



Ham & High

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Oscar's curse leaves theatre group dreading the boards

Leading man's sudden illness could be down to 'jinxed' play

Tom Victor

A CURSE dating back to the 19th Century may have plagued a Hampstead production after their leading man suddenly fell ill.

The Pentameters Theatre on Heath Street was due to open a run of Oscar Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua* earlier this month but was forced to delay it until this week after the actor playing the Duke, Seamus Newham, fell ill.

And now members of the production team are convinced they were hit by an age-old curse of the writer's second play.

Wilde wrote the play in 1883 for an actress called Mary Anderson, but she unexpectedly turned the role down.

It cancelled its opening run in Broadway in 1891 after just three weeks when the producer died, while a German production of the tragedy was hit with rumours of one of its cast going insane.

The play has only been performed once in this country in 1907 and hasn't been touched since — adding to its reputation for carrying a curse.

That was a factor the Pentameters crew didn't take



seriously until Mr Newham's daughter called shortly before the premiere.

Director Rafe Beckley said: "I was saying to the cast I didn't believe the curse was real or that there was anything to be worried about. I doubt I'll be doing that

again. Thankfully Seamus has called and said he is on the mend, but he will not be ready to take to the stage for this production.

"A person's health is obviously more important than the show."

The crew now has a replacement in Peter Gerald, who plays



THE REALLY WILDE SHOW: Cast rehearse Oscar Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua* which opened after a delay at Pentameters Theatre. Left, director Rafe Beckley

Pictures by Polly Hancock

the Duke in the production which finally opened last night.

He had just a week to rehearse but Mr Beckley says he has made a sterling effort to rise to the challenge. "I've worked with him before. He is a fabulous actor and I know he's up to it," he said.

Leonie Scott-Matthews, owner of the theatre, said: "We were aware of the curse before and originally thought nothing of it, but it's a very strange business

when things like this have happened over and over again. I have never experienced that before, someone calling in literally hours before the first performance.

"You can call it a curse, or you can call it serendipity or coincidence. It depends on how you look at things."

But now both cast and crew are hopeful all will go smoothly for the rest of the run.

● *The Duchess of Padua* is showing at Pentameters Theatre, in Heath Street, Hampstead, above the Horseshoe pub. Performances are 8pm Tuesday to Saturday with a 5pm matinee on Sunday.

Tickets for the play, which runs until May 15, are £12 (£10 concessions) and available from the box office on 0207 435 3648.

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