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Wilde cards

Forty years on, Neil Titley has handed over the baton to a new Oscar Wilde at Pentameters.

Emma Goldman charts the journey...

Thursday, 18th April — By [Emma Goldman](#)



Neil Titley as Oscar Wilde in 1984

IN April 1984, Pentameters Theatre in Hampstead ran the first performance of Neil Titley's one-man play about Oscar Wilde: *Work is the Curse of the Drinking Classes*. Forty years to the day, it's on again.

The play is set in Paris, 1898. Oscar is sitting at a café watching the world go by. He's recently been released from Reading Gaol, where he was imprisoned for homosexuality. Having now fled the notoriety of England, he is dependent upon those friends who haven't deserted him.

The brutalities of prison life have destroyed an artist who only a short time ago was at the height of his fame. But what has utterly broken him is the loss of his two young sons: at his trial, the judge ordered that he never see them again.

In the 40 years since that Pentameter's first performance, Neil has taken the play around the world; across Africa, the Americas and Europe. He once performed it to the prime minister and Cabinet of Belize.

Many audiences have consisted of hundreds of people. Yet on one occasion just one drunken man turned up. He fell asleep. It was the first night of a week's run in the English countryside.

A makeshift theatre had been set up at the end of a barn. The show had to be abandoned half way, but not because of the drunken man's snores.

A wild autumn was raging beyond the rickety walls and, as the soliloquy on stage grew in stature, a sudden gust of wind dashed open the side door. It swung to and fro on a piece of rope. As Neil carried on regardless, a shape appeared on the threshold. A damp carthorse ambled onto the stage.

Others to whom the play has been performed have been the military command in Fort Bragg, South Carolina, the members of an Alabamian country club, Ethiopia's poet laureate, a Somali warlord, and Reykjavikian fisherman in the world's most northerly Irish pub.

Every line in the play is Oscar's own, whether from a drama, letter, essay, or simply a witty utterance.

These lines have been woven together seamlessly to make a soliloquy that leads you into Wilde's wit, then drops you into his heartbreak.



Will Govan in the 2024 version of the play, Work is the Curse of the Drinking Classes

Oscar is not presented as a tragic hero. Yet, in the manner of one, it was hubris that spurred him to challenge the Marquis of Queensbury, father of his lover. Oscar took him to court for libel after the Marquis left a note at his club which publicly addressed him as a “sodomite”. Oscar was then at the height of his theatrical fame. Three of his plays were running concurrently. Perhaps in the midst of his success he felt unassailable. He certainly failed to foresee the lengths to which the Marquis would go in order to win; the dirty tricks he would play.

As Oscar was led down to the cells to begin a two-year sentence of hard labour and solitary confinement, he saw his loyal friend Robbie Ross. It was there that, in front of a jeering mob, Robbie slowly raised his hat to him. Oscar later wrote, which is in the play, that “men have gone to heaven for less”.

The story of Oscar is a story of terrible injustice. But to keep telling the story partly redresses the balance.

Neil retired from the stage in 2019 to concentrate on his other writing. And in 2023 his book *The Oscar Wilde World of Gossip* was published in America. Stephen Fry called the book “a magnificent gift to the world” and “a new form of biography”.

In 2021, however, an email arrived from the Irish actor Will Govan, who had seen a recording of the show. How would Neil feel if Will took over? For the past year, the baton now passed from older actor to younger, Will has taken the play around Ireland to great acclaim. Now he’s bringing it back to Pentameters.

Pentameters opened in 1968 as a theatrical space for poetry readings. The founder, Léonie Scott-Matthews, remains artistic director, and in 2020 she received an OBE for services to local arts and British

theatre. Although Pentameters re-opened after lockdown for weekly poetry readings, *Work is the Curse of the Drinking Classes* is its first play since then.

Oscar Wilde as a threat to social order and morality was a potent spectre well into the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, Neil first heard the man's name in that context. It was 1960. The obligatory male hairstyle was still short back and sides. Schoolboy Neil's had grown past the nape of his neck. It actually appeared to be snaking towards the collar of his blazer. He was sent home from school.

"Don't come back till you've had it cut," the master barked. "Who do you think you are? Oscar bleedin' Wilde?"

Who was this rebel Wilde? He had better find out.

• ***Work is the Curse of the Drinking Classes* is at Pentameters Theatre. Tickets available for April 26 and 27. 8pm. Tickets £10, cash at the door. Email theatre@pentameters.co.uk to reserve tickets**