

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dorian Gray In Shades From A to The

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 3rd, 2018

There are many ways you can look at a piece of theatre, especially when it openly invites you to do that, and a stage adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* all but cries out for open-mindedness. The key word in Michael Michetti's elegant stage version of Wilde's novella at Pasadena's A Noise Within (ANW), is revealed by an almost imperceptible change in the title — the change from a “*The*” to an “*A*,” as in *A Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Dorian Gray, Wilde's only novel, has been abundantly tortured over the 100 plus years since its 1890 publication in Lippincott's literary magazine. It's had insults thrust at it, changes made and remade through the years, bad music forced on to it, and other assorted mutilations. Michetti's stage version, originally offered in 2006 at Pasadena's Theatre @ Boston Court (where I did not see it), has its share of fantasies, but they are all suitably Gothic in their theatricality. It also offers some of Wilde's choicest wit and keeps distortions down to an acceptable minimum.

Acceptable is another of those malleable words subject to one's personal perceptions. So without carrying these meditations too far, this ANW production is faithful to Wilde's intent, period and language and it has the specific good fortune of being directed by Michetti as well.



I-r, Colin Bates, Amin El Gamal & Frederick Stuart in *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* at ANW.

In this iteration, the staging of the lurid morality tale of a man whose portrait grows old while he retains — and abuses — his youthful good looks, makes use of some of the theatre's best tools. It is spare in all things but talent. This includes a setting suggested simply by the selective placement of furnishings on a bare stage (the design also is by Michetti, with the collaboration of James Maloof), the hanging of empty frames, a fine array of period costumes by Garry Lennon, wigs and make-up by Shannon Hutchins, good lighting and sound from Rose Malone and Robert Oriol, respectively, and some inspired ideas, such as allowing the actors who are supposed to age throughout the action, to put on their own aging makeup on stage in full view of the audience.

All this underscores the fact that this is not a movie or a reality show, but a theatrical conceit that confirms that what we're watching is a cautionary fairy tale.

That much needs to be quite clear since, through it all, and in spite of the passage of time, Dorian (played by ANW newcomer Colin Bates) does not age. Neither, I should add, do his clothes — a decision at once symbolic and pragmatic that must be laid at the feet of the director and was perhaps determined by the fact that the action in the second half keeps the character (and the actor

playing him) unremittingly busy.

The first half, which could be a tad shorter, is straightforward. It recounts events from the time of the painting of Dorian's portrait by an ardent admirer, to the languid hours of idly socializing with friends and admirers, to Dorian's mad adventure with heterosexual love and his first fall from grace.

That's when the portrait, too, begins to change — a happening that so horrifies its owner that he banishes it forever to the attic under lock and key.



Colin Bates (foreground) and dancers in *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* at ANW.

The second half, which takes place 18 years later, is the more involving one. Dorian, by now fully engulfed in a life of debauchery and self-degradation, moves unflinchingly and insatiably from one depravity to the next. The theatrical conventions also undergo a change. Dorian's exploits are seen through a prism of intricate, sinuous, suggestive movement with various partners that approaches a kind of *danse macabre* without quite getting there. John Pennington's inventive choreography effectively skirts all around the issues and, combined with the haunting chorus of voices from the ever present ensemble, manages to convey visions of opium dens and indiscriminate sex even when there's none to be seen. Dorian's actions become increasingly less focused and more fevered until, in the full grip of his Faustian bargain, they begin to control him more than he is able control them. Perdition, we now know, cannot be far off.

Bates, who is new to the company, is a compelling Dorian, who will accentuate the sinister beyond where it is now while retaining the magnetism and egocentricity that accompany most creatures of mystery. What I saw was only the second performance; so there is room to grow. Bates will secure his way into the role, grasping the added assurance he needs as he performs it.

Frederick Stuart, a company stalwart, is an accomplished Lord Henry Wotton, an aristocrat as much intrigued as attracted by Dorian, while Amin El Gamal, who plays Basil Hallward, the timid artist who put all of himself into the portrait of the man on whom he has such an uncontrollable crush, displays the right fragility and sweetness of temperament that the part dictates.



I-r, Colin Bates & Amin El Gamal in *A Portrait of Dorian Gray* at A Noise Within.

As for the rest of the cast, this is a production where the minor roles are shared by so many that one can only comment on the success of the ensemble as a whole. Like Dorian, the actors involved were just a hair shy of self-assured on the day that I saw them. The choreography they've been given is not as rigorous as the one Dorian and his partners had to master, but it makes demands nonetheless. Assurance will come, because these are mostly seasoned performers who know what they're doing — and still need to be doing.

It is a tribute to ANW that they choose to deliberately reach beyond their comfort zone by taking on productions that will guarantee their continued growth and development. From soup to nuts, the majority of the talent in this *Dorian Gray* is new to the company. This indicates, at the very least, a decision to expand the horizon by refreshing the mix. Always a good idea.

A Picture of Dorian Gray is also a triple manifestation of Michetti's impressive creativity as he

continues to find ways to command his audiences' interest, curiosity and respect.

Top image: l-r, Colin Bates & Frederick Stuart in A Picture of Dorian Gray at ANW.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *A Picture of Dorian Gray*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E Foothill Blvd, Pasadena, CA 91107

WHEN: Thursday, Nov 15 ONLY, 7:30pm;

Fridays, Oct 19, 8pm (*Conversation*); Nov 2, 8pm (*Conversation*); Nov 16, 8pm (*Conversation*);

Saturdays, Oct 20, 2 & 8pm; Nov 3, 2 & 8pm;

Sundays, Oct 28, 2 & 7pm; Nov 11, 2 (*Conversation*) & 7pm

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available at www.anoisewithin.org, or by calling 626.356.3121.

Student Rush with ID, an hour before performance: \$20.

Groups (10 or more): Adults, \$25-\$50 per ticket, up to 35% off; Students from \$18.

Sunday Rush: Oct 28 & Nov 11, 7pm – all remaining tickets, \$25, available online after 12am, day-of-performance with code SUNDAYRUSH, or cash or credit at the box office, day-of-performance after 2pm.

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