

DAILY MAIL (London)

March 20, 1998

Neeson's Oscar winner; at last night's first night

BYLINE: Michael Coveney

SECTION: Pg. 6

LENGTH: 370 words

The Judas Kiss by David Hare: Playhouse Theatre LIAM Neeson rolls on to the stage as Oscar Wilde in a huge fur-lined coat, big as a country farmer, and proceeds to get bigger all night. His massiveness is terrific, especially when he's belittled by everyone else. And his powerful presence the wide forehead, the unflinching eyes, the unaffected, chest-rooted voice - commands a sea of shiftiness around him.

David Hare's moving and funny play, beautifully directed by Sir Richard Eyre and presented for a season by the Almeida at this Charing Cross venue before moving on to Broadway, is a cunning conversational piece, quite different from the recent film. The first act is set in the Cadogan Hotel, where we see a young waiter graphically pleasuring a chambermaid on Lord Alfred Douglas's (Bosie's) unmade bed. Bosie, more peevish than languid in Tom Hollander's performance, will join Wilde and Robert Ross (Peter Capaldi) to discuss tactics: Oscar's libel action against his hated father, the Marquess of Queensbury, has collapsed. It is a flashpoint in the Wilde story. Will he stay brazenly to be arrested, as Bosie says he must, or will he flee at once? He stays, unbrazenly, for lunch and for Bosie. The second act in Naples follows the two-year prison sentence. Ahead lies Paris, utter loneliness and the grave.

A series of dialogues that burn with moral argument show Wilde's inability to see through Bosie, or to condemn him when he does. Bob Crowley's lush bedroom design gives way to the glittering bay of Naples. And Bosie is pleasuring a local fisherman called Galileo - 'Did you see stars?', Oscar enquires, mischievously. No slavish biographical snapshots here, though you fully understand Wilde's legendary magnetism in the way he gets on with the lower orders.

Bosie and Oscar, the short and the long of it, are curiously like Laurel and Hardy. Another fine day is followed by another fine mess. Friendship rots away, leaving only penury and wasted love. It is a wonderful, poignant double act, Hollander blinking shiftily alongside Neeson's quietly roaring lion of a decent man who refuses to confuse life with art. And loses everything for a passion