



A play based on the novella by
OSCAR WILDE

Adapted & Directed by
MICHAEL MICHETTI

A N O I S E W I T H I N P R O D U C T I O N

SUMMARY

Employing bold theatricality and a distinctive style and point of view, this adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* marries elements of Greek Chorus, narrative dance, and a highly contemporary sensibility with the novel's original Victorian setting.

It also differs from previous dramatizations by restoring the homoerotic aspects of the novella which have been conspicuously missing in most adaptations. Additionally, it avoids the familiar melodrama/Gothic horror approach to the story, instead concentrating on the psychological resonance behind the allegory of the decaying painting.

WHY DORIAN GRAY?

The Picture of Dorian Gray is one of the world's best known pieces of literature. There are few unfamiliar with the story of the handsome man who stays young while his portrait grows old. The novella's central idea has become a part of our cultural consciousness, and its enduring popularity has been ensured through several film versions, a hit Showtime series, an opera, a ballet, and many stage adaptations. So why do we need to hear it again?

I felt it was time to restore an aspect of this story which was unmistakable in Wilde's original novella, but which had been avoided in every major treatment subsequently.

Oscar Wilde was perhaps the nineteenth century's most infamous homosexual. His writings were frequently criticized for their more "purple" passages. His scandalous manner, ideas and activities made him even more famous in his day than his writing. And eventually Wilde was imprisoned because of his sexual orientation. Homosexuality was essential to many of his works, and *Dorian Gray* is certainly not an exception.

The most blatant gay references in the novella involve the painter, Basil Hallward. Basil tells Harry (and eventually confesses to Dorian) that he has a romantic obsession for this beautiful young man; his lengthy descriptions of his passionate feelings for Dorian leave no doubt. And he refuses to show the portrait publicly because he is afraid the world will see in the painting his love for Dorian.

Lord Henry Wotton (Harry) is equally infatuated with the beauty and personality of this remarkable young man. While Harry is married (as Wilde was), it is clear in the novella that his marriage is, at best, one of social expediency.

Dorian himself, while clearly attracted to the beauty of women (as in the case of Sibyl Vane), displays his most lasting and intimate relationships with the men who adore him, particularly Harry and Basil. Indeed, anyone who will worship Dorian seems to be fair game, and those who he leaves in his wake include more men than women.

And there is the character of Alan Campbell, who has had an undefined relationship with Dorian in the past and who ends up being blackmailed by Dorian. One can easily hypothesize that they had been lovers, and that Dorian is threatening to disclose Alan's secret.

And the intimation of homosexuality goes on...

The Picture of Dorian Gray was originally published in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's*, a popular literary magazine. Wilde received enough criticism for the novel's homosexual allusions that he "tidied it up" a bit and deleted some of the more explicit references to Basil's affection for Dorian before it was published in book form. But even in its edited form, the gay component is obvious.

Well, Hollywood in 1945 apparently found the sexuality even more problematic than the Victorians, because the screenplay for the film version which starred George Sanders and Hurd Hatfield, and featured Donna Reed and Angela Lansbury, entirely erased all suggestion that any of the characters might be gay. And the popular stage adaptation by John Osborne, which premiered in England in 1975, goes out of its way to obliterate any hint of homosexuality.

Wilde's homosexuality was an integral part of his expression – publicly, privately and in his work. He explained that *Dorian Gray's* three central characters are all aspects of himself; "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be – in other ages, perhaps." Trying to remove the homo-eroticism from Oscar Wilde does the man and his work a disservice, and this stage adaptation attempts to remedy this glaring omission.

DORIAN GRAY AND AESTHETICISM

The Picture of Dorian Gray was written during a late nineteenth century theoretical movement, popular amongst the cultural elite, called aestheticism. This movement believed that, in its highest form, life was to be lived in the pursuit of beauty for the satisfaction of the individual. Wilde himself was an aesthete, perhaps the movement's most visible proponent, so it is an interesting paradox that *Dorian Gray* was written as a warning of the dangers of aestheticism.

In the story, Dorian, under Harry's tutelage, takes these principals to their extreme, living his life only by seeking pleasure, and doing so without regard to the consequences. It is clear the effect this has on the people around him, as those he contacts watch their lives descend into ruin. But the irony is that Dorian himself seems almost untouched by his actions. Indeed, at the end of the story, eighteen years after it begins, Dorian still looks as beautiful and as innocent as the day we first meet him. He is still the physical incarnation of that aesthetic beauty which is so important to him. And that is why the image of the decaying portrait is so powerful.

Dorian's pursuit of pleasure does not bring him peace or happiness. His disregard for others does not offer him contentment. Instead, we see him as the most tortured individual in the story. And when Dorian recognizes the toll his life has taken on him, he fears he is incapable of reforming. In this respect, *Dorian Gray* is a true tragic figure, one who sees the disastrous direction his life is taking but is unable to stop it.

Oscar Wilde was frequently accused of writing an immoral novella in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But the story proves otherwise. He clearly sends the message that all our actions create reactions, there is a law of cause and effect. And while it seems on the surface that Dorian's actions have no consequences, they obviously take a massive toll on his soul, one which eventually leads him to kill himself.

This message is particularly interesting in light of the emphasis I have given the story. This is a cautionary tale that may be of particular significance to a modern gay audience. To make an admittedly sweeping generalization, gay male culture emphasizes the pursuit of pleasure and beautiful things to a greater degree than the general public. There tends to be an almost narcissistic fascination with youth and physical beauty, as evidenced by the attention paid to gym-going, youth culture, etc. There is clearly a greater emphasis on things of beauty – works of art, design, fashion, performing arts, and so on. For many gay men, there is an often hedonistic pursuit of gratification, whether through sex, serial relationships, drugs and alcohol, etc. And I think that many of us find the endless pursuit of these things unfulfilling in the whole. Ultimately, however, it is not the pleasure or the admiration of beauty *itself* which takes such a toll; it is the *emphasis* on the external world rather than the internal world. As Harry quotes to Dorian from *Mark, 8:36* in the final scene, "what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

THE ADAPTATION

The process of adapting *A Picture of Dorian Gray* for the stage began by transcribing all the dialogue from the novella. Fortunately, Oscar Wilde loved the spoken word, and the vast amount of the story told through dialogue foreshadows his career as a playwright which was to flourish following the publication of *Dorian Gray*. Few of the dramatic sequences were told exclusively through narrative. I decided not to attempt to supply “Wildean” dialogue to fill in the holes, but rather to use theatrical devices – movement, narrative dance, music, visual images, Greek Chorus, etc. – to complete the story.

The published book form of the story supplied the basis for the play, but I went back to the original *Lippincott’s Magazine* version for the more explicitly homosexual references which Wilde himself, in response to public and critical outrage, later deleted. The adaptation was then achieved through extensive editing, some liberal restructuring, the addition of theatrical devices, and the physical enactment of scenes which were previously only described.

The final result is a script which, while in many ways different from the novella, is almost entirely Wilde. In fact, only maybe a couple dozen words in the entire play are not lifted directly from the original sources. The hope is that this adaptation remains true to Wilde’s story while making it feel vital and relevant for the contemporary stage.

THE PRODUCTION

Usually *Dorian Gray* is treated as a melodrama or a sort of Gothic horror story. But the thing that draws me to this tale is the psychological truth behind it. This is not the story of a rotting portrait; it is the story of a rotting soul. All elements of melodrama, therefore, take a back seat to the emotional honesty of the characters and the situations. The playing style, while highly theatrical, is extremely truthful.

The portrait of Dorian Gray is represented by an empty, gold baroque picture frame. The progressive decay of the portrait is then seen through the effect it has on the individuals who are viewing it, again diminishing the "horror story" aspect of the tale.

The production has a highly sensual tone, emphasizing the story's subject of hedonism, with an erotic tension throughout. Like Wilde's novella itself, the production has it both ways – reproaching the pursuit of sensual overindulgence while seducing the audience with the aesthetic appeal of that very excess.

The production, like the novella, is set in the late 19th century but avoids a slavishly period treatment. The production design in particular suggests the era while filtering it through an extremely modern, minimalist sensitivity. The design elements almost feel closer to an "invented world" concept than a Victorian period piece. The scenic design is stylish and elegant but spare, employing a combination of sleek-contemporary and ornate-baroque, with the repetition of empty gold frames throughout the set. Clothes evoke the period through their lines and silhouettes, but owe nearly as much to contemporary *haute couture* as to Victorian England. The musical score is eclectic, with predominantly twentieth century music played by string quartets.