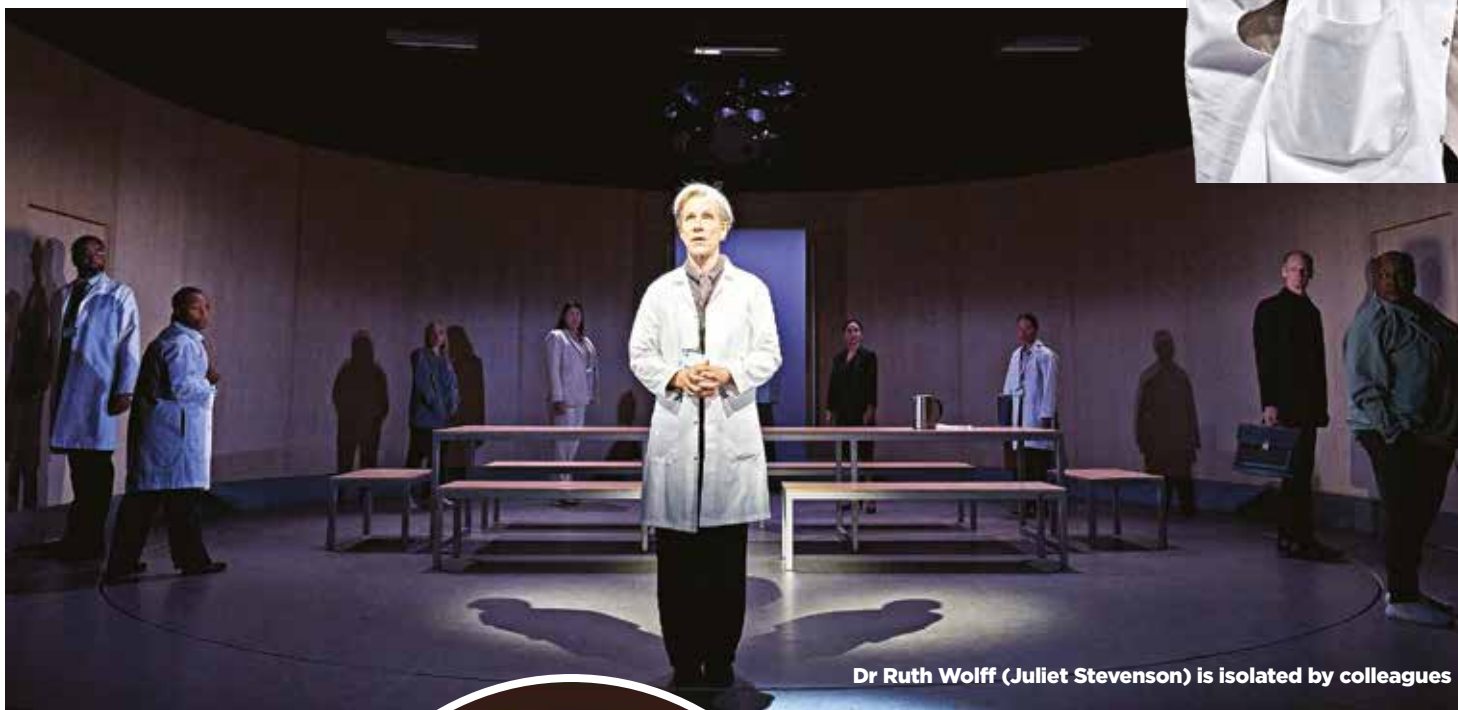


DOCTOR'S *Appointment*

Beatrice Sayers reviews a powerful play about racism, cancel culture and personal morality



Dr Ruth Wolff (Juliet Stevenson) is isolated by colleagues



With (top) Dr Roger Hardiman (Naomi Wirthner) and with partner Charlie (Juliet Garricks)

Shouting matches between medical professionals and clergy are thankfully rare, but the noisy clashes that take place on stage in *The Doctor*, the contemporary hospital drama that has now transferred to the West End, feel all too plausible in an age of social media bullying and cancel culture.

Professor Ruth Wolff, the founder and director of the Elizabeth Institute, takes an instinctive decision to refuse to allow a visiting Catholic priest to give the last rites to a 14-year-old girl in her care who is dying from sepsis after a self-induced abortion. The doctor's view is that the girl does not know she is dying, and the priest's presence will frighten her by making her aware of what is to come.

At first the priest is alone in his absolute fury, but gradually the Jewish doctor's Catholic colleagues turn against her, and turn a professional row into a personal one, which is seen to grow, steadily and unstoppably, from the antisemitism that is one of the main themes of this play.

Robert Icke, who wrote this adaptation of *Professor Bernhardt*, completed in 1912 by the Jewish Austrian doctor-writer Arthur Schnitzler, has preserved the anti-Jewish poison which is that play's main theme, and deftly shown how it can grow and morph. "You've murdered my little girl and I will exact that pound of flesh," the priest (played with appropriate menace by John Mackay) tells Wolff.



Wolff with Father Jacob Rice (John Mackay)

Icke, who also directs, embraces the 'comedy' label Schnitzler applied to his play. When Charlie, the often-sarcastic doctor's partner, quotes Oscar Wilde on wit to her, she scathingly responds: "Karaoke is the lowest form of wit." And as outrage against Dr Wolff takes hold, and an online petition takes off, she enters diagnostic mode, announcing conclusively: "I am trending."

Juliet Stevenson, who debuted the title role three years ago at the Almeida, from where this production has transferred, gives a truly outstanding performance as Wolff, the capable, committed and conscientious professional, "born to Jewish parents" but not a subscriber to religion, as she puts it.

The cross-gender and cross-ethnic casting among several of the supporting characters mirror the surprises and confusion the rise of identity politics brings. And as the misguided and overzealous protagonists become polarised in their own thoughts, the disorientation and unreality are felt by the audience as the stage begins slowly to rotate.

This powerful play is a stark and troubling reminder of how groupthink can upend the work of a vital institution, run on democratic principles, but also, in the final scene between Wolff and the priest, how the calm voices of honesty and humanity can prevail.

• ***The Doctor* is at the Duke of York's Theatre until 11 December. Book at thedukeofyorks.com/the-doctor**

SCHNITZLER'S JEWISH PROTAGONISTS

Arthur Schnitzler's play *Professor Bernhardt*, from which *The Doctor* is adapted, is unusual in being free of the erotic or sexual themes that characterise most of his output. The best-known works by the Viennese author and dramatist (pictured right) are probably his ultra-provocative 1897 play *Reigen* (*La Ronde*) and his indecent proposal novella *Fräulein Else*. Both still shock.

In *Fräulein Else*, the 19-year-old protagonist, who is staying at a fashionable spa with her aunt, receives a letter from her mother begging her to save her father from debtor's jail by asking a wealthy family friend to lend them 30,000 guilders (later increased to 50,000). Through the young woman's stream of consciousness, her moral struggle emerges after the lecherous friend agrees to lend the money – but only if Elsa undresses for him.

Fräulein Else has been adapted three times for the big screen, first in a 1929

German silent film and most recently in 2014, by the Austrian Anna Martinetz.

What Else and Bernhardt have in common is that they are two of the few identifiably Jewish protagonists in Schnitzler's output. And *Bernhardt* is the only one of his works to take as its main theme the antisemitism that was starting to pervade life in Austria at the time he was writing, something he had explored in his 1908 novel *Der Weg ins Freie* (*The Way into the Open*), the tale of an unhappy love affair. Schnitzler, who had a career as a doctor before turning to writing, would have experienced the rising antisemitism around him.

The Austrian might be said to have something in common with the American film director Woody Allen, who in 1975 starred with Diane Keaton in his satiric comedy *Love and Death*. Schnitzler, asked about the critical view that his own works all treated the same subjects, replied: "I write of love and death. What other subjects are there?"

Beatrice Sayers



The 2014 film *Fräulein Else*