

Life & Times Theatre

The Doctor

The Almeida, London; finished 28 September 2019. The Doctor starts at the Duke of York's Theatre, London, from 20 April 2020

IDENTITY, BIAS, MEDICINE, AND FAITH

'Whom, not who.' Professor Ruth Wolff (unaffectionately known as BB, for Big Bad) is a stickler for grammar, due process, and her patients' best interests. This leads her to prevent a Roman Catholic priest visiting a dying 14-year-old, which escalates into a ferocious debate, fuelled by an online petition.

The setting of *The Doctor* is deeply implausible — Professor Wolff is the founding director of a privately funded institute for dementia research, which has in-patient beds and no mention of laboratory medicine whatsoever.

She decides to admit a teenager who has sepsis from a self-administered abortion. To a clinical ear and eye it is on this ground she should be held to account; however, this is not the point of the play. The issues explored are those of identity, unconscious bias, and the tension between medicine and faith. By denying the priest access to the teenager, does Professor Wolff protect her from the fear of her imminent death that his presence would confirm? Or condemn her to eternal damnation from an unshriven sin? Or is her real agenda that of racism, as the priest is a black African, albeit cast as a Caucasian, and whom she physically prevented from entering the girl's room? A bandwagon is there, and interest groups jump onto it thick and fast.

Professor Wolff refuses again and again

The Doctor. Ria Zmitrowicz and Juliet Stevenson. Photo credit — Manuel Harlan.



to be identified as belonging to 'a group'. She could be described as female, gay, and/or of Jewish heritage, all of which she rejects. She simply repeats, 'I'm a doctor', as if being a doctor is not being part of a group and transcends any other identity. She wants to exist independently of her entire environment apart from the clinical one and to be able to use words stripped down to an equal simplicity. But, of course, neither of these are possible, and first the audience and then she is forced to confront the meaning of identity, being repeatedly wrong-footed in terms of unconscious bias.

Casting across gender and colour demonstrates the ease with which we make assumptions about people's identities. The priest we have assumed to be white Irish turns out to be black African, and the female junior doctor is accused of exercising her 'typical male privilege'. We the audience see and hear that what we see and hear aren't necessarily true. What seem to be unlimited combinations of fake news, selective quotations, populism, anti-Semitism, racism, the colonial legacy, language, power, positive and negative discrimination, gender identity, and indeed any identity confront the audience every minute. Professor Wolff is forced to confront her depersonalised adherence to language use and status, finds that she cannot divorce it from her own lived experience, and her carapace of invulnerability shatters. Although there is an element of choice about how we define ourselves, we can neither choose how others see us, nor the societal constructs and hierarchies that shaped and shape our pasts, presents, and futures.

When briefly questioned about her decision to admit the teenager, Professor Wolff is portrayed as showing a glimpse of much-suppressed humanity, rather than a catastrophic clinical error. The presence of the unseen patients with dementia nearby, symbolised by the ubiquitous white coats



The Doctor. Juliet Stevenson and Joy Richardson. Photo credit — Manuel Harlan.

and stethoscopes of all the medical staff, is never explained.

Are the wards acute or long stay? Have the patients been admitted for clinical or research reasons? Who has given consent and how? Why are the only clinical staff medical — as in clinical medicine? There doesn't even seem to be a psychiatrist, let alone the multidisciplinary team one would expect for such a patient group. And since when are research clinical units run by boards whose members are exclusively the medical team?

The questions posed are not new: how free are we to choose who we are? How do we accommodate our non-negotiable characteristics? Where do the boundaries lie between our personal and professional lives?

Paradigms of gender identity, faith, and science clash and interweave — can we peacefully coexist with such different and apparently irreconcilable values? The answers, as so often, are yes but no-but yes-but no-but yes-but. Professor Wolff would not approve.

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The Doctor will transfer to the Duke of York's Theatre, London from April 2020.
<https://almeida.co.uk/whats-on/the-doctor-west-end/19-apr-2020-10-jul-2020>

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