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**Oscar's premiere**  
Wilde play's first  
night in pub theatre

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## 'Earnest' excitement in world of drama for UK premiere of Irish playwright's 'cursed' tragedy

by JOSH LOEB

HE is a writer best known for his wit, but a production of a "never before seen" tragedy by Oscar Wilde has triggered a wave of excitement among academics.

*The Duchess of Padua*, an early work by the legendary Irish playwright, will get its UK premiere in a small theatre in Hampstead next week – a mere 127 years after Wilde penned it.

The performance of the five-act work, described as Shakespearean in style, is regarded as so unprecedented that a group of Wilde experts – The Oscholars – is sending a researcher to Pentameters in Heath Street, where the play is due to be performed, in order to record interviews with the actors for posterity.

Oscar Wilde Society deputy chairman Michael Seeney says he is "prepared to be moved" by the piece, by far the least-performed of the seven plays Wilde wrote.

Mr Seeney said: "As far as I can tell it is first time it's been performed in the UK.

"If you put on one of Wilde's comedies you are almost guaranteed a good audience, but if you put on the *Duchess of Padua*, you are taking a risk. You don't know how it's gone down before because it has been so rarely performed."

Wilde declared the play to be "the masterpiece of all my literary work, the chef-d'oeuvre of my youth" after finishing it in 1883.

Worldwide, it has been performed only a handful of times – in New York in 1891 and twice in Germany in the early 1900s.

Director Rafe Beckley said he fell in love with the obscure work while

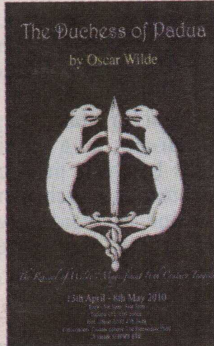


Players rehearse for the UK premiere of Oscar Wilde's little-performed tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua* – a play that is rumoured to be cursed

# Theatre group up for Oscar as Wilde's 'never seen' play opens



Wilde's *Duchess of Padua* is rarely performed



"crashing through texts" at drama school seven years ago.

He said: "It really is jaw-droppingly good. I absolutely loved it. Ever since, I have wanted to act in or direct it."

The only record he could find of the play having been performed in the UK was a so-called "copyright performance" – a one-off, non-public performance

arranged by a publishing house in 1907 to secure copyright in order to publish the text, as was required by law.

One reason why the *Duchess of Padua* is so rarely performed might be that it is rumoured to be "cursed".

Laurence Barrett, who produced the first production of it in New York, died shortly afterwards. In the productions

in Germany, an actor reputedly went mad.

The title role had been intended for the American actress Mary Anderson, but she declined to appear after reading it.

■ *The Duchess of Padua* is at Pentameters Theatre, above the Horseshoe Pub, 28 Heath Street, NW3, from April 13-May 8. For tickets call 020 7435 3648.