

The show everyone's talking about – ‘It’s like there’s a live wire in the room’: the subversive on-stage energy of *The Doctor*

Director Anthony Almeida and cast members Mariah Louca, Doña Croll and Christopher Osikanlu Colquhoun share their thoughts on bringing Robert Icke’s brilliant new play to life – and why it is a work that speaks to the current moment

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There were moments, during rehearsals for *The Doctor*, where discussion got pretty heated. Unsurprising, perhaps, given the subject of superstar writer-director Robert Icke’s hit play: what happens after a doctor – played by Juliet Stevenson – refuses to admit a priest to the bedside of a young woman fighting for her life following a self-administered abortion.

“Of all the plays I’ve done, this is the one that has been the most discussion-led,” says Mariah Louca, who plays the PR director of the hospital where Ruth Wolff, Juliet Stevenson’s character, works. Louca joined the cast for this West End transfer of *The Doctor* having been involved in both the critically acclaimed original production at the Almeida theatre in 2019 and its run at the Adelaide Festival in 2020.

“Rob has always been keen on hearing our voices, allowing us to feed into the process and have ownership over it,” she says. That’s been more the case than ever this time around: “We were all talking about things that perhaps we were only nibbling at before.

“As cast members and creatives we were all aware of the massive change that globally we’ve gone through, so we were having even more intense and deep conversations than those in 2019, which is important and exactly what the play needs.”

But while *The Doctor* is an adaptation of a much older work, the 1912 play *Professor Bernhardt*, by Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler, the cast and creative team were struck at the beginning of the rehearsal process by how relevant the play felt.

“The world in which *Professor Bernhardt* was set was very different but [this idea of] everything you do being scrutinised in a very intense way, that was happening then and that hasn’t changed,” says Louca. “It’s just the way that people access information that has changed.”

Anthony Almeida, who directs this production, agrees: “It feels like as a culture, as a country, a lot of things have happened in the past couple of years, but we’ve been wanting to have that conversation for a long time.”

Working on *The Doctor* has been “absolutely joyous”, says Almeida, who has helmed the show while Robert Icke has been busy mounting new productions of two previous shows, *Oresteia* and *Hamlet*, in New York. “I’ve known Rob for many years. There’s a sort of shorthand for what we both want theatre to be and what we want from our nights out.”

The process of getting the play from script to stage felt like an “organic” one, says Doña Croll, one of those new cast members, who plays the clinical director of the hospital. “Because we’re all experienced actors, we feel our way around. It sort of just happens, except when we’ve missed out on something, then the director will say: ‘If you do that there, then we can have this here.’ Everybody goes: ‘Oh, of course!’ and it all makes sense.”

The nitty-gritty of the staging stayed fairly fluid during the four-week rehearsal process, says Croll, with changes taking place right up until the first show of the nearly three-week tour that precedes The Doctor's West End run. "Different spaces give you different challenges," she says. "Brighton's Theatre Royal has got a rake [upward slant] on stage, for instance."

It's likely that further changes will be made during the period of technical rehearsals – when technical details such as light and sound cues are finessed – at the Duke of York's Theatre in London. "Rob and I will do a few working sessions and we'll rework a few things," says Almeida.

"It's very much still Rob's production, but there's something I've really enjoyed about him as a writer. It's been a gift for me as a director to work with his rhythms," he says. "He's a theatre director, but there's such a musical quality as well: these big group symphony scenes, when the doctors meet, have been such a great thing to work through and 'conduct'. And then you get these little chamber scenes, these domestic scenes that Ruth has at home, which feel like the heart of the play."

The play's musicality isn't limited to its structure and language. The addition of a live soundtrack by drummer Hannah Ledwidge serves to "make the work epic", says Croll.

"Music marks the emotional heartbeat of any piece that Rob does. The music came in week three of rehearsals: it came in one day and then wasn't there the next two days, then it came in again so we gradually got used to it. It made everything more visceral, more live," she says.

Liveness, whether born of a pulsing soundtrack, vivid performances, compelling writing or, more likely, all three combined, is key to the power of The Doctor as a piece of theatre. As Christopher Osikanlu Colquhoun, who plays one of Ruth's consultant colleagues, puts it: "The theatre on each night that this play is shown becomes an arena in itself. We're not simply actors on stage doing a play for the entertainment of the paying public – the audience brings their responses to the space.

"It's not like any theatre experience I've ever had before because it feels like there's a live wire in the room."