

THE DOCTOR: PRESS RESPONSES

London (2019, 2022); Austria, Amsterdam (2021); New York (2023)

a new play by Robert Icke

after *Professor Bernhardt* by Schnitzler

www.roberties.com

THE TELEGRAPH

Fiona Mountford

★★★★★

Juliet Stevenson triumphs in this swansong from Britain's best director.

It's a fond farewell for now to Robert Icke. The brightest directing talent British theatre has produced in a generation – and the youngest ever winner of the Olivier Award for Best Director to boot – is leaving his permanent post on these shores for pastures new, and possibly more experimental, in Europe. His final huzzah at the Almeida, the venue that has nurtured Icke and given rise to his phenomenal work on *The Oresteia* and *Mary Stuart*, to name but two, serves as a razor-sharp reminder of what is about to be lost.

For starters, Icke must once more be ruing the fact that theatre doesn't follow film's lead and include a Best Adapted Play category in its award ceremonies. He freely, skilfully and rigorously transposes Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 Viennese drama *Professor Bernhardt* to contemporary England, gently nudging the debate along from its starting point of medical ethics to cover personal morality and, finally, identity politics. The impassioned howl he raises against the reductive nature of the latter could surely be heard on the continent.

Schnitzler's original afforded almost no airtime to women, a fact Icke corrects at a stroke by turning the male professor into Dr Ruth Woolf (Juliet Stevenson). She is the founding director of the prestigious Elizabeth Institute, a stern professional with an attitude of 'trademark disdain'. The catalyst for the drama is when a 14-year-old, dying of sepsis after a botched at-home abortion, comes into Dr Wolff's care and she refuses admittance to a priest (Paul Higgins) who wishes to administer the last rites. Dr Wolff asserts firmly that her patient's religious convictions are uncertain and the girl must be left to die in peace.

Arguments and recriminations about religion – Dr Wolff's parents were Jewish – are the first to bubble up, followed swiftly by race, gender and education, as various interested parties engage in a ferocious battle, stoked by social media, to stake out the greatest claim of victimhood. In a script note Icke states that 'each actor's identity should be directly dissonant with their character's in at least one way' and he embarks upon a thrilling series of games of theatricality and rugpulling in which nothing is quite what – or who – it seems. We are, the play says from its slickly impersonal set on a slow revolve, far more complex than a series of simplistic labels. This assertion is underscored by Dr Wolff's home life, which comprises two shadowy figures whose truths are only revealed late on.

Stevenson has shone for Icke in two of his previous Almeida productions and does so again here, in a towering performance that will surely win awards. Her uncompromising mien starts to crumble and she becomes a ruffled, hounded figure whose certainties are brutally chipped away. There's strong support too from that intriguingly shape-shifting actress Ria Zmitrowicz as a gauche, truth-telling teenager. It is greatly to be hoped that Icke does not stay away too long.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Hemming

★★★★★

"I'm a doctor," says Juliet Stevenson near the outset of this scintillating piece of theatre. It's a phrase her character will repeat again and again — with certainty, with passion, with defiance, with anguish — as her life crumbles around her. Robert Icke's riveting production takes a century old drama and turns it into a devastating play for today, led by Stevenson's superb performance.

Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 original, *Professor Bernhardt*, tells of a Jewish physician who treats a 14-year-old girl dying of sepsis following a botched abortion. When a Catholic priest arrives to administer the last rites, Bernhardt refuses him access, arguing that he will make the girl aware that she is dying and so fill her final moments with distress. The ensuing

row pitches reason against faith, science against religion, principle against pragmatism and explores the toxic nature of prejudice.

In Icke's hands, this becomes a gripping moral thriller and a scorching examination of our age. The core of the story remains, but here the doctor is female (Ruth Wolff), the clinic is a modern institute treating dementia, and the ethical debate swiftly ignites a social media firestorm. The anti-Semitism depicted in the original is joined by gender, race, class and identity politics and the ugly phenomenon of trial by Twitter.

Is Ruth under fire because she is Jewish? Did she reject the priest's request because he was black? Should the parents' wishes outweigh those of the medical staff? Everyone has an opinion — informed or not — and every opinion is loaded. The argument spreads like a virus. The more Ruth adamantly clings to her ethical code as a doctor, the more perilous her position becomes. Meanwhile the future of the institute itself comes under threat.

In many ways, this is a successor to Icke's *Mary Stuart*: it shares with Schiller's drama an appetite for moral debate and the ability to make that debate both moving and theatrical. Just as *Mary Stuart* opened, electrifyingly, with a coin-toss, here too Icke brings dramatic immediacy to the issues. The simple gesture of having the cast walk on to Hildegard Bechtler's clinical set, don their various uniforms, and with them their roles in the argument, emphasises the complex layering of identity and the reductive nature of labels. Meanwhile, unexpected cross-casting frequently pulls the rug from under us, prompting us to re-evaluate events and question our assumptions. Perspectives shift; certainties dissolve.

It's delivered by a fine ensemble, at the centre of which is Stevenson's beautifully pitched Ruth. A woman of crystalline integrity, she is also waspishly funny, prickly, proud — and caring. It's a magnificent performance, culminating in a revelation that sheds new light on all that has gone before.

There are a few too many issues and hefty arguments loaded into the mix and the critique of identity politics sometimes threatens to undermine the serious concerns at stake. But this is a galvanising piece of theatre and a stark health warning for an increasingly divided nation.

SUNDAY TIMES

Quentin Letts

★★★★★

They are Death's rival attendants, medicine and religion, the white coat versus the dog collar. In 1912 an Austrian, Arthur Schnitzler, wrote a play about a Jewish doctor who comes unstuck after preventing a priest from giving the last rites to a young patient. Now Robert Icke, the UK's sparkiest director, has adapted that story and set it in 21st-century London. The result is explosive.

With a characteristically magnetic central performance from Juliet Stevenson, *The Doctor* blasts the mad, destructive politics of minority identity. I thought this vital task would only ever be done by mocking comedy. Icke achieves it with throbbing intellectualism.

Most medical dramas feature hospital beds and beeping monitors. Here, tellingly, we have only a committee table in a sanitised pale-wood set, plus persistent percussive commentary from a cool drummer. The drama's debates are played out while the stage revolves at an almost imperceptible rate. At crucial moments, the lighting swells slightly. There are a few white coats, but not a single colostomy bag to be seen.

This is not really a story of clinical care. It is about the egomaniacal politics of control and managerial "gatekeeping" that have become the new Jesuitism. All the lunacy of non-meritocratic racial and gender balance, and of brilliant people's careers consequently being wrecked by Twitter storms and corporate cowardice, is slowly skewered. This production does for today's moralising elite what *The Bonfire of the Vanities* did for Manhattan's money men in the 1980s. Heck, it's good. Even better, it is being pushed down the gullets of an audience in Islington. You could sense the privileged Almeida-ites shifting on their bottoms.

Icke shows are never boring to watch. At a mere 32, he has become the most skilled (or perhaps least irritating) proponent of the ambient-noise/video-screen brigade. His *Hamlet* had CCTV in the corridors of Elsinore, and in his *Mary Stuart*, the two main actresses decided only at the start of each performance which of them would play which part. With other directors, this sort of thing can feel forced. With Icke, there is usually enough artistic truthfulness to get you over any grumpiness.

Stevenson plays Professor Ruth Wolff, founder of a top private clinic. Wolff is autocratic and brilliant, and there is talk that she could bag a Nobel prize. But Wolff is bad at the politic compromises — another word might be “lies” — required if you are to be given public money for your work. When she prevents a priest from seeing a dying girl, there is a scuffle in the corridor. The priest records the incident on his mobile. Soon an online petition has thousands of signatures, amid claims that Wolff’s hospital is “exclusively Jewish”. Wolff claims she is blind to gender and race, but once you have been hooked by the cultural grievance gang, the only way to save yourself may be a swift apology. This she won’t do.

The main staging stunt is in the casting. Icke confounds us. Some black characters are played by whites, some men by women. This is fashionably tricky and will, I suppose, buy Icke credit from the very monsters he is attacking. But it has a cost in terms of full theatrical engagement. That is balanced by the marvellous Stevenson, who slowly opens her emotional throttle as Wolff’s world disintegrates. Brilliant stuff. And brave.

WHAT’S ON STAGE

Sarah Crompton

★★★★★

What a clever director Robert Icke is! He ends his six years as associate director at the Almeida with a savagely brilliant version of an early 20th-century classic, which he has both translated from the German and transformed into a challengingly humane examination of many of the issues of our times.

It stands alongside his productions of the Oresteia, Mary Stuart, Hamlet and The Wild Duck at the same address for its clarity of purpose and its willingness to breathe new life into old plays, while never betraying their intention.

Here the text is provided by Professor Bernhardt, by Arthur Schnitzler, first produced in 1912, and controversial even then. Its subject is a Jewish doctor who refuses a priest admission to the bedside of a young woman who is dying of sepsis following a botched abortion. The doctor wants his patient to die in peace, without the knowledge of her death; the priest to forgive her mortal sin.

The collision between the rationalities of science and the sanctities of religion, between two types of comfort and care, between a Catholic and a Jew spins into a huge scandal. Icke, pulling the play into the contemporary world, has made the doctor a woman, Ruth Wolff – known by her cynically conspiring male colleagues as BB, as in big bad – and she is played by his regular collaborator Juliet Stevenson with an upright, uptight belief in her own integrity, a quick wit and what another character calls her “trademark disdain.”

Because she is a woman, the cycle of accusation that unfolds around her is complicated not only by anti-semitism (as in Schnitzler), but also by a heaving tangle of gender and identity politics. Icke has further complicated an already murky situation by casting his excellent actors against the descriptions of their characters; white actors play black characters, women play men. Some roles – such as Wolff’s ‘partner’ Charlie – are deliberately left non-gender specific although he/she is tenderly embodied by Joy Richardson.

Because the priest is played by the white actor Paul Higgins, it completely pulls the rug out from your assumptions when it is revealed that he is black – and Wolff is herself accused herself of racism and unconscious bias. The ground of accusation is constantly shifting, and the only thing that is absolutely clear is that everything is political, and self-interest and ambition will always have a role to play even at an institute, like the one where Wolff works, that is supposedly devoted to the disinterested pursuit of finding a cure for dementia.

These themes are given a physical manifestation by Hildegard Bechtler’s clinical set, with a table at the centre which sometimes revolves as the arguments unspool, creating a sense of an endless round of accusation and counter-charge. Icke resolutely refuses to give anyone a clear argument; in a world where everyone is totally sure of their opinions, his point is that nuance is all. Nothing is entirely black and white; everything shimmers in shades of gray. This is best illustrated by the terrible moment where – in order to preserve her integrity and make her case – Wolff betrays a teenager she has befriended. Our sympathies may be with her as she faces the court of public opinion, enduring a witch hunt ill-informed and inflamed by lies being spread on social media, but she is not without flaw.

Icke directs all this like a thriller; the air positively crackles with the difficulty of the raging debate. It is a play entirely made up of ethical argument, yet it is so tense there are moments when you stop breathing – or when someone’s point of view seems so outrageous that it demands a sharp intake of breath. It can be uncomfortable but it’s also fiercely

funny. The electricity is increased by the sheer tautness of Icke's direction; the way the lights barely flicker at each revelation; the freeze-framing of moments of violence; the live score played on drums by Hannah Ledwidge.

The performances too are excellent, with Ria Zmitrowicz in particular gently and truthfully touching as Woolf's teenage friend and Naomi Wirthner positively terrifying as her odious rival. But it is Stevenson who towers over the evening. She barely leaves the stage, as she registers each moment of Woolf's decline from powerful leader, in charge of her world and her emotions, to the haunted and hunted tragic figure she becomes at the end of almost three hours. It's an astonishing, gripping evening – and a testimony to Icke's unparalleled ability to make theatre that you can't turn away from.

THE GUARDIAN

Michael Billington

★★★★★

As a director and writer, Robert Icke specialises in updating the classics. But where his version of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* struck me as an impertinence, this adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt* is a brilliant expansion of the original's themes. Icke's production also yields a performance by Juliet Stevenson that is one of the peaks of the theatrical year.

First performed in 1912, Schnitzler's play offers a devastating portrait of Viennese antisemitism in showing a Jewish doctor attacked for refusing a Catholic priest permission to administer the last rites to a patient. Icke retains Schnitzler's premise while subtly rewriting it. His protagonist, Ruth Wolff, is a secular Jew who runs a prestigious institute specialising in Alzheimer's disease. But when Ruth prevents a priest seeing a 14-year-old girl dying from a self-administered abortion, the incident acquires a toxic publicity. It goes viral on social media, provokes petitions and TV debates, and jeopardises not only Ruth's future but that of the institute and a government bankrolled new building.

Impressively, Icke enlarges the original to take on not just religion but also race, gender and class. He even adds a creative dissonance in casting women to play male roles, black actors to play white characters and vice versa.

At the heart of the play lie two crucial issues handled with exemplary fairness. One is whether the purity of medical ethics supersedes all other considerations. The other related topic is the danger of constantly playing identity politics: as one of Ruth's colleagues points out, it is irrelevant whether a doctor is white, Jewish, godless or a woman, and even more destructive to allow the professions to be judged by sanctimonious trolls.

All of this is debated with fierce clarity. Icke, following Schnitzler, shows his protagonist as a victim without totally exculpating her. This double vision is magnificently captured by Stevenson. She shows Ruth to be brusque, politically naive and intolerant of other people's failings, especially when it comes to the misuse of language. But while Stevenson shows how integrity can turn into obduracy, she also beautifully portrays the human cost of making medicine one's god. Her features look memorably pained when seen in closeup during a hostile TV encounter, and she confronts the sacrifice of her relations with her lover and a transgender teenager with an unbearable sense of loss. This consummate performance shows Ruth in all her complexity.

In fact, everything about Icke's production feels right. Hildegard Bechtler's design has a clinical simplicity, and the cast, although not identified by character, inhabit their roles perfectly. Paul Higgins as the impassioned priest, Naomi Wirthner as Ruth's most implacable opponent, Pamela Nomvete as her fiercest champion and Ria Zmitrowicz as her betrayed friend all perform with great skill.

This is not the only way to approach Schnitzler's play, as shown by a 2005 production at the Arcola in London, with a text by Samuel Adamson, that respected its Viennese setting. But what Icke has done is heighten the play's contemporary resonances and movingly suggest that the doctor and the priest, while dramatic antagonists, have more in common than they realise.

THE TIMES

Dominic Maxwell

★★★★★

Juliet Stevenson stuns in the play of the decade.

It is the most politically pertinent play of the decade. And if pertinence is fine and dandy but not necessarily a prompt to engage a babysitter, know that *The Doctor* is also an involving, stimulating, moving, handsomely staged and exquisitely acted night at the theatre. Juliet Stevenson's stunning lead performance helps it to do what so few plays have managed: find knotty drama in the shifting certainties and power grabs of identity politics.

The writer-director Robert Icke, reworking Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 play *Professor Bernhardt*, plunges you into the heart of a moral and emotional quandary from the off. "My identity is not the issue," Stevenson says as Professor Ruth Wolff, a highly placed doctor defending herself against an alleged act of prejudice. In that, at least, we know how wrong she is.

What gets Wolff into trouble? Well, in the course of treating a dying 14-year-old she denies entry to a Catholic priest keen to administer the last rites to the girl. The girl had not indicated that she was religious, even if her parents were. Wolff makes a strong case that she was only looking after the girl's interests. Strong enough, though? Does it matter that Wolff is Jewish? Atheist? Standoffish? Is she a supreme rationalist or cocooned by privilege? Should she apologise and make the problem go away, as the online petition against her gains traction? Everything fast becomes politics. Identity politics.

Meanwhile, brilliantly, Icke's gender-blind and colour-blind casting destabilises our assumptions about those identities. You can't tell what colour or sex a character is until the story makes it clear. So we become active participants in the process of decoding people's identities.

Stevenson gives us a vivid, unsentimental yet emotionally acute depiction of a woman edged out of her ultra-rational, professionally exalted safe space. She remains our hero. Yet when she appears on a Moral Maze-style debate on TV Icke makes sure that her identity-fixated inquisitors are far from fools. The more that Wolff wriggles against her bonds the tighter they cling. No wonder at one point she just runs in desperation around Hildegard Bechtler's spare, revolving set. These arguments might just ruin her.

A superb, ten-strong supporting cast that includes Doña Croll, Naomi Wirthner and Christopher Osakanlu Colquhoun are backed by an ambient soundtrack, by Tom Gibbons, that is sometimes amplified by Hannah Ledwidge's live drums. The effect is unsettling yet hypnotic. Icke's earlier hits include rejigs of the *Oresteia*, 1984 and *Hamlet* — all of which, like this, began life at the Almeida Theatre. *The Doctor* may just be the pick of them. It is a complex, provocative evening that is rich in empathy and intelligence alike.

THE GUARDIAN

Arifa Akbar

★★★★★

The return of Robert Icke's play about medical ethics, identity politics and antisemitism brings all the same contentions as its original run. It is often static in its action, abrasive in its tone and revels in its flagrant theatricality. Yet the effects are slowly, searingly electric and you are unlikely to see anything in the West End that comes with the same amounts of tension, combative intellectual complexity and sheer bare-toothed drama as Icke's reworking of Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 Viennese "comedy", *Professor Bernhardt*.

Again directed by Icke, this production is a very close replica of the original at the Almeida theatre. Its plot is relatively straightforward: Ruth Wolff, the Jewish director of a leading medical institute, refuses entry to a Catholic priest to read the last rites to a 14-year-old patient who is dying of a botched, self-administered abortion. That refusal sparks online protests and government intervention outside the medical centre, and an aggressive jostling for power within it, while rank antisemitic scapegoating of the doctor ranges across the board.

It's "a good time to talk about Jews", says one of Ruth's old medical-school friends, now a prominent politician, and it's true that the themes of this play chime louder than ever in a time when racial and antisemitic bigotries thrive and identity politics have become the stuff of gladiator fights.

But *The Doctor* eschews binaries and turns into a richly layered thing, as bigger racial, religious and gender politics come into play. A friend who grew up Catholic in Ireland accompanied me on press night and vehemently took the side of the doctor, while I saw Ruth's denial of religious rites as heinous. But it is not as simple as this, and the play forces the complex ethical ground beneath our feet to rumble and shake. Definitions of medical "best interests" are interrogated, and faith is pitted against medical science before that binary is itself undermined. The idea of choice — even for a child — is taken into account, and so is the shadow of the girl's abortion.

All the arguments are nuanced and thoughtful. We see the antisemitic hate towards Ruth, and the misogynistic satisfaction in bringing a high-powered woman “down to earth”. But we also see her cleaving to a tyrannical belief in the neutrality of medical science. She refuses to see her own humanness within medicine.

Juliet Stevenson plays the doctor with counterintuitive brilliance, starting at top volume and dialling down to present the quiet tragedy of a remarkable doctor who bears the fatal flaw of arrogance. Ruth is almost unique in a world where everyone is intent on using identity for their own ends, but where does her integrity stand, the play asks, in relation to her arrogance? The gender reversal of the role carries its own complicated irony: Ruth is a woman stranded in a man’s world who is phlegmatic, patrician, overtly performing masculinity in order to survive.

The striking casting – white actors play black parts, women play men, to leave us in a morass of uncertainty – feels like an unnecessary layer of complication until its power lands with the simple use of the word “uppity” by Ruth, and we are left reflecting on language, and our own assumptions.

It is not just the play’s ideas that fizz: Natasha Chivers’ lighting is pitched for stark dramatic highs, Tom Gibbons’ music and sound design contain dread rumbles of drums and disturbing single notes that are left hovering. Hildegard Bechtler’s set of tables, doors and a kettle revolves slowly and almost ceaselessly as we see each argument dissected from every angle, and certainties slowly yanked apart to leave the grey exposed.

There are brilliant contradictions in *The Doctor*: unapologetically cerebral, it hooks us in emotionally, expanding in our chests. A play about mortality, it ends with hope. It will doubtless ruffle feathers, however removed we feel at the outset, its arguments bedding down deep and forcing us out of our own entrenched certainties, however briefly. It is, in the end, a captivating and profound argument against absolutes.

THE TELEGRAPH

Dominic Cavendish

★★★★★

You could painlessly junk a fair few of the shows that were around before the pandemic and which have since resumed or had delayed openings. What might have been urgent and vital pre-Covid ain’t necessarily so now.

No obsolescence, though, has set in with Robert Icke’s scalpel-sharp reinvention of Schnitzler’s *Professor Bernhardt*; in fact, quite the reverse. *The Doctor* hurtles a neglected classic of Austrian drama from an early-20th-century Vienna simmering with anti-Semitism to a 21st-century London beset by those same prejudices and complex layers of identity politics too.

Three years ago at the Almeida, Icke’s production confirmed him as one of our brain-boxiest director-adaptors; a career best thus far. And it answered the prayers of those wondering when the stage would start interrogating the fraught age of “woke”. If anything, what has happened in the interim, in terms of the rise of cancel culture and debates about white privilege and so on, has pointed up the prescience of Icke’s clinically cool, ingeniously involving version, presented in a characteristically stripped-back fashion – with a curved sweep of wooden wall and dominating, and sometimes revolving, board-room-style table.

In this long-awaited transfer, Juliet Stevenson reprises, to perfection, the role of Ruth Wolff, the founding director of a medical institute that’s rocked to its financially needy core when she stops a Catholic priest giving the last rites to a 14-year-old girl dying from sepsis after a botched abortion. Her manner is impatient, and even imperious – in the absence of a stated wish by the patient, she snap-decides the presence of a man of the cloth will fatally distress the weak child, albeit the ensuing shouting-match does exactly that.

Stevenson’s white-coated medic blazes with intellectual certainty, all contained exasperation as the backlash begins and builds into a witch-hunt online and in real life. “I’m a doctor. I don’t go in for groups,” she intones, rebutting the accusation that, despite being a non-religious Jew, she has shown bias, personal and institutional, against those affected. Though she avoids being sympathetic, her line of thinking is seductive – and such is the actress’s beady focus that we’re with her, thought by thought: “A ‘woke’ perspective? ... The use of language makes one want to cry... Other people’s views are not asleep!” she scoffingly exclaims during a testy TV debate.

It’s cheering to hear these sentiments expressed, but the allied virtue of the evening is to test any complacency about her rightness. In the “dissonance” of the casting – with the others actors playing against type in terms of gender and race, ambushing assumptions, especially about the priest – our own bias gets probed. The mode of portrayal heightens the provocation: that an argument, even in the realm of science, can be affected by who makes it.

In fleeting, vaguely otherworldly encounters with two other characters close to Wolff, we also glimpse factors that complicate the studied neutrality. And in a moving scene with John Mackay’s priest, the gulf narrows between rival

camps, bridged by mutual empathy and self-doubt, something that Stevenson lets visibly steal across Ruth as the battle takes its toll.

At almost three hours, it's a long evening, yet it's a hugely rewarding one too. And in its stimulating experimentalism, it's just what the doctor ordered to help resuscitate the cerebral life of our post-viral, musically bloated West End.

WITNESS PERFORMANCE

Robert Reid

In the great (long) English tradition of talking-head drama, director Robert Icke's adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 play Professor Bernhardi takes an inciting event as the key to unleashing debate about a particular social issue. He then spins from it various related issues while ratcheting up the pressure on the character at the centre of it all. In the case of *The Doctor*, presented in Adelaide by major London theatre Almeida, the debate is science (specifically medicine) versus religion. It's an old favourite as controversial debates go but it makes for prize fight-level excitement.

The program notes by Rob Bath describe Schnitzler's play as having been "banned outright by the Nazis during the 1930s and 40s. Deemed – ironically perhaps – by its author as a 'comedy of character', the play explores anti-Semitism and Austrian Jewish identity. Set in 1900 Vienna, where Jewish physician Professor Bernhardi is director of a private teaching medical clinic, the plot turns on his decision not to allow a priest to give the last rites to a Christian patient who is close to death." Bath goes on to say that this adaptation "thrusts Schnitzler's confronting concept into this century, where the issues are alarmingly similar." And that's exactly what it does.

Professor Ruth Wolff (Juliet Stevenson), the archetypal brilliant, iconoclastic doctor, is founding director of the Elizabeth Hospital which is dedicated to finding a cure for Alzheimer's. She finds herself rapidly embroiled in a scandal over the death of a young girl in her care who has been refused the Catholic ceremony of Last Rites. As public outcry and private pressure mount, she battles to defend her choices as a doctor, her place on the hospital board, her belief in medicine over faith, her professional pride and the sanctity of her personal life. She is surrounded on all sides by ambition and betrayal as her friends and colleagues one by one abandon her to the wolves of public opinion and scrutiny.

I'm basically riveted from the first few minutes to the end. I'm so often ahead of a play from the beginning, so often can tell what the next scene will be, what the next movement will be, hell, what the next line is going to be (that's not a boast about how great I think I am, more evidence that I've seen a great many plays and so many of them fall into predictable patterns after a while.) It never even occurs to me to do that with this play. It stays just exactly where I am with it, keeping pace with me all the way, engrossing me in the argument, the characters and the wider implications of the action. It is three hours long with interval and I don't notice the time pass for a second. I doubt anyone else does either. There are oohs and ahhs and gasps all around the theatre as the story twists and evolves. There is a fair bit of shifting around in the seats in act one – the Dunstan play house seating is unforgivably in need of oiling – but by the second act even these are silenced. We are rapt, unmoving: maybe not even breathing.

In the first minutes the patient, a 14 year old girl who has self-administered a partially successful abortion and developed septicaemia as a result, is minutes from death. Her parents are uncontactable, the girl herself is in-and-out of consciousness, and Wolff is confronted by the arrival of a priest (Jamie Parker) who is demanding access to the child. Her parents are Catholic and so, the priest claims, is the girl. Wolff refuses the priest entry on the premise that the girl does not know she is dying and that the priest's presence will not only alert her to the fact but also fill her final moments with terror.

The priest, and some of the other doctors who have gathered around the escalating conflict outside the door of the patient's room, make the argument that giving him access and allowing him to perform his sacred duty can do no harm if the girl is about to die anyway. Wolff counters that once the girl realises that she is in fact about to die it will bring on panic that could well hasten her death and at the very least rob her last few moments of any kind of peace. The doctor's duty to her patient now, Wolff maintains, is to ensure the patient's comfort and, since the patient is (in the doctor's opinion) not in any condition to make her own beliefs and wants known, she can't simply accept the word of the priest that this is what she would want.

When the priest insists and attempts to enter the room anyway, things turn quickly physical (we're not shown the actual moment of contact as there is a brief pause and a lighting change that leaves it to the audience to decide how violent the encounter was). A junior doctor (Millicent Wong) has slipped into the patient's room and comes out to report that the girl has realised she's dying and is panicked in just the way Wolff had feared. Within seconds, as chaos and shouting reigns outside the room, it's too late and the girl has gone. And then we're off and running.

From here much of the first act takes place in the board room of the hospital. There is contention over an upcoming position as well as funding to be secured for the construction of a new building for the hospital. Wolff is not universally liked by the other staff and there are several of her colleagues with grievances that seem to stem from professional jealousy or thwarted personal ambition. They, along with the hospital's PR manager Roberts (Mariah Louca), argue these issues around a long table as the crisis the hospital has been thrown into in the first minutes of the play begins to worsen exponentially.

As the doctors race to catch up with the growing shitstorm, the racial and religious issues that have been boiling just underneath the surface at the Elizabeth hospital for years begin to surface. Dr. Hardiman (Naomi Wirthner) and Dr Murphy (Daniel Rabin) are the most openly critical of the culture they say Wolff has encouraged in the hospital, consciously preferencing the appointment of women over men, white people over people of colour and Jewish over Christian staff and accusing her doing so because she's a woman, white and Jewish. Wolff maintains that she has only ever judged people by the sole criteria of being the best doctor, the best one for the job; but of course isn't that how nepotism and bigotry are always defended? The privilege inherent in her position is painfully and expertly unpacked in the second act, but we'll come to that in a moment.

Prof Wolff is not exactly an unlikable character, though she is somewhat supercilious and generally disliked by the hospital staff. She's that maverick leader, convinced of her own authority and rectitude, who stands firm by her principals and is damned by the foibles of personality. The iconoclastic, almost anti-hero, doctor trope so familiar from House's Dr House, ER's Dr Romano, MASH's Dr Winchester, Ben Casey's Dr Casey, even Scrubs' Dr Cox. It is nice to see this role played by a woman for once.

The tension keeps building around her. An online petition grows from a few tens of signatories to many thousands calling for her removal, which grows into attacks on social media (which early on is easily dismissed by Wolff and her allies as beneath their contempt), to racially motivated attacks on her in her home. There are shouts of "murderer" and banging on her door, rocks thrown through her windows, a swastika painted on her car and the murder of her cat on her doorstep. They all reflect the rising tensions in the world that have been released along the ancient lines of which God you've given your faith to. We see only a few moments of Wolff at home in this first act: we are let into her personal life very gradually, her partner Charlie (Joy Richardson) and the teenage girl, Sami (Liv Hill) whom Wolff has befriended and is a kind of proxy daughter. I notice that Charlie and Sami never interact, so its quickly apparent that Charlie is a memory or a ghost.

This brings me to the cross-racial and cross-gender casting of the production. Some, but not all I think, of the actors are cast against how they present. There are female-presenting actors playing men, white actors playing black characters, and vice versa. It throws all kinds of unexpected ambiguities into the characters. Charlie is a good example. I don't think it's ever specified if Charlie is male or female (or neither) but the character is played by Joy Richardson and it's strongly suggested that Wolff is gay. It's hard to not read this into characters from the actual physical presence of the actors on stage and when, early on, Roberts (the PR manager) suggests that it might make things easier if Wolff were out as a lesbian. Charlie makes a point that, at first blush before we realise this is a memory, seems to suggest the same. "Maybe it's time you told them about me," Charlie says. But Wolff refuses to allow it, adamant that her private life and professional life be kept separate.

These ambiguities are a bit like red herrings and I find myself brought up time and time again, as an actor who presents as female is revealed to be playing a male character, or an actor who presents as white turns out to be playing a person of colour. It in no way changes the strength of these performances, but it does keep reminding me that people are not always as they present and that to read a person semiotically on stage (and indeed in real life) is to apply a simplistic lens to our humanity.

I'm happy to get past it when it's a woman playing a man, or when it's a person of colour playing someone who is white, but when a white actor is revealed to be playing a black character, it pulls me up on my assumptions. It shows me over and over again that while I'm prepared to read complexity into women and people of colour, I'm still reading male whiteness as male whiteness; which suggests that it's still too easy to assume white male is the default. I'm not sure if this is written into the text or if it's a directorial/casting decision, but it's frankly brilliant. It bypasses my woke self-assuredness to show that there's still work to be done.

Maybe there always will be, I certainly think for my generation at least, this is going to be a never ending process of deconstructing our cultural imprinting. There's a particular moment when one of the doctors who is a person of colour played by a white-presenting actor accuses one of the other doctors who claims to be a person of colour, and is played by a person of colour (also a female presenting actor playing a male character) of not really being a person of colour because, despite the characters grandmother being from Nigeria, they still present as white! The internecine racisms of

semiotic assumptions are so complex and nuanced and labyrinthine in just this moment alone that I'm left mind blown trying just to get my white-blinded brain around it.

As we head to the foyer for interval, the audience is buzzing with debate. So far it's done what good theatre – good mainstream theatre anyway – should do and that's get people talking. Arguing with their friends over who is right, what viewpoints there are, what the wider issues are. Not a single group I pass is talking about what they're gonna have for dinner afterwards, or how good a given (famous) actor is. Maybe that's luck and I just happen to pass the ones who are engaged, but I don't think so.

In the second act, the ethical and process-driven issues of how a hospital treats its patients and the right of doctors to make decisions on behalf of those patients are replaced by the undoing of Wolff. She has been tightly bound throughout the first act, holding firm to her faith in medicine, her strength as a leader, her integrity; but after she has been forced to resign as chair of the hospital board, and even take leave from her job as a practicing doctor at the end of act one, she returns to face the criticism of a panel of experts on a TV debate program (not unlike an interrogative Q and A.) Wolff has early on proven herself a pedant with regard to how words are used, constantly correcting her colleagues at work and Sami at home, about the use of words like "literally", and "like", smugly adding the caveat that it only matters if you care at all about language.

The second act begins with an anxiety-driven tirade directed at Sami about the confusion of using "literally" to mean "figuratively", as perpetrated by the younger generation. This draws the biggest laugh of the show and indeed a thunderously approving round of applause. "Yes", says this applause, "the old standards of language are being eroded and we applaud their defence. Hear hear!" The reaction is telling – even more so when the TV debate experts receive derisive laughter when they state their cases against Wolff's actions. There is the same laughter when one character introduces herself as a professor of post-colonial studies (Anni Domingo), the same when the lawyer (Wong) who is an expert on how language is used to reinforce racial and social divides that give the rich white woman doctor the privilege to define herself, but makes that same right to self-determination for people of colour a constant battle.

I'm genuinely surprised by this laughter at first, as these all seem like perfectly reasonable and valid points to me, but as I look around the room at the people laughing and see it's almost all grey-haired, middle class white people, I realise it's not really surprising. They're reading these things as parodies of political correctness designed to be triumphed over by the good doctor. The audience's own prejudice and privilege is very much on display and being paraded before them. They don't recognise what's about to happen, but I do.

The expert on post-colonial studies points out that the doctor has called the priest, whom we have discovered is a person of colour being played by a white actor, "uppity." There is an audio recording of the confrontation in which she can clearly be heard shouting that he shouldn't get uppity with her. Wolff responds with confusion that she didn't intend to cause offense by saying he was uppity – it's just a word that described his behaviour, as unruly and above his station – but the expert argues that it is not Wolff's intent that this being questioned. There is a history attached to that word, despite Professor Wolff claiming that words are just words: "uppity" has historically been used in conjunction with another word, a poisonous word that she won't use on the program, but that she challenges Wolff to call her right now. On national television. If words are, indeed, just words.

'The audience's own prejudice and privilege is very much on display and being paraded before them. They don't recognise what's about to happen, but I do.'

Wolff stammers to a halting silence. You can see the realisation cross her face, sink deep in: and I wonder if the same is happening around the theatre. I hope so. Wolff refuses to use the word and concedes the point. You might say that the adaption has manipulated this agreement to force Wolff into an untenable position, that it makes a straw man of her; but I think it's more a matter of twisting the knife into the laughter of the insulated that has come only moments before. Still, when the expert asks if they can expect any kind of apology to be forthcoming, Wolff asks why and is told anything you feel you should apologise for. There is once more laughter, but this time I think a little more subdued and defensive.

I'm not free of my own prejudices either. I will admit there is also an expert on the panel who represents the anti-abortionist movement and I find myself immediately aligned against her. She makes some good points in the argument but seems to me hopelessly medieval. Wolff as good as calls her that at one point. This "expert" proceeds to expose Wolff as having had an abortion herself, and ties to use this as a weapon to discredit her, to claim there's no way she can be objective in her stance on abortion. Wolff rallies well and, looking back, I wonder if this was the real straw man in the argument. But maybe they're all straw men, and this one is just meant for someone like me.

During this interrogation, Wolff in an attempt to humanise herself presumably, has outed Sami as trans. My heart sinks, because it's such a public betrayal of the young friend who until now has been one of the few glints of humanity we've seen from Wolff. Sami's her only real friend, and she throws her under the bus without a thought. This is the only time I can see ahead to what is coming, and it duly arrives a few moments later when Wolff returns home. She finds her certificates smashed on the floor and the furious and betrayed teen in her home, telling her in no uncertain terms that their friendship is over, that the doctor is nothing without her certificates, and she hopes Wolff dies. "Literally".

Ultimately Wolff is disbarred after an official enquiry into her actions, she's branded and broken. There is the beginnings of a rapprochement in the final scene when the priest visits her in her home. They talk and, in a way, he hears her confession without offering absolution. They show that they can each see each other's position – he's more than a dog collar and she's more than a lab coat, and they are both human after all. She finally tells her story about her lost love, Charlie, the ghost that has been haunting the stage around her, lost to the very disease she's been striving to cure all these years. The conversation she remembers in the first act, Charlie saying she should tell the hospital about their relationship, resolves into being about Charlie's Alzheimer's, not their sexuality.

Wolff describes the devastating effect of the disease, the loss of memory, of identity and presence that Alzheimer's wreaks in people's lives. In a flood of sharing, she explains that to Charlie, in the few lucid moments left to them, suicide seems like the only way out. She tells how she'd seen the plastic bag, an "exit hood", out for days without really noticing it, perhaps not letting herself know what it was intended for. How she returned home to find the kettle, a symbol that has been established early on as a sign of security, love and sanctuary, now cold and the bag gone. There isn't a sound in the theatre now.

Of course this has been the driving personal factor of her refusal to give an inch, to surrender even a little of her power. I can't help but think all along that her courage in the face of public outrage is only a façade of pride pretending to strength, which masks deep, deep pain and personal loss. Yes, the people on the internet are uninformed and destructive; yes, the religious communities seem archaic and ridiculous to those who are without faith or have given their faith other shapes. Wolff herself describes doctors as being a kind of witch, telling Sami in act one that they still prescribe certain herbs or bits of bark to cure pain, poor sleep, a hunched back, only under different names and in pill form or injections. The medical profession today, she says, will seem hopelessly superstitious to that of the future.

If she'd only been able to bend a little, to allow for other people to have their faiths as well, to see beyond her own belief in medicine and her own unshakable faith in her infallibility – no, that's not fair, her faith in the infallibility of medicine – then none of this need have happened; but she is still too broken from the loss of Charlie. To bend at any point is to invite shattering into a million pieces, which in the end is what the world forces on her anyway.

Stevenson as Professor Wolff is electrifying. It's impossible to tear my eyes away from the drama unfolding on stage and her performance is at the heart of that. She commands the space totally: her strength, the power of her voice as she orders the squabbling board members to sit down and demands they follow the proper procedures for a board meeting are the essence of the characters charmless "Jerk Doctor" charm. Of course, she loses control of the board anyway, and everything is gradually taken away from her, bit by bit, until she is a weeping broken human mess at the end. Wolff's acceptance and confession of her humanity is nothing short of gripping.

People are in floods of tears as we leave the theatre, comforting each other as the house lights come back up. With COVID 19 continuing its spread across the globe and Trump claiming it's all a democratic hoax, the issues at the heart of *The Doctor* seem all the more urgent. There's so much more that I could talk about.

It made me think of the Eurocentrism – nay, the Anglocentricism – of the Melbourne Theatre Company. It seems to me that if they must keep importing new works from overseas in preference to expanding the place for Australian writers – and it seems fairly obvious from recent programming that they still do – then they should bring this kind of play. Melbourne needs to see this play. Hell, everyone does. I really can't overstate how engrossing, intelligent and important it is. This is some of the best writing I've seen in a long time.