

'The Picture of Dorian Gray' Directed by Kip Williams for The Sydney Theatre Company, at The Roslyn Packer Theatre

'The Picture of Dorian Gray', originally a gothic novel written by Oscar Wilde, was adapted for Sydney Theatre Company's 2020 season, by Director Kip Williams. The adaptation and the original explore notions of youth, narcissism, ageing, innocence and beauty told through the story of the protagonist, Dorian Gray. This production received much praise, and was widely considered another notable achievement in Kip Williams's streak of highly successful plays as artistic director with the Sydney Theatre Company. Stylistically, the production has many modern elements, prominently the use of digital screens and references to contemporary pop culture.

Despite the tremendous acclaim the production has been receiving, I believe a series of questionable directorial decisions prevented it from having the same impact on me. These reduce to two major issues, the strict adherence to one actor and the use of cultural shorthands. The use of one and only one actor was a decision that struck me as odd as it was necessary to use screens to make up for the actors who would play the other characters. Conceptually it makes little sense, except maybe tying into the theme of narcissism. Regardless of this, I found the novelty of one actor playing all of the roles wore off fairly quickly, and the challenges it presented grew more and more apparent as the play progressed. These challenges were mainly present in characterisation. The characters that appeared on the screen felt noticeably weaker, detracting from large group scenes the most. This was not helped by the fact that the production drew attention to the presence of the screens with additional self-referential dialogue, tirelessly making the exact same "It's my turn to speak". It felt like a compromise. At the risk of sounding a bit like a purist, there is a reason why theatre has survived alongside film, it has a unique appeal which can not be replicated with pre-recorded footage. This is not to say that an interdisciplinary approach of theatre and film should not be attempted, however more consideration into why, and the effect on the play is needed. I found the approach especially jarring on this occasion, as it was an interesting component of Williams' production of 'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui', in the STC's 2018 season. Furthermore, there were inevitably moments where the live and pre-recorded dialogue fell out of sync, and though we are talking about margins of a few seconds it was yet another unnecessary disadvantage the digital element presented. When it came to immersing the audience in a setting on the other hand, the screens worked relatively well.

In several instances, the use of cell phones and snapchat imitations felt distracting and clunky. Snapchat does make sense contextually, however on stage a projection of a low resolution photo with a filter on it, haphazardly alternating between portrait and landscape mode, is a highly ineffective image for what the director presumably wanted to convey. Even if the rapid alternation was just a one-off mishap, the attention to detail beyond the initial idea was severely lacking. Ultimately it felt as if the inclusion of snapchat was there exclusively to get a cheap laugh out of parents and to give the teens something to relate to. Its use in the play was an

uninspired cultural marker. This lazy use of cultural markers even extends to the sound track. The use of Bach's Prelude in C Major, from the first book of 'Der Wohltemperierte Klavier' is an odd choice, given the setting of Victorian England, especially as it is diegetic. I was, on the other hand, pleased to hear a piece of music from Mica Levi's soundtrack to 'Under the Skin'. The play closed incongruently with a melodramatic ballad. All of these disparate musical interludes were distracting. You might expect such a soundtrack in a production where the director expected little emotional impact on the audience, as a means of compensation.

In my opinion, the ambition of the play was best realised in the opening scene, which felt significantly more considered than the remainder of the play. It perfectly balanced a sense of banality and dread as the Faustian premise of the play is established. The frequent character switches minimised important dialogue being performed by way of prerecording and the displayed backgrounds very cleverly played with perspective to create spaces not possible in exclusively live theatre.

Even with my reservations, the ability of Eryn Jean Norvill is undeniable. For approximately two hours she was a convincing and dynamic presence on stage, not to mention the feat of recalling the sheer amount of lines she had.

This production is not without merit, but it was plagued with serious flaws in the way of a consistent artistic vision. If you go to the theatre for a spectacle, to be wowed by an impressive dramatic feat, then I have little doubt you will enjoy this production. The acclaim and level of commentary for this production was such that it has become a cultural event in itself. Although it was flawed you cannot accuse it of being boring. This reviewer however remains unsatisfied