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Tea, cake and a really Wilde show

By **MATTHEW WILSON**
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HE was the greatest wit of the Victorian age whose stories, sayings, poems and plays continue to delight us today, but Oscar Wilde's own story ended in ignominy and tragedy.

Following his release from Reading Gaol in May 1897 he sailed immediately for France, where he was to remain in exile under the assumed name of Sebastian Melmoth, dying three years later at the age of 46.

Often credited with inventing the modern idea of celebrity on his 1882 lecture tour of America, it is natural to wonder what form Wilde's fame might have taken had he lived in the age of radio, television and the internet.

Perhaps the seriousness underlying his humour would have led him to shun the airwaves, let alone Twitter. But as the man himself famously said, "I can resist everything except temptation."

One Wilde aficionado who thinks the Irishman would have made a great chat show host is Jonathan Goodwin of the Don't Go Into The Cellar theatre company.

So much so that he and his colleagues have been touring just such a show around UK venues for the past two years — and are bringing it to the Kenton Theatre on Saturday, February 18.

Tea with Oscar Wilde sees the popular modern chat show reimagined for the Victorian age.

Jonathan, who both writes and stars in the show, says: "I guess I began thinking, well, if chat shows had existed in the Victorian era, and if TV existed, then Oscar Wilde would have been the natural choice to host it."

"In a way, it's Graham Norton sent back in time to the 1890s. So lots of Wildean quips, there is storytelling in it — he narrates *The Happy Prince* and *The Nightingale and the Rose* — and music as well. We have Marie Lloyd — probably the biggest music hall performer of



Fine and dandy: Jonathan Goodwin writes and stars in *Tea with Oscar Wilde*. Right, with Amy Bullock and Sali Gresham as Victorian-era celebrity guests Cora Crippen and Marie Lloyd

the day — she's one of the guests. And also William McGonagall."

Renowned as one of the worst poets of all time, McGonagall is played by Phil Jennings, with Sali Gresham portraying Marie Lloyd.

Another guest, Cora Crippen, the wife and alleged victim of the notorious Dr Crippen, is played by Amy Bullock.

The choice of Crippen as a guest is a subtle nod to the macabre — something of a specialism of *Don't Go Into The Cellar*, whose other touring shows include *Murder by Gaslight*, *Morbid Curiosities*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Old Haunts*, *Frankenstein and Dracula's Ghost*.

Jonathan, who founded the company in 2010, calls *Tea with Oscar Wilde* "a nice contrast to the usual spooky stuff that we do", adding: "It's funny, there are songs in it, it's light-hearted and it's a

lovely change for me to be able to make people laugh."

Given Wilde's acknowledged status as a legendary wit, you'd think his shoes would be rather intimidating ones to have to fill on stage. But Jonathan is unfazed.

"Well, there's always scope for ad-libbing and improvisations, so although the show is semi-scripted — the script is written for the other actors playing the characters — I always endeavour just to be as familiar with Oscar's ways and what he said as I can because, honestly, when I'm chatting to members of the audience you never know what they're going to say, and it could be about anything."

"But it's just getting into the spirit of the man — you know, it's light-hearted, it's funny, and from everything that I've read he was a thoroughly likeable man. Very



witty and charming. And audiences tend to appreciate that."

Jonathan says that while his portrayal of Wilde isn't set at any one point in his career, it does aim to show him at the peak of his powers and his fame.

"When we join him, none of the downfall has happened — the Marquess of Queensberry and the trial that was the ruination of him, that hasn't happened at all. So he's just at the top of his game — he's funny, everyone loves him, he's famous for being witty, you know, for being a great writer, and it's just a party round at Oscar's place — he's inviting his mates round to tell jokes. So, yes, two hours of good old-fashioned fun."

As someone who set up his own theatre company, you might have thought Jonathan would have been to drama school. But no. After

reading English and media at Plymouth University's Exmouth campus in Devon, he found his way out into the world of work.

"I'm 44 now. Didn't start acting until 10 years ago. I used to be an arts events manager. So it was all about events management. And then I left that and I thought, do you know what, I'm going to become an actor."

"I hadn't gone to drama school, but I knew... you know, I think with acting you can or you can't, and I'd always written. And so 10 years ago I began going to auditions, got bits of work."

"But then I found that there weren't — the kind of jobs that I was going for weren't really the kind of acting gigs that I wanted, because I wanted there to be theatre based around Victorian themes, and it didn't exist. So I just

thought I'd invent it myself. So in 2010 I set the company up. Began writing the scripts. We've got about 30 scripts now that I've done and we always tour constantly 10 or a dozen of them."

"Because I know very much the kind of thing that I'd want to watch, I think that was half the battle. And because I'd always read this kind of thing, it's just imagining that type of thing but transposed to the stage and given a fresh imagining. Just a case of, you know, picturing what I would like to see and then writing it. It's pretty much that straightforward."

● *Tea with Oscar Wilde* is at the Kenton Theatre at 7.30pm on Saturday, February 18. Tickets are £11 for adults and £9 for children and concessions. To book, call the box office on (01491) 575698 or visit www.kentontheatre.co.uk

Thriller is worth strapping yourself in for

FIRST NIGHT REVIEW

Kiss of Death
Theatre Royal, Windsor
Tuesday, February 7

A FULL house turned out to enjoy this taut psychological thriller, written by Simon Williams and directed and designed by Patric Kearns.

There was an audacious use of a live camera feed and pre-recorded sound effects throughout, which had a very good success rate, as goings-on were simultaneously projected on to a background screen or broadcast over speakers.

Actress Zoe Lang agrees to attend an unusual improvisation workshop, one for which she is to be paid and which involves speaking direct to a camera.

She meets Bernard and Brocklebank, who are running this workshop, which appears to have wider implications involving Zoe's safety.

However, Zoe has a painful past, which has given her a vulnerability yet also the fortitude to ensure that no one can ever hurt her again. She also seems highly adept at out-psychoing everyone else...

A serial killer known as "The Surgeon" is also at large, for which Zoe could be about to serve a useful purpose, and there may be more than one case of hidden identity.

The use of the Nine Inch Nails song *Hurt* at the very start was a good indication of where this was going, as Zoe was invited to portray down-and-out Natasha Campion in an attempt to flush out the murderer.

Her tussles with the balaclava-clad



stalker of women proved insightful and almost cathartic.

There were acerbic comments and biting banter between the antsy Brocklebank and the mysterious Bernard, always wearing sunglasses and prone to quoting Latinisms and platitudes.

A smart set with red lampshades and blue lighting helped create an eerie undertone as we delved into the mind of

a killer and explored the twists and turns of fate. There were quite a few jump-out-of-your-seat moments, with shrill telephones and other sounds ringing out, while William Blake's classic poem *The Tyger* was used to haunting effect.

Ultimately Zoe's sheer ability to read the situation shone through, like a beacon of hope amid the madness.

Until Saturday.

Natalie Aldred



Three-seater: John Doyle, John McCusker and Michael McGoldrick are familiar to fans of the BBC's *Transatlantic Sessions*. They play Nettlebed on Monday

'Transatlantic' trio are in session

THREE of the world's finest folk musicians will be taking to the stage at Nettlebed Village Club on Monday night (February 13).

Michael McGoldrick, John McCusker and John Doyle will be familiar to fans of the BBC's acclaimed *Transatlantic Sessions*, six series of which have been recorded to date.

A master of flutes, whistles and Uilleann pipes, Michael McGoldrick is a founding member of Flook and Lunasa and is a current member of Capercaillie.

Regarded as one of the greatest flute players of all time, he has toured with Bob Dylan and Mark Knopfler, as well as with The Afro Celts, the RTE Orchestra and Kate Rusby. He has collaborated

with the likes of Jim Kerr, Youssou N'Dour, John Cale and Zakir Hussain and was named the BBC Radio 2 folk musician of the year in 2006.

John McCusker's unique fiddle playing has earned him a worldwide reputation as one of the most gifted and versatile musicians of any genre.

McCusker was also part of the legendary band that toured with both Bob Dylan and Mark Knopfler.

Joining the Battlefield band aged 17, he spent 11 years touring the world with the now legendary folk outfit.

Renowned for his skill at transcending musical boundaries, he has worked with artists ranging from Paulo Nutini and Jools

Holland to Steve Earle and Rosanne Cash and has recorded with Paul Weller and Ocean Colour Scene.

John Doyle's gifts as guitarist, songwriter and vocalist have played an essential role in the ongoing renaissance of Irish traditional music.

Now living in the US, he was the recent musical director for Joan Baez and toured with her for two years.

One half of the stellar duo Liz Carroll and John Doyle, he is also a founding member of the internationally acclaimed Irish group Solas.

Monday's show starts at 8pm. Tickets are £17.50 in advance and can be booked by calling 01628 636620 or via www.nettlebedfolkclub.co.uk