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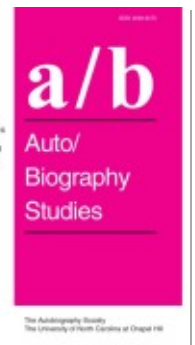
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# “To Be Said to Have Done It Is Everything”: The Theatrical Oscar Wilde and Possibilities for the (Re)Construction of Biography

By Lindsay Adamson Livingston

*Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. . . . Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought. The imagination can transcend them.*

—Oscar Wilde

NEAR THE BEGINNING of the second act of Moisés Kaufman’s play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, the titular Wilde has just been indicted on charges of gross indecency and denied bail. When Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosie), apologizes for encouraging Wilde to stand trial, Wilde quotes a passage from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, sadly admitting to Bosie that “the real tragedies in life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning” (81). If one were to assemble a list of requirements for good biography, “crudeness,” “incoherence,” and “want of meaning” would almost certainly not make the list. Biographical forms, be they written, filmed, televised, digitized or performed, are almost always striving for an artistic rendering of these real tragedies, a way of smoothing out the tangled mess of a subject’s life, stretching it tautly to fit a neat narrative structure. But a neat narrative structure is not always the best way to accurately represent the multivalency of the subject of a biography, or, indeed, the nature of historical and life writing in general.

The modern printed biography, which began in the mid-eighteenth century when Samuel Johnson enacted “his great vision of modern biography” (Hamilton 4–5), has often been relegated to less-investigated corners of academic study.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, biography has been

and continues to be perhaps the most popular form of nonfiction writing, a popularity that has continued to grow over the past thirty years. It is not just the printed biography that enjoys a devoted following: the performing arts also seem to have a love affair with life writing. Each year, Hollywood releases several biographical films, many of which number among the year's most respected and prestigious films.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, biographical theatre has enjoyed increasing popularity: Michael Schiavi counts at least thirty-five plays that have premiered in New York in the past thirty years that concern the life of a famous literary figure—a subcategory of “biodrama” (400).

The term “biodrama” is a portmanteau constructed from “biography” and “drama”; in my conception, it applies to any performance that has at its core the individual life of a person known to have existed and around whom all the action of the play revolves. In its generic concern, biodrama would necessarily fall under the category of historical drama, although biodrama offers a more narrowed and finite vision due to its focus on the individual. Though not identical, biodrama is concatenate with and often utilizes similar structures as other forms of nonfiction theatre such as documentary drama. The critical and social appreciation of biodrama has followed much the same trajectory as that of printed biography; especially during the nineteenth century, some of the most popular plays were based on lives and stories taken from the headlines. These plays tended to be melodramatic in form, and as such they were deemed “middlebrow” or bourgeois theatre and therefore unworthy of scholarly consideration.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, theatre scholars have followed a more general trend in literary studies, affording more scholarly attention to types of performance that have been ignored in the past, such as circus, burlesque, melodrama, and biodrama.<sup>4</sup>

Some form of biographical drama can be found in many theatrical traditions,<sup>5</sup> but contemporary biodramas have begun to move in new directions, revealing the ways in which theatre, with its particularly phenomenological elements, can deconstruct traditional text-based life writing, thereby troubling the fraught auto/biographical relationship of “doing” and “reporting.” Because performance is, by its very nature, a “doing,” it often grapples with issues of textuality and embodiment in ways that other biographical forms cannot, and since most theatre is always already a translation of textual and other materials to the stage, there is more possibility for revealing slippages wherein there may be space to interrogate more fully the concept of a complete, consummate subject that is often advanced by more traditional biographical forms.

Biography, like history, has faced post-structuralist challenges to its ability to deliver an objective “truth.” A textual artifact, the modern

printed biography often has a clear linear narrative; a psychologically-based cause and effect structure; and a penchant for the sexual, grotesque, and subversive. Ruminating on biographical titan Leon Edel's concept of life writing as a method to uncover "the figure under the carpet," Leonard Cassuto explains that, in most twentieth-century biography, "the biographer's job is to infer what lies out of sight below, the 'secret myth' that's causing that particular and individual pattern of bumps and lumps that's presented to the world. Simply put, the biographer searches for internal motivation" (1250). But the organization of a person's life into a flowing narrative, wherein the internal motivation can be both discovered and decoded in order to explain the external persona, can actually occlude the truth rather than reveal it. Lives are rarely, if ever, direct lines of inner cause and outer effect, neatly ordered into a linear narrative structure. Rather, they are complex, messy things, based as they are on people who are sites of fractured, scattered identities and who often cannot define themselves, let alone have others do it for them. Conventional printed biography often relies upon a defined, centered, and identifiable self, a troubling notion in our time of shifting signifiers and ruptured identities.

It is at this fractured site that theatre can, perhaps, intercede and aid biography in achieving Michel de Certeau's hope that it become "the self-critique of liberal bourgeois society, based on the primary unit that society created[:] the individual—the central epistemological and historical figure of the modern Western world" (15). Performance offers a new formal paradigm for shaping the experience of the individual and disrupting the primacy of narrativity, continuing the post-structuralist project of deconstructing narrative, which, according to Hayden White, is considered "not only an instrument of ideology but the very paradigm of ideologizing discourse in general" (33). If we are to take White's assessment of narrative for granted, then biography that is tied to a linear narrative structure is almost certainly doomed to reiterate ideologies without providing a method for getting to the actual person behind the narrative. Biodrama that challenges narrativity in some way, then, can offer the possibility for a new kind of subject to emerge from biography: the embodied and textual self, a self composed not of a linear chronological narrative rooted in psychological archaeology, but rather the contested and unfinished self as a site of multivalent subjectivities.

### **Imagining Oscar Wilde**

By his first trial in 1895, Oscar Wilde was a celebrity. Known as early as his schooldays at Oxford for the flamboyant figure he cut and for

his championing of the aesthetic movement, Wilde had since swept the London arts scene with his sparkingly witty plays, poetry, essays, and fiction. Espousing the credo “art for art’s sake,” Wilde averred that art should provide pleasure rather than sentimentality or a lesson: art ought to be divorced from morality. The Decadent movement, which had its roots in Walter Pater’s essays on the Renaissance, was also characterized by a level of philhellenism and homoeroticism that encouraged, at least in Wilde’s case, a continuation of the Greek pederastic tradition and offered a philosophical justification of his homosexual desires.

It is unclear when Wilde first explored physical relationships with other men (and boys), but by 1895 his proclivities were certainly suspected if not yet proven. Wilde himself instigated the first of his three trials when he sued the Marquess of Queensbury, Bosie’s father, for libel. On a calling card left at a men’s social club Wilde frequented, Queensbury had scribbled an accusation: “Oscar Wilde: posing sodomite” [*sic*]. As S. I. Salamensky points out, little probably would have come of the accusation had Wilde not pursued legal action, but “urged on by a rebellious Bosie and a confused solicitor,” Wilde filed suit (576). It was a disastrous choice since, under British law, Queensbury was required to prove that his claim was accurate and therefore not libelous. As a result, the trial became more about Wilde’s sexual experiences rather than Queensbury’s accusation. Ultimately, the prosecution withdrew the case when the defense threatened to bring boy prostitutes to the stand to testify against Wilde.

Wilde enjoyed great support through much of the first trial as the public saw him as the heterosexual victim of a feud between Bosie and his father. According to Salamensky, even Queensbury was surprised to discover that Wilde had actually had sex with men; he had, after all, only accused Wilde of “posing” as a sodomite—not of actually *being* one (577). Wilde’s public support waned, however, when, based on evidence revealed at the libel trial, the British government brought Wilde up on charges of “gross indecency” (though not the more severe “buggery”) and began a second trial.

The arrest warrant went out twenty-four hours after the charges had been filed; presumably, this was meant to allow Wilde time to escape to the continent before the trial began. Though many of his friends and colleagues (including Bosie) fled, Wilde stayed behind and stood trial. The first trial for gross indecency ended with the jury unable to reach a verdict, whereupon Wilde was released on bail and went into hiding. The government then brought a second suit against Wilde, despite the pleas of Edward Carson (the attorney who defended the Marquess of Queensbury in the first trial and prosecuted Wilde in the following trials) to let the matter rest (Ellman 435). This

time, Wilde was found guilty of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor. Prison was very hard on Wilde's health, and he died in 1900, three years after his release.

At the time, the three trials were *causes célèbres* and were seen as entertainment; as Salamensky explains: "The courtroom was standing-room-only, and readers thrilled to blow-by-blow press accounts of Queensbury's solicitor's sallies and Wilde's outrageous, exquisitely-phrased retorts" (577). The libel trial, in particular, was seen as yet another example of Wilde turning life into art. As evidence of Wilde's sexual adventures became public knowledge, however, the tenor became seedier and more condemnatory, few stepped up to Wilde's defense, and many men who were in similar positions feared for their own status and fled to the continent at the time of Wilde's arrest. The trials were early examples of mediatized celebrity scandals, and they held the city of London breathlessly awaiting Wilde's fate.

At the end of the twentieth century, Oscar Wilde was suddenly very much in vogue again, at least in the theatre: in 1997 and 1998, one could see three radically different interpretations of the poet and playwright ghosting the stage in New York and London. Kaufman's play *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), which limits itself almost strictly to an exploration of Wilde's trials for libel and sodomy, premiered at the off-Broadway Minetta Lane Theatre in the West Village and presented a fey, feminized Wilde. David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* (1998), meanwhile, focuses primarily on Wilde's inaction: his refusal to flee the country or adequately defend himself. This production featured a tall, fleshy, and decidedly more masculine Wilde moping around the Broadhurst Theatre on Broadway. In London, Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (1997) brought a Hades-bound Wilde back to life for a cameo as a flamboyant foil to the protagonist, a prim, repressed A. E. Housman.

Each of these plays attempts to trouble conventional notions of history, fact, identity, and the self, and each offers a glimmer of performance's abilities to deconstruct biographical narrative by foregrounding an embodied Oscar Wilde. Susan Bennett explains that, in biographical performance, "the body, above all else, makes these performances both more and less reliable than their written equivalents, for it claims a special purchase on the real, incites evidence of the past and promises, for the audience, a three-dimensional text" (46). *The Judas Kiss*, citing evidence of the past, most blatantly challenges received notions about Wilde's embodied reality, insisting that Wilde was not slight in stature (a conceit often associated with homosexuality), but rather an imposing physical presence, solidly fleshy and even "butch" in appearance. In spite of the play's insistence on Wilde's physicality, his sexuality is hardly emphasized at all, challenging the

public image of Wilde as only homosexual. *Gross Indecency*, claiming a special purchase on the real through its foregrounding of historical and academic documents, presents a Wilde that is formed by his texts, embodied principally through his words and the words that others spoke about him. Although an actor plays the role of Oscar Wilde, it is the texts that embody him and, by so doing, interrogate the primacy of the queered body of the biographical Wilde. *The Invention of Love* capitalizes upon theatre's ability to provide a three-dimensional text via the body, offering a Wilde who is a flamboyant caricature of himself, a living reproduction of a pop-culture image: the fey, epigrammatic genius who, even on his way to Hades, extols the virtues of art for art's sake. Stoppard's Wilde functions as an embodied icon, forcing spectators to reevaluate their preconceptions about the man because the character is somehow simultaneously flat and larger than life. Through the use of an actor, and thus a body, these plays can claim, incite, and promise a phenomenal experience that challenges traditional biographical narrative.

### **Biodrama: Undermining Historical Narrative**

Biography, which in the past has been relatively under-theorized, has begun to receive a great deal more attention from scholarly circles. Much of this attention is directed towards defining biography and locating it within the larger genres of history and literature. Indeed, biography seems to stand at a crossroads between the two genres: composed of historical facts, it is, nevertheless, the *story* of a life. In his Introduction to *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, William Epstein offers what he sees as the most pressing issue for biography in the twenty-first century—the fractured subject as site of contestation: “Biography is a vital contemporary ‘arena of dispute’ in which important issues can be, indeed, cannot avoid being, contested. This is so because . . . the narratives of biography and biographical criticism are ‘life-texts,’ powerful and influential discourses precisely and strategically situated at the intersections of objectivity and subjectivity, body and mind, self and other, the natural and the cultural, fact and fiction, as well as many other conceptual dyads with which Western civilization has traditionally theorized both the practices and the representations of everyday life” (2). Biography, therefore, offers a site upon which to contest these “conceptual dyads.” Unfortunately, this hope for contestation does not fully eliminate the genealogy of biography, a heritage that was often tied up in textual narrative structures that emphasized a patriarchal, white, masculinist, “great man” view of history. In spite of this genealogy and owing to a

reputation as a "soft" cousin to historical writing, biography has often had less strident limits than history, traditionally allowing for more diverse and multivalent methodologies and subjects, a trend that is also reflected in biographical drama.

Biography, though not awarded the same cultural cachet as history, nevertheless faces many of the same problems as that form: most importantly, the prevalence of narrative in historical writing. Roland Barthes sums up the trouble with narration thus: "Does the narration of past events, which, in our culture from the time of the Greeks onwards, has generally been subject to the sanction of historical 'science,' bound to the underlying standard of the 'real,' and justified by the principles of 'rational' exposition—does this form of narration really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel and the drama?" ("Discourse" 7). By suggesting that it is the form (narrative) rather than the content (epic, novel, drama, history) that is fictionalized, Barthes questions the possibility of ever escaping the trappings of fiction. Biography, like drama, is situated at a particularly troublesome spot on the narrative scale: acting as the constructed interpretation of the "facts" of a person's life, it possesses the opportunity for slippage between source and presentation.

The emphasis on the personal, private, and individual in biography increases this chance for slippage, as there is an ever-deeper search for the means of titillating the commercial audience. Without an audience, there can be no commercial biography (or theatre, for that matter) in a capitalist society, but the audience's demand for exciting content can often overrule the search for truthful depiction, something Roger North understood long before the contemporary "based on a true story" formula was perfected: "The very lucre of selling a copy is a corrupt interest that taints an historical work, for the sale of the book must not be spoiled by the dampness of overmuch truth, but rather be made vivacious and complete by overmuch lying" (qtd. in Epstein, "(Post)" 226). This notion that truth is often abandoned in favor of melodramatic detail has caused biodrama to languish in the unfortunate category of "middlebrow" theatre for most of its existence.

In written form, it is often difficult to recognize the difference between factual evidence and embellishment or even outright fabrication in a biography, and here, perhaps, theatre can intercede and help open up a space to interrogate the factual claims of biography. Through the embodied performer, historical tropes and narrative assumptions can be interrogated: the actor becomes a site upon which the easy narrative flow of history and biography can be disrupted. By putting the body back in the life, theatre has the



possibility of rupturing history's assumptions. Epstein expounds upon the fully textualized, un-embodied subject of written biography: "The biographical subject, as we know it, is always already off-center, a discursive fragment elliptically dispersed into written culture by the disintegration of a thoroughly public world in which the individual was openly and inescapably present and plural" ("(Post)" 225). Although theatre cannot fully recover that public world with its infinite plurality, it is possible to unsettle the accepted textual location of the subject in the physical space of a performance by foregrounding the actor's body as a rupture in the text.

One of the most significant ways in which this rupture can be staged is in the representation of a known figure by an actor.<sup>6</sup> This possibility for fissure, a kind of non-mimetic representation, is largely restricted to biographical figures from the last one and a half centuries or so—since the popular dissemination of photographs and the ensuing mediatization of public figures. Since then, such persons have become ever more recognizable, and this process has only accelerated through further media proliferation, resulting in certain celebrities becoming iconic images. P. David Marshall suggests that "the icon represents . . . the possibility that the celebrity has actually entered the language of culture and can exist whether the celebrity continues to 'perform' or dies" (17). Wilde is a perfect example of an icon: in the cultural parlance, he has long since morphed into a concept rather than a human being.

Film scholar James Monaco takes this conception a step further, suggesting that celebrities who become icons are reflections of the culture at large: "It is not what they are or what they do, but what we *think* they are that fascinates us" (qtd. in Marshall 16). These iconic images resonate with theatergoers as well as filmgoers, and therefore audience interest in watching a biodrama is in part to see how effectively casting matches the mediatized image of a figure. The liveness of the actor, as opposed to the mechanistic reproduction of mediated images, endows the performance with a certain amount of veracity unattainable in other mediums.<sup>7</sup> But this liveness is inherently problematic as well. No matter how remarkable the transformation of the actor into the biographical subject, there is always some level of slippage in the representation: a gesture that rings false, a nose that's just slightly too bulbous.

The "effort of comparing the real and the represented," Ira Nadel claims, is "the process of biography, which is the visual, mental, and verbal comparison of what we read with what we think we know of the subject" (*Biography* 2). It is also the process of watching biodrama: comparing the embodied performer onstage with the image of the embodied person the performer is representing. It is in the moments

of mis-recognition that an audience is pulled out of the illusion of truth, and, whether intended by the production or not, forced to reevaluate the claims of authenticity being offered. The performing body is thus able to expose the fissures in biographical history by "[i]mprovising guerilla tactics that opportunistically take advantage of momentary gaps in the discursive surveillance of the proprietary powers, [allowing theatre to] disruptively mimic the indifference of traditional biographical recognition—and thus abduct it, lead it away from its historical alliance with dominant structures of authority by recessing its parts and revealing the hidden, but now signified, recurrent wound in the writing" (Epstein, "(Post)" 231). These "guerilla tactics" can be instigated by a performance team interested in exposing the recurrent wound for the audience, or they can be instigated by savvy audience members aware of the possibility for generating meaning in the slippage between the mediatized image of the subject and the actor representing that person. This "recurrent wound in the writing" is not the same in every performance, every biography, or every life, but it is always there, encouraged by the narrative structures that shape the information. The embodiment of the actor, and the slippage between icon and representation, then, is a space wherein truth and narrativity in biography can be interrogated.

Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* and Hare's *The Judas Kiss* make particularly good use of this opportunity for rupture, playing with popularly received notions of both Wilde and acting in general. The premiere production of *The Judas Kiss* problematized received notions of Oscar Wilde by presenting Irish actor Liam Neeson as the doomed poet. Neeson's physical attributes are far from the usual conception of Wilde, as Ben Brantley expresses in his review of the Broadway production: "As portrayed by the Irish actor and movie star Liam Neeson . . . what truly sets the author of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' apart is his height. . . . The real Oscar Wilde was also tall and, according to most accounts from his contemporaries, a broad-shouldered fellow with a brawny voice." Such a physicalization, Brantley contends, bears "little resemblance to the popular vision of him as a soft, doughy cream puff." When Neeson appeared onstage, he brought with him a palpable phenomenal experience, something which phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as the "unmotivated upsurge of the world" (xiv)—the public world outside the theatre imposed itself upon the representational space, demanding spectators reckon with the physical truth of Wilde's (and Neeson's) body.

Using such an actor was not only a production choice; Hare specifies in his stage directions that Wilde is "just over 40 with long hair, not at all the languid pansy of legend. He is solid, tall and fleshy,

6'3", a mixture of ungainliness and elegance" (16). This slippage between received knowledge (the popular conception of Wilde as only homosexual, and therefore physically marked as diminutive and fey) and the performance's embodied presentation (Neeson's imposing physical stature, which resembles Wilde's own) is a guerilla tactic, forcing audiences to reconsider their image of Wilde and the inconsistencies of their previous understanding. The recurrent wound here exposed is the equation of homosexuality with certain physical manifestations—a wound that can be exorcised by this interplay of expectation and representation.

It is not only through the embodied reality of Neeson onstage that the production challenges the public perception of Wilde. Spectators can be influenced by their preconceptions about Neeson, the kind of person he is offstage—most notably, heterosexual—and the types of roles he is generally known for playing. In his book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson discusses *ghosting*, an integral element of theatrical experience. Ghosting, he maintains, "presents the identical thing [audience members] have seen before, although now in a somewhat different context" (7). In this performance of *The Judas Kiss*, the audience's interaction with the play was almost certainly deeply influenced by their prior knowledge of Neeson as a heterosexual man famous for playing quite masculine characters. As Susan Bennett astutely states, "the live, performing body renders the script three-dimensional but it itself has been scripted, as it were, prior to its subject matter. Its very physicality—indeed its liveness—is an account of all experiences leading to the present moment, the archive of a life lived" (35). Because of their prior associations, spectators are forced to reevaluate not only what kind of roles they think Neeson plays, but also how they understand and visualize Wilde, a figure who, though he may not have defined himself as such, has often been typified as the penultimate homosexual.

Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* approaches the subject of Wilde's physicality entirely differently, employing the Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* to make "the presence of the actor telling the story . . . visible" (xv). Often called the "alienation effect" in English, Brecht's influential performance strategy encourages actors to "[refrain] from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they [are] playing." Brecht continues: "the spectator [is] no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically . . . by means of simple empathy with characters in a play. . . . The subject-matter and the incidents shown [must be put] through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding" (71). This distancing of the actor from his or her role is an integral part of Kaufman's

intertextual concept: each actor in the play portrays several historical characters, using a presentational style that precludes the audience's personal identification with the character. Before quoting a passage from the book, newspaper, or journal he or she is citing, the actor holds up the physical object, reminding the audience that the play they are seeing is rooted in the textual culture of biography, gossip, and court records and thus disallowing the audience's full and total emotional engagement with the narrative of the trials.

These reminders of textual culture also work somewhat paradoxically to subvert the authority of those texts; the juxtaposition of several competing "facts" (all textually based) invites the audience to question the validity and truth claims of documentary evidence. Kaufman also uses Wilde's own documented speech to question the nature of truth:

WILDE: I rarely think anything I write is true.

CARSON: Did you say "rarely"?

WILDE: I said "rarely." I might have said "never"—not true in the actual sense of the word. (39)

The presentation of several differing narratives, each directly from printed documents, forces the audience to participate actively in the construction of meaning; the performance of the documentation destabilizes its authority and invites the audience members to construct their own meaning of the trials, Wilde's story, and the play itself. When Kaufman began researching the play, he says, he was overwhelmed by the multiplicity of personal accounts of the trials: "It seemed to me that any legitimate attempt to reconstruct this historical event had to incorporate, in one way or another, the diversity of accounts" (xiv). The diverse accounts, though almost entirely text-based, are still represented by actors, however; and the play thus makes physical Barthes's conception of the text (in this case, the historical and popular accounts of Wilde's demise) as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash . . . a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable" sources (*Image* 146). Once again, the embodied actor can reveal the constructed nature of textuality and documentary evidence, allowing performance to practice those guerilla tactics and lead biography away from the dominant structures that comprise its form, exposing the fissure in historical and biographical documentation as well as ruptures between image and reality.

The exposure of this fissure can do more, however, than just reveal the slippages between the textual and the phenomenal; it can also expose the constructed nature of the audience's perception of the

represented person. In *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard offers a map of the progression of an image from reality to simulacrum:

- This would be the successive phases of the image:
- it is the reflection of a basic reality
  - it masks and perverts a basic reality
  - it masks the absence of a basic reality
  - it bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum. (11)

By the time an historical subject is represented onstage, the subject has often progressed through all of Baudrillard's stages, and is fully separated from reality—he or she is a complete fictionalization, and has entered the realm of simulacrum and mythology, perhaps even becoming an icon. Here again, however, the performing body can, by either resisting or blatantly reaffirming audience expectation, reveal the layers of distortion that have been put upon an image and invite a reconsideration of the subject. In *The Judas Kiss*, the body resists expectations of Wilde's physicality; the body in *Gross Indecency* challenges the primacy of textuality.

Wilde's body is also primary in Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, but the play has at its core the life not of Oscar Wilde, as do the other two, but of the classical scholar and poet A. E. Housman, best known for his poem cycle *A Shropshire Lad*. Stoppard places the action on the River Styx, with Housman remembering his life on his way to Hades. In the play, Wilde and Housman are established as clear foils: two Victorian poets educated at Oxford, two very different views of art, and two versions of passionate love. Housman, too, was homosexual, but unlike Wilde's embracing of a freer and more promiscuous sexuality, Housman nursed a single, unrequited love for his schoolmate Moses Jackson his entire life and poured his stifled ardor into his poetry and scholarship. Stoppard here tells the story of Housman's great quiet passion, but questions whether Housman really lived at all, especially when compared to his contemporary, Oscar Wilde.

The Wilde presented in this play vigorously reaffirms expectations, but in so doing, also manages to call them into question. Wilde does not come on stage until very late in the action, but he haunts the play throughout and is established early as a foil to Housman. When he does emerge in Hades, he lectures Housman on the perils of not fully embracing one's own life; this Wilde is a caricature of his own popularly conceived self, perfectly flamboyant in purple pantaloons. Stoppard contrasts this embodied simulacra with comments on the nature of truth and biography, thus unsettling and questioning the iconic Wildean image:

AEH: I had read a report of the inquest in the Evening Standard.

WILDE: Oh, thank goodness! That explains why I never believed a word of it.

AEH: But it's all true.

WILDE: On the contrary, it's only fact. Truth is quite another thing and is the work of the imagination. (93)

Wilde's conception of gossip-induced biography also troubled easy definitions of truth: "I was said to have walked down Piccadilly with a lily in my hand," says Wilde. "[But] there was no need. To do it is nothing, to be said to have done it is everything. It is the truth about me" (93).

Richard Holmes suggests that biography perhaps "developed from the enormous growth in congenial coffee-houses, companionable taverns, and clubs, where gossip, anecdotes and the telling of 'the latest story' became a premium" (21). Between Holmes's and Stoppard's Wildes, there is a suspicion of biography, a suggestion that it is at best glorified gossip and at worst flat-out lies. Housman is aware of the tendency to historicize gossip and also feels that this kind of truth can come from non-factual evidence. He tells Wilde, "I moved house four times, once it was said because a stranger spoke to me on my train on the way to work. It wasn't so, but it was the truth about me" (95). Housman repeats Wilde's claim that "to be said to have done it is everything": just because the event was factually unsound does not mean it was untrue.

This sentiment gets to the center of Stoppard's defense of his kind of biographical writing. As Ira Nadel explains, Stoppard possesses an admittedly deep suspicion of biography: "in his plays and in many interviews, Stoppard consistently dismisses the value of biography. He feels uncomfortable with the genre because it is (a) invasive and (b) invariably incorrect" ("Stoppard" 158). Despite his stated mistrust of biography, however, he continues to use the lives of actual historical figures to tell his stories, and just because some of his events are factually unsound does not mean that they are untrue. For Stoppard, the line separating fact from fiction is quite fuzzy, and he has little use for that binary. There are many conflicting opinions of truth and invention throughout *The Invention of Love*, but Stoppard's seems to be embodied by Wilde, who claims that "Art cannot be subordinate to its subject, [sic] otherwise it is not art but biography, and biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes" (93). Stoppard is reminding us here, toward the end of his play about invention, that he is in the business of inventing art and not producing biography. By using an iconic physical image of Wilde and contrasting it with

Wilde's own words about not trusting iconic stories and images, he ruptures the complicity between gossip and facts that is often evident in biography and history. In this way, once again, theatre can expose the relationship between biography and dominant discourse by emphasizing the art inherent in writing a life.

Biodrama consistently confronts the notion of the individual subject as a consistent, coherent, and whole entity. Epstein claims that biography is forced to engage with "contestatory issues" and that "foremost among [them] is the notion of the autonomous subject, of an individual human consciousness endowed with freedom of thought and will, or a personhood or selfhood that resists, as it submits to political, religious, social, economic, and cultural structures of authority" (Introduction 2). Contemporary theory, he continues, has decentered or deconstructed "such transcendental signifieds as . . . individual human consciousness" and thus denies "the radical situatedness of the subject" ("(Post)" 221). Without a situated subject, without an individual who can be exhumed and consumed by readers and viewers, how does one approach the construction of a biography, in whatever medium? This problem presents yet another area in biographical writing where theatricalized biography makes an intercession.

Because theatre is always already a translation that occurs in the transport of material to the stage (textual and non-), there is more space for interrogation. The three Wildes presented in these plays are completely divergent: the physically imposing, butch Wilde of Hare's reconsideration; Kaufman's textually constituted and questioning construction; and Stoppard's ironic reiteration of popular image. Each of these Wildes represents a certain facet of the historical Wilde, one shard of his fragmented identity. Whereas written narrative biography often emphasizes a single cause and effect strand connecting one event of the life to the next event, the very physicality and obviously constructed nature of theatre allows room for questioning the make-up of biographical narrative.

Kaufman's stated goal of investigating the ways in which "theatre can reconstruct history" could stand in as a primary goal in many contemporary biodramas, especially the three examined here (xiv). Kaufman in particular looks to Polish director Tadeusz Kantor as a guide: "Kantor said that one goes to the theatre to see these elements fighting each other to determine who is going to be the next 'text.' So you have actors march in, then all of a sudden music comes in really loud and takes over the central role in the theatre, and then text comes in, and the tension between each of these elements with each other is where theatre is made. The conversation between them is the play" (qtd. in Brown 54). As these plays with their multivalent



portrayals of Wilde suggest, it is in the gaps of this "conversation" that the most fruitful exploration of the self and the fractured identity can be made, and Wilde presents an ideal site for investigation because he was so publicly fractured and so publicly documented, making his conversation particularly accessible.

The plays each employ a different narrative frame: Hare's play is stridently realist—his portrayal of Wilde's physicality is really the only subversive aspect of it, while Stoppard and Kaufman employ just as strident an anti-realist frame. But within these frames, each play possesses a similar goal—the interrogation of biography, history, image, and textuality through the deconstruction of received notions of Oscar Wilde and his history.

### **Wilde Notions: An Anti-Conclusion**

At the beginning of Act II in *Gross Indecency*, Kaufman offers a little Brechtian break from the action of the trials with an interlude entitled "The Interview With Marvin Taylor." In this scene, the actor playing Moisés has a discussion with the actor playing Taylor, a well-known scholar of Foucault and Wilde, and Taylor points out some of the potential pitfalls of historical exploration: "Moisés, this is the thing. Oscar's project was less about sodomy, I think, and more about art, about aestheticism. Wilde was less interested in admitting that he had sex with men than he was interested in expressing his own intellectual ideas, his ideas about beauty and about art. Though it does look like he lied. I mean we all have that feeling, or we're projecting. Do we want Oscar to be gay therefore we're projecting that he's lying? [. . .] Well, am I to judge him by his own standards or by the standard of later gay liberationists? [. . .] So, yes he lied but, it doesn't . . . (chuckle) . . . I'm on very slippery moral ground here. Ethically it doesn't bother me that he lied. Alas, what they were trying to do I think was fix homosexuality, to contain the disruption which Wilde presented, and this is a disruption of all kinds of things, of class, of gender, of hum sexuality, hum and they did that, very successfully. But of course by that point he had released these ideas into Western culture that you know . . . are still there" (Kaufman 77–78). This passage epitomizes the problems facing modern historians and biographers: how do you approach a subject without imposing your own thoughts, understanding and expectations upon that subject? How can modern interpreters of Wilde's story avoid "fixing" him as any one thing: an artist, a homosexual, an aesthete, a father, or a husband? Theatre, because it is an art form that combines several kinds of communication, offers a space to interrogate master narratives, new ways to conceive of biography, and explorations of the



fractured subject and how historical information and images are disseminated. It can precipitate conversation about the construction of the subject rather than reinforcing a tired, reiterative genealogy overly influenced by narrative conventions.

Attilo Favorini, elaborating upon de Certeau's conception of historical writing, explains "the historian and artist alike produce a discourse of knots and half-signs since the way events are handed down to us partakes of literary devices and typologies which, in turn, 'dictate our relation to what we construe to be the past'" (39). Biodrama, through its unique situation as both history and art, can perhaps open up other ways of conceiving of lives, outside of a strictly narrative structure, and change our "relation to what we construe as the past," thus allowing for the interplay of multiple narratives, identities, and sites of subjectivity. Each of the plays here studied make use of theatrical techniques of embodiment to interrogate the supremacy and continuity of textuality, challenging the conclusions of history: at the end of *The Invention of Love*, Stoppard locates his Wilde in Hades; in *The Judas Kiss*, Wilde is reading in Naples; Kaufman's end is a poem: the extant textual Wilde. By refusing to conclude their biodramas—no deaths, no imprisonment—these authors argue for a reflexive and continuing narrative of life, one not tied to the completed, whole subject but rather one joyous in its refusal of such a finish. This, truly, is what biodrama can do: change history.

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## Notes

1. The claim about biography as an under-theorized genre has been made in several studies, including, most recently, Hamilton's *Biography: A History*, wherein he argues that this lack of critical attention is a result of the term "biography" being too narrowly defined: "A biography," he avers, "became the correct dictionary designation for a written record of a particular human life, but it was not distinguished from the more generic term 'biography'—the latter thus being limited only to *written* lives, rather than including the entire field of real-life human depiction, in various media" (3). My reading of plays and performances as types of biography attempts to expand that narrow definition of the term. See also Grace.

2. In the past five years alone, eight of the twenty-five films nominated for Best Picture Academy Awards have engaged with some level of biographical storytelling. These films include *Frost/Nixon* (2008), about the infamous interviews David Frost conducted with Richard M. Nixon; *Milk* (2008), a look at the political life of Harvey Milk;

*The Queen* (2006), an exploration of Queen Elizabeth II's reaction to the death of Princess Diana; *Capote* (2005), the story of Truman Capote and his writing of *In Cold Blood*; *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), about Edward R. Murrow's challenge of Senator Joseph McCarthy's hearings; *Ray* (2004), a true biopic about the life of Ray Charles; *The Aviator* (2004), a sprawling narrative about Howard Hughes; and *Finding Neverland* (2004), which reflects upon J. M. Barrie's life and his sources for *Peter Pan*. If you expand this consideration to include acting nominees, the list of biographically-inclined films increases exponentially.

3. The description of a play as having a "melodramatic form" is a very specific designation in terms of theatre history. Melodramas are plays set to music in which the musical cues indicate to the audience how they are supposed to react to a character or event. Characters in melodramas tend to be fairly unambiguous, and the plots are generally full of action and exploitative of emotional and/or salacious occurrences. Because they utilize a highly formulaic structure, encourage emotional involvement, and were wildly popular among lower and middle-class audiences in the nineteenth century, such plays were largely dismissed by many academics as "middlebrow" entertainment and undeserving of study. This is a trend, however, that has changed as cultural studies has influenced the study of theatre, encouraging more attention to popular performance traditions.

4. Although most biodramas were considered bourgeois and "middlebrow," other plays that could be broadly construed as bio-drama enjoyed a better reputation; often, however, these were plays by authors such as Shakespeare whose works were already firmly entrenched in the canon.

5. The earliest reported dramatic performance, the Abydos Passion Play, could broadly be considered biographical. This Egyptian ritual performance told the story of the king-divinity Osiris, his death at the hands of his brother Seth, and his resurrection through the help of his wife, Isis. Though this was, undoubtedly, a religious performance, it is certainly possible that those who performed the play believed Osiris, Isis, and Seth to be real people who had existed and this account an accurate rendering of their experiences. Under this rubric (one that is also applied by Nigel Hamilton in his *Biography: A History*), many of the most famous plays in the ancient western theatre canon, such as *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles) and *The Persians* (Aeschylus), could also be considered at least marginally biographical. Such ritual/biographical plays can also be found in early Japanese, Hindu, and African performance traditions.

6. For an extended discussion of the optics of celebrity in the theatre, see Quinn, Roach, Carlson, and Wolf.

7. For a more complete discussion of liveness and its relationship to mediatization, see Auslander. Auslander challenges the binary distinction between live and mediatized performance; however, I find the distinction remains useful, especially when exploring issues of casting in biodramas.

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