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Neeson riveting in study of Wilde's fall from grace; **FIRST NIGHT**

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The Judas Kiss The Playhouse

THE FAMOUS old scandal of Oscar Wilde's fall from glory takes on an enticing freshness in David Hare's new play. The Judas Kiss, which substitutes the lumbering masculinity and surprise of Liam Neeson's Oscar for the usual "precious, plumed effeminate," eloquently imagines itself into two little-researched incidents from Wilde's life. It broods over key questions arising: why did the playwright face the dangerous music of a trial for homosexual offences instead of fleeing abroad?

Why did he return to Alfred Douglas, the lover he tried to give up like alcohol - but from whom he continued to drink deep until that Judas kiss.

Love is the predictable answer. A complex brand of betrayal, its mechanics and cruelties, forms the play's dramatic core and Hare's interest: It is Douglas, Wilde's awful and unwisely adored Bosie, who does the betraying. Love causes Oscar to cling to Lord Alfred as if he were an elixir rather than, as in Hare's portrayal, the human incarnation of a sexually transmitted disease. But despite the fiery, forceful passion of Hare's writing, the first act's edgy tensions, in the Cadogan hotel where Wilde awaits the expected police swoop, there's something wrong. It has to do with the tantalising question Hare indirectly raises in his scrutiny of Bosie's betrayal of Oscar.

In the programme, Hare belittles Noel Coward for saying Wilde "threw away his life for a worthless love". Quite right. That love was worth a lot to Wilde. But The Judas Kiss, while establishing Bosie as Wilde's fatal flaw, does not face up to a crucial, never satisfactorily resolved problem. What, after the first surges of sexual excitement had abated, explains Wilde's love for a man so mad, bad and dangerous to know? Was Bosie's power to do with his English title? That first act, where Hare mostly and mercifully avoids the borrowing or mimicking of Wildean paradoxes and aphorisms, shows Bosie in full aristocratic flight of folly.

Tom Hollander shimmering with one dimensional crudity - all plaintive petulance and grievance in a nasal whine of a voice - urges Wilde to stay, insisting rent-boys are never believed in court. It's Peter Capaldi's memorably strained Robert Ross who puts the case for leaving while Wilde settles for serene fatalism on the contented grounds that his true love for Bosie has unmade him.

The clamour of opposing, urgent views gives this first act, set in Bob Crowley's gilded and grey silk hotel passionate conviction. But there's a reiterative monotony about Hollander's Lord Alfred, both here and during the final act on the Italian coast (poorly lit and evoked) where the now exiled, longsuffering Wilde watches Bosie packing his bags to leave and dumping his conscience and love. Hare makes Bosie simply malign and Hollander relishes making his character a master of Lordly snivels and sneers. Damagingly, there's no deep, illuminating sense of their love when Neeson and Hollander tangle. LIAM Neeson's Wilde, though, comes as a riveting surprise. Scorning the old style of Wildean affectation and camp, he whirls on stage, long hair trailing, manly sweat soon streaming down his face.

This is Wilde the emotional bulky hulk rather than the plump commanding intellect, with wit his weapon of choice. Pallid and hair parted, he does not later look the victim of two years ruinous hard labour and emotional breakdown. But how wrenchingly he conveys Hare's sense of a Wilde wrecked by love and society.