

THE DOCTOR: PRESS RESPONSES

Duke of York's, West End (2022)

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WHATSONSTAGE | Alex Wood

A 14 year-old has died at the start of *The Doctor*. The crucifix-sporting teen was brought into a medical institute, run by one Ruth Wolff (the titular doctor), after a botched self-administered abortion. In the closing moments of her life, Wolff denies a priest access to the Catholic youngster's bedside: the clinician argues that the presence of clergy will only distress the patient and worsen the circumstances of her passing.

A heady 15 minutes kicks off Robert Icke's piece, finally opening in the West End. In Icke's vision, Arthur Schnitzler's Professor Bernhardt – which acts as the inspiration for the three-hour play – is radically transformed: Wolff's actions are a theoretical touch paper – with a conflagration of concepts and charged conversations following.

Together with Anthony Almeida (who directs the West End staging – the show was first presented in north London in 2019), Icke has his characters prowling a slow revolve, as the issue of the teenager's death picks up a whirling hysteria – battle lines are drawn, statements are drafted. Wolff's Jewish identity is dissected, as if she has been placed on a public petri-dish, while the integrity of her institute is called into question.

But, as anyone who has seen his work before won't be surprised to know, Icke adds an extra twist of stagecraft – in this case casting with deliberately indecipherable identities. Genders and racial characteristics of all on stage are deliberately ambiguous at the beginning (some remain so through to the end of the show). It adds a sense of inertia, forcing the audience to jettison their assumptions about those they see in front of them. Sometimes Wolff is a woman in a room packed full of shouting men, and it is only later that we come to understand what that might mean.

So on one level there is medical ethics, on another there is identity, while a final piece of the puzzle is a whole debate concerning the use of language. For the medical world, words are precise, definite. In our increasingly hazy world, meaning and origin meld with contemporary usage. Wolff, an ardent grammarian, is blind-sided in act two when her presuppositions are swept aside.

Kudos to Icke, Almeida and drummer Hannah Ledwidge for making the experience feel more like a thriller than academic stodge. Designer Hildegard Bechtler has a long, single table sit in the centre of the stage – a solid nod to a biblical image if you needed one – the battleground for ideologies, religions, racial tensions, abortion issues and generational conflict.

The cast are on fine form – Juliet Stevenson as Wolff proves once more why she is one of the finest performers of a generation, aided by a stellar supporting team.

But in this fast-paced, digitally-driven world, the force of Icke's work has been dampened by the shifting tides of global events. It's hard to shake the feeling that the show would have provided a jackhammer of oomph had it arrived in the West End in 2020 – but already displays some of its age. A whole section about the etymology of the word "woke" has become passé (now that the term has been reappropriated in a derogatory sense by certain aspects of the media) while the whole concept of medical ethics has been no stranger to the headlines over the last few years, for obvious reasons.

Just like its protagonist, then, you could say that Icke's work has, in a small way, been the victim of circumstance. But Juliet Stevenson's unquenchable, indefatigable performance is transcendent. It has to be seen to be believed.

ARTS DESK | Laura De Lisle

Robert Icke is an expert in corporate tragedy. He has a penchant for taking classics (Hamlet, The Oresteia, Mary Stuart) and transporting them, with the help of designer Hildegard Bechtler, to the frosted-glass doors and pale wood of the boardroom.

The Doctor, his 2019 swan song at the Almeida Theatre now transferred to the Duke of York's Theatre, is an adaptation of a 1912 play by Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler. It's a sharp-tongued vivisection of identity politics, anchored by an astonishing lead performance from Juliet Stevenson.

Like all good tragic heroes, Ruth Wolff is first seen at the height of her powers. She's the director of an institute trying to find a cure for dementia; they're about to open a new building, years in the making. She can see what her (male) colleagues can't, reading a person instantly with what another doctor refers to as her "Jedi powers". "I am crystal-clear," she says, her voice cutting through the noise around her to deliver the objective truth. Or, at least, her version of it.

The inciting incident is remarkably similar to Schnitzler's original. A Jewish doctor refuses a Catholic priest access to a teenager who has had a botched abortion. Ruth thinks the priest's presence will alert the girl to her imminent death, and bars the door. But the argument escalates, and the girl dies panicking. The key differences are that Ruth is a woman, and Jewish by background, not by religion. Icke's version of the priest, though played by a white actor (John Mackay), is Black. As the hospital's head of PR (Mariah Louca) notes, the "optics" aren't good.

Despite the urging of her bullish deputy (Naomi Wirthner), Ruth refuses to apologise. Within a day, the situation spirals out of control. Ruth's colleagues split into warring factions. Her car is vandalised. All the while, she insists that she has done nothing wrong. She is a doctor – she had a duty to her patient. Even as Ruth's power wanes, Stevenson commands the stage, an actor at the top of her game. Her Ruth is at once achingly brittle and totally unbreakable.

Icke and revival director Anthony Almeida stress Ruth's experience of constant surveillance. In a TV interview, she is seated with her back to us, a live camera feed zoomed in on her face as she answers questions from a panel of experts in various fields. It's like we're being interrogated along with her. At one point, Stevenson sprints around Bechtler's semicircle of smooth nondescript wood like it's an arena or a cage, desperate to escape the millions of eyes watching her.

Which is easier for her than for some, of course. One of the panellists, a researcher into unconscious bias (Sabrina Wu, making an excellent stage debut), points out that Ruth has the freedom to reject the boxes that society wants to put her in – unlike people of colour, or poor people. This is a good point, but it comes a bit late in Icke's reasoning. The writing is liable to get tangled up in its own conflicting arguments, especially towards the end of the first half, when the action seems to writhe out of even the two directors' control.

The scenes at Ruth's house offer a welcome respite from the endless medical and philosophical jargon that get thrown around in the debate over her actions. She confesses her doubts to her partner Charlie (Juliet Garricks), and to Sami (Matilda Tucker, pictured right), a local teenager who comes by to do her homework. It's revealed late-on that Sami is transgender, which is a bit out of left field. The decision to cast actors from ethnic backgrounds different from their characters can

make it feel like Icke is constantly trying to pull the rug out from under us. But maybe that's the point – we don't know Sami very well, so why should we be allowed to know a significant fact about her from her first line?

The play's title allows Ruth what she wants: to be seen as only her profession, her qualifications, the trust that her patients place in her to help them. But she mentions to Charlie that she wishes she could tell her colleagues about their relationship. She doesn't seem afraid of a homophobic backlash – only of opening up, of mixing the human with the doctor. The problem is that doctors are human, and their decisions are always affected by who they are. Just like everybody else.