practiced mannerisms: a cigarette and looks of feigned indifference for Lord Henry; a paintbrush and dejected hunch for Basil; a blonde wig in childish curls to match Dorian's naivety in the first half, and a meticulously styled pompadour and hypnotic swagger in the second. Adding the role of Narrator to Snook's arsenal of characters also offers an effective solution to those tricky descriptive passages, with the added benefit of pulling the audience closer into the action on screen and stage by way of direct address, shot close-up, as if to let us in on the latest scandal by more intimate means.

There is a surprising restraint to this production, at least at first, as if to mirror the composition of a painting that slowly finds its form. The stagehands, costume dressers and camera operators become characters, of sorts, mutely waiting upon their aristocratic protagonists like doting servants. The camera and projection screens also become characters, or rather they become the characters' eyes – eyes that we, the audience, see through. We watch Dorian as he poses for Basil, but we gaze from the perspective of Lord Henry – the smoke from his cigarette

drifting across our mediated field of vision as he utters his queerly seductive speech to Dorian: “Resist temptation, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself.”⁸ We watch Basil as he confronts Dorian with the sordid stories that have marred his name in London’s fashionable circles, although it is the audience whose Basil’s imploring eyes address: the audience invoked as the eponymous youth. And as Basil and Harry and Dorian look upon Basil’s painting for the first time, they appear in their projected form to be looking at us, the spectators, sitting mute somewhere in the void of the auditorium. That which is revealed as art, it seems, are those watching the watchers. Or, as Wilde puts it in the epigraph to this review: “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” Layers of reality fold in upon themselves, and in the end it is we as much as Dorian Gray who are implicated.

This is a production about screens. Screens also play an important role in Wilde’s book—a picture is painted on a canvas, and a screen is used to hide it—but the twenty-first century has lent the screen yet greater significance as a medium of surprising relevance. Before the show starts we are presented with a hanging black screen, and soon it becomes clear that its shape stands in for the “black mirror” of a smartphone (Snook also starred in an episode of Charlie Brooker’s influential television series *Black Mirror*).⁹ As Dorian explores London’s seedy nightlife, they start filming themselves on their phone with the captured image livestreamed onto one of several screens. They edit their image using an augmented reality app (I later discovered that this was an app called B612, designed by South Korea’s Snow Corporation), at first in ways that appear only subtly—lips slightly larger, eyes slightly brighter—before then stretching their eyes, lips and cheeks into monstrous mutations. Later on, in a psychedelic sequence that transforms Wilde’s opium den into a nightclub, the app modifies their face into that of a bearded male—Dorian’s nemesis, James Vane—as well as variously gendered revelers. The effect is disturbing, not least at a time when rights to one’s own image have become contested in a commodified digital arena.

Wilde may well have questioned the attempt to highlight such explicit sociocultural relevance in moments like this, in which the artificial beautification of selfies reads as vanity or as a response to the insidiousness of technological platforms governed by commercial imperatives that facilitate social interaction and comparison. Also, one cannot help but wonder whether Wilde might have enjoyed social media as a platform for cultivating his own celebrity. Regardless, the intoxicating and addictive effects of this technology matched with the appeal of disco-drenched techno seem a fitting contemporary touchstone for the lure of a world that seduces Dorian into curing his soul by means of the senses, not least by way of incorporating a medium—a smartphone—that promises perfect worlds and rare experiences that are inevitably out of reach.

Three issues sit a little uncomfortably in this otherwise superlative production. Firstly, one's pockets need to be deep to afford a ticket.¹⁰ Its London premiere was facilitated by the commercial prowess of top-dollar producers and investors,¹¹ with prices ranging from between £35 and £50 for a restricted view to £249 for a seat in the stalls. Whatever he might have said to the contrary, Wilde made peace with commerce in his own lifetime as a published author,¹² and may well have appreciated the recognition and international influence promised by the show's big wig producers. Nonetheless, the prospect of such a work being folded into a portfolio of lucrative smash hits may well have raised a quizzical eyebrow, or provided fodder for a witticism to fend off suggestions that one's art has ended up bound to the priorities of the culture industry.

Secondly, the casting of a cisgendered heterosexual woman in the title role misses an opportunity to make more of the queerness that plays such an important role in Wilde's text. This is to take nothing away from the virtuosity of Snook's performance, which revels in the campy possibilities of adapting Wilde's novel for the stage. But I cannot help but wonder how a LGBTQ+ performer might have enhanced the thematic interplay between stage and screen by riffing on a "glitched" production of self at the interface between material and digital culture.¹³

Casting a queer, trans, and/or nonbinary performer might also have enabled Williams to dig deeper into one of Wilde's descriptions of Dorian, which they highlight as being key to their interpretation of the novel: that "a human [is] a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature."¹⁴ Wilde's insight is as relevant to Snook as it is to her audiences, but a more focused exploration of queer and especially nonbinary or trans identification would have made that relevance all the more fecund in theatrical and thematic terms.

Finally, one very particular aspect of the work's aesthetic results in a strange, somewhat jarring, incongruity. The production's take on a pivotal scene in Wilde's story featuring a rural shooting party situates Dorian alone amongst trees, plants and, at one point, the black-tipped ears of a hare. At first Snook as Dorian stands amongst the deep-rutted bark of tree trunks hung from the rafters, and waxes lyrical about the capacity of nature to inspire grace. This is the first time in the show that the stage is freed from projection screens, but in time they return and reveal a lush green woodland filmed in high definition. Up until this point that which might otherwise be understood as signifiers of the natural world are clearly the product of artifice—artificial flowers strewn about the place, the putting on and casting off of genders like garments in a changing room—but here the camera's replication of a wooded landscape appears as just that: a wooded landscape. Dorian in their costume seems so utterly out of place within it. The worlds so lovingly crafted through hints and allusion on stage, along with their livestreamed doubles on the screens, are replaced with an altogether more "real" woodland scene that fails to fit with the stylized aesthetic of the rest of the production. Including a melodramatic chase scene that finds James Vane hounding Dorian through the wood with a revolver unfortunately does not help matters, at least on the face of it, and neither does the decision to have Dorian blast Vane with a shotgun after Vane's gun runs out of ammunition. Wilde's tale opts for a more bathetic *dénouement* in which a marginal character and member of the hunting party—Sir Geoffrey Clouston—spots the hare, misses, and accidentally hits Vane instead, who has been hiding unbeknownst to the others.

But perhaps there is more going on here than meets the eye. The chase scene is accompanied by Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 2, Resurrection Symphony*, which was first performed the year of the Wilde Trials in 1895. I do not think it too much of a stretch to read Vane's hounding of Dorian as an allusion to the public's hounding of Wilde. Also, the incongruity of the high-definition woodland reveals something important about the "decadence" of the performance's aesthetic. Nature is not at home on this stage (unless, as Lord Henry says, it is "simply a pose").¹⁵ Its presence sullies the artificial paradise—and the harrowing landscapes—that chart Dorian's captivating descent.

The decadence of this performance resists the temptation simply to stage the luxurious trappings of material wealth. Instead, what we find is a relatively spartan design and reserve. The savoring of a cigarette, the raising of an eyebrow filmed close-up, the exquisite filigree of a waistcoat: these are the indices that hint at its decadence. Decadence can also be found in the homage it pays to a kind of artifice that makes little attempt to reveal itself as anything other, for the most part; the space it leaves for the cast and creatives to revel in the refinement of their craft; the enjoyable art of the pose; the smiles raised by the bite of Lord Henry's wit, which delights in provoking moral sensibilities; and the beauty to be found in the virtuosic depiction of decay, decline and depravity. Most of all, what crowns the idiosyncrasy of its decadence is the appeal it makes to the audience to inhabit the shoes of Wilde's protagonists, to project themselves into a projected world, and even to become the very object of Dorian's fascination and horror: which is to say, to become if not an artwork, then at least that which art mirrors. These are the qualities that merit the plaudits bestowed upon it, and that will, no doubt, ensure its place as a landmark production in the Wildean canon.

Notes

1 Oscar Wilde, “The Preface,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Croxley Green: Chiltern Publishing, 2020), 5-6 (p. 6).

2 Wilde, “The Preface,” 5.

3 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 35.

4 Oscar Wilde, “The Preface,” 5.

5 Maho Hidaka, “Play on Life: Exploring the Theatrical World of ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray,’” *Journal of Irish Studies* 21 (2006): 97–106.

6 See Irving Wardle, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde,” *The Times*, February 14, 1975; Michael T. Leech, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde,” *After Dark*, April 1975. Both reviews available at: <https://www.nothing-fancy.com/michaelkitchen/theatre/pdg.htm>, accessed February 28, 2024.

7 A similar issue plagues other landmark adaptations for the stage. For instance, see Richard Allen Cave’s study of two versions by Neil Bartlett. Richard Allen Cave, “The Abbey Theatre Stages Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies* 3 (2013): 25–34.

8 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, adapted by Kip Williams, from the novel by Oscar Wilde (n.c.: Samuel French, 2024), 8.

9 “Men Against Fire,” *Black Mirror*, episode 5, season 3, written by Charlie Brooker, directed by Jakob Verbruggen October 21, 2016.

10 My thanks to the benevolent editors, who made this review possible.

11 The London run of Sydney Theatre company’s production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was produced by the Michael Cassell Group and Adam Kenwright (a managing partner with Kindred Partners): the former a specialist in blockbuster international tours (which include *Hamilton* and *The Lion King*), and the latter an original cofounder of the theatre marketing company AKA and a former Group Board Director of Ambassador Theatre Group. The

billionaire investor and philanthropist Len Blavatnik also gains a credit as a coproducer with Danny Cohen through Blavatnik's company Access Entertainment—and this to name only a few of the show's producorial partners.

12 See Kirsten MacLeod's writing on the pact that many decadent writers—Wilde included—made with the commodification of literature despite at the same time decrying it. Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 10–11.

13 See Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020).

14 Wilde, qtd. in Kip Williams, "Author's Note," in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, , p. xviii.

15 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 13.