HARE TODAY

David Hare talks about docudrama, the real Oscar Wilde, and why he decided to write THE JUDAS KISS.

By Gerard Raymond

In the words of the late Kathleen Tynan, David Hare is a "detective of the soul." He observes his characters through a socio-political lens, writing in an elegant style popular with mainstream audiences (his mother-daughter piece, *Amy's View*, was a big hit in London this spring) but retaining a perspective from his salad days as a left-leaning fringe playwright in the early '70s. Whether dissecting the break-up of a love affair in the context of the differing political views of the couple (last season's *Skylight*), examining the mission of the Church of England against the challenges of inner-city life (*Racing Demon*), or, 20 years ago, exploring a mental breakdown against the death of idealism in post-war England (*Plenty*), Hare embraces both insider and outsider viewpoints, relating private behavior to public circumstances.

The 51-year-old playwright's latest work, *The Judas Kiss* — which arrives on Broadway this week in a production directed by Richard Eyre and starring Liam Neeson — is based on two incidents from the life of Oscar Wilde: Wilde's decision to remain in England and face prison after the collapse of his libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry in 1895, and a period during his exile in Naples two years later when he is faced with betrayal from Lord Alfred Douglas, the great love of his life. Shortly after the play's London opening, Hare traveled to New York to discuss it.

Is *The Judas Kiss* a docudrama? Is this your first play about a historical subject?

This is the first time that I've given a name to a character that was a name from real life. However, having said that, I must tell you I hate drama documentary. The attribution of made-up lines to people who never said them, I think, is a very depressing genre. But this play cannot be interpreted as anything but my fantasy. Merlin Holland, who is Oscar Wilde's grandson, says that there are two kinds of work about his grandfather. There's documentary work like *Gross Indecency*, where somebody with integrity takes the story of Wilde and lays out the facts. As Merlin says, the facts are so extraordinary that if you do it honorably you always have a compelling evening. The other category of work is where a creative writer is inspired by the memory of Wilde to go off in a direction of their own.

What was it about Wilde that inspired you?

I've admired him for many, many years. I found myself in three plays — *Skylight*, *Amy's View*, and now *The Judas Kiss* — writing about sacrificial love. If you love someone more than they love you, what is the cost? There isn't anyone who ever paid a higher price than Oscar Wilde. He takes this theme that I have been writing about for some time to its logical conclusion. There's something magnificent about somebody telling you that love is more important than life.

It seems that your Wilde has a destructively headstrong passion similar to that of Susan Traherne, the heroine of your 1978 play *Plenty*.

It's completely true. Wilde, Susan, and Esme Allen in *Amy's View* are united in a stubbornness and a truth to their own values. *The Judas Kiss* was almost inspired by the physical image of this man sitting in his chair in Naples, not moving in 24 hours and implicitly saying, "This is what I believe. Love me or leave me, sod off if you don't like it, but these are my

values." Now, plainly, Susan has some of that, and Esme is exactly the same. These are my people — stubborn. I admire them.

You're very specific in your stage direction for Wilde: "not the languid pansy of legend."

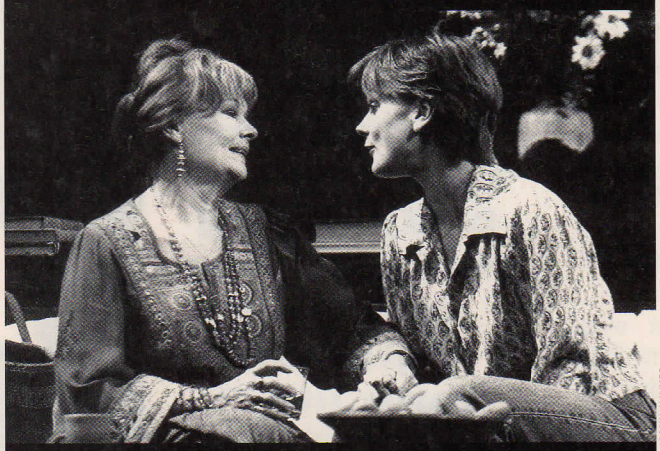
If you believe that Lord Alfred Douglas was a blond Adonis who was the all-time dream date, and if you believe that Wilde, in the words of a friend of mine, was the classic queer at the dinner party — someone who entertains you for an hour and then bursts into tears; if you have, as I think, a sado-masochistic view of Wilde, you will not like this play. No. I'm tired of watching that stereotype in which gay relationships are presented as one man enthralled to another who effectively is pulling the puppet strings. In the play, these are two complicated people who love each other in a way which is given the dignity of complexity, as in a heterosexual relationship. It's a conscious relocating of the Wilde myth, and in England — indeed in the reviews — there have been people who've been unwilling to contemplate anything but the pansy with the mascara running, in love with the beautiful young boy. In my view, that's not the story.

How much importance do you place on Wilde being Irish?

I don't know how you can present Wilde except as Irish. I think it gave his work a political dimension. That's very powerful in Liam Neeson's performance — when he says, "In England, there's always a hanging." I absolutely believe that that's how Wilde thought. This is the man who wrote *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. You often see him as a personality who happens to be a writer, but he was a writer first and foremost. And he was a writer with a critique. He happened to put that critique in disguise, but don't doubt that these plays are subversive. *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *An Ideal Husband* are attacks on the British institutions of marriage and attacks on British society — yes, of course, by a man who's half in love with society. But that's always been the artist's position — half in, half out. And to be Irish in Britain is to be half in and half out. That's always been the best place for the artist to be.

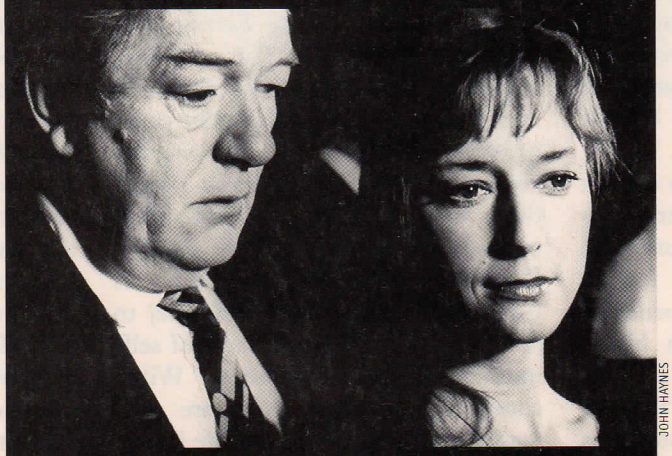
IVAN KYNCL

Hare's love trilogy: Liam Neeson and Tom Hollander as Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas in *The Judas Kiss*.



JOHN HAYNES

Judi Dench and Samantha Bond in *Amy's View*.



JOHN HAYNES

Michael Gambon and Lia Williams in *Skylight*.

Did he have an Irish accent?

No, he got rid of the Irish accent at Oxford. There's a supposed recording of his voice in the Victoria and Albert Museum, but Merlin Holland, whom I regard as the person who knows most about Wilde in the world, is convinced it's a fake.

Did you do much research?

Oh yes, loads. I think you have to do the research and then forget it. I had done the work a couple of years before; it takes time for it to be absorbed so that you don't have to look things up. I feel one of the interesting things about Wilde is that he inspires such good writing in other people. In a way, the story is so intangible. People will work away forever at the mystery of why a man appeared to rush toward his own downfall, choose to lie and believe he could get away with it, and not to do anything to protect himself when so plainly he was on a suicidal course of action. And people

want to work out at what level of consciousness he knew what would happen to him, which is always the interesting question about human beings.

So how factual is *The Judas Kiss*?

Merlin read the whole play and said there was not a fact that he could fault me about. There are points of interpretation that he disagrees with. For instance, I say in the first act that the authorities deliberately allow Wilde time to run away. Merlin says, "You may be right or you may be wrong, I disagree with you, but your interpretation is equally valid." But the point of my play is not the fact, it's the theme. I regard it as a matter of professional honor that the facts will be right, but that's simply the scaffolding on which I build what I want to do.

You don't use any of his famous epigrams or quotations in the play. What about the final passage — is that Wilde?

The final passage is from *De Profundis*. I don't do paradoxical epigrams because I don't believe Wilde talked like that — that was a literary style. So what I have had to do is invent a method of speech. I get extremely pissed off when for some of the better lines everyone asks me where Wilde said that. I say, "Well, he didn't; I've made it up."

How did you arrive at a style for Wilde?

Inspiration. The first act was, frankly, very difficult because it concerns off-stage events and it has all those problems playwrights have when they are carpentering. But the second act — I wrote it in 10 days — I felt like Mozart. I would go in every day and it was dictated to me. It was so inspired.

Your title refers to the story of Jesus. Did Wilde apply Christ imagery to his life?

He was obsessed with it to a point that people thought was dangerous. In prison, the Christ story became the only way through which he felt he could interpret what had happened to him. And, frankly, who can blame him? It was a crucifixion. As he declined, friends used to say, "It's not healthy; you're not Christ." But Jesus was the only parallel that made sense to him. And in the way of a great writer, he was always looking at ways of reinterpreting that story.

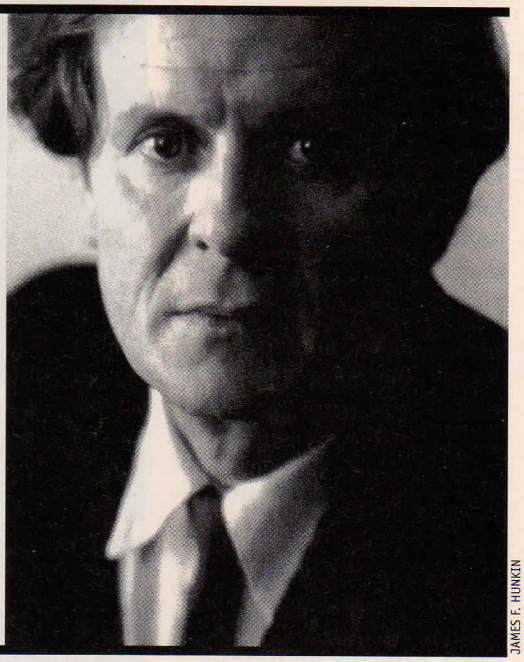
Like suggesting that the story would have been better if John rather than Judas betrayed Jesus?

Yes, Wilde said that, but not in the way it's phrased in the play.

How do you feel about the notion that Wilde allowed the trial to go through because he wanted to confront the world with his sexuality?

It cannot be true. Otherwise why did he lie? No. He was creative for as long he was in the closet. The minute he was out, he couldn't write. And that's because he's a poet of concealment. His work depends for its power on the fact that it does not allude to its true subject. *An Ideal Husband*, as the recent [Peter Hall] revival [showed], *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and *Salome* are all in code. The one thing he did not want to do, as I make claim in the second act, is make public cause of his sexuality. He did not believe that kind of "honesty" was honest. I think this is why he has such massive appeal to us at the end of the 20th century. Blurting out what you are feeling — as psychoanalysis has taught [people] to do — is, by and large, a form of self-indulgence and aggression. Wilde comes to us saying there are only masks, and what matters in life is love and the quality with which we love.

Hare on the passion of Oscar Wilde: "There's something magnificent about somebody telling you that love is more important than life."



JAMES F. HUNKIN

Is there any connection between your writing about love and your recent marriage? The three plays are all dedicated to your wife, Nicole.

I suppose so. Michael Gambon always said that. Whenever anybody went round to his dressing room after *Skylight* and said they enjoyed the evening very much, it's been reported that he would reply, "Yes, David's got a new wife." As if that was a logical response! I think the change in my work is a more formal one. In the trilogy I wrote for the Olivier Theater [*Racing Demon*, *Murmuring Judges*, and *Absence of War*, about Church, Law, and Politics], I was handling epic themes with huge casts. After that work, which was exhausting, it was a tremendous pleasure to try for the first time in my life, in *Skylight*, to write a play in one set with just three characters. So I would say in the current three plays, my work is just as political, but in a much narrower focus. *The Judas Kiss* ends a little trilogy, and it's wonderful to feel that I have seen a subject through. It's been a very rich and satisfying period, and there's been a sense of artistic continuity with Richard [Eyre] directing [all six plays].

Why haven't you directed your own work since the 1989 Broadway production of *The Secret Rapture*?

Frankly, the *Secret Rapture* experience stopped me wanting to direct. I just fell off the horse and didn't feel

like getting back on again. Many years went by until Wally [Shawn] sent me *The Designated Mourner* [1996]; I thought it was too good to miss. Then I did *Heartbreak House* at the Almeida, which was an unbelievably happy experience. But actually it was *The Knife* [a 1987 opera about transsexualism at the Public Theater, co-written with Tim Rose Price and Nick Bicât] that was the beginning of my decline as a director, because I think it failed as a production and I think it was my fault. We didn't pitch it right in terms of how avant-garde it was, and the attempt to make it look like a mainstream American musical was just fatuous. What does a director do? He mediates to the audience what genre they are watching. There's the famous Gielgud line: "Style is knowing what kind of play you are in." Well, directing is communicating what kind of play it is.

So what's next for you?

Plenty is due for a big revival next year; Jonathan Kent is going to direct it at the Almeida. And I'm doing something radically different from anything I've ever done. I don't know how to talk about it yet, but it's a project for the Royal Court.

Back to where your career was launched nearly three decades ago?

Yes. I had to give this thing I'm writing to some bloke there who looked to me about 22. He said he was the artistic director. He's actually 33 and his name is Ian Rickson. I did find it very odd to be giving a play to somebody who could be my son! Part of what I want to do in the next few years is find a way of being free to experiment in public. There's a certain point in your life which is very depressing because you are a prisoner of your reputation. I'm finding that younger people want to work with me, and I think that's probably what I shall be doing, simply because it's invigorating to see what I can do for them and what they can do for me. I don't want to grow old. ■

GERARD RAYMOND most recently traced the history of *The Deep Blue Sea* for *InTheater*.