

# THE DOCTOR: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2019)

a new play by Robert Icke

after *Professor Bernhardt* by Schnitzler

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## THE TELEGRAPH

Fiona Mountford

★★★★★

Juliet Stevenson triumphs in this swansong from Britain's best director.

It's a fond farewell for now to Robert Icke. The brightest directing talent British theatre has produced in a generation – and the youngest ever winner of the Olivier Award for Best Director to boot – is leaving his permanent post on these shores for pastures new, and possibly more experimental, in Europe. His final huzzah at the Almeida, the venue that has nurtured Icke and given rise to his phenomenal work on *The Oresteia* and *Mary Stuart*, to name but two, serves as a razor-sharp reminder of what is about to be lost.

For starters, Icke must once more be ruing the fact that theatre doesn't follow film's lead and include a Best Adapted Play category in its award ceremonies. He freely, skilfully and rigorously transposes Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 Viennese drama *Professor Bernhardt* to contemporary England, gently nudging the debate along from its starting point of medical ethics to cover personal morality and, finally, identity politics. The impassioned howl he raises against the reductive nature of the latter could surely be heard on the continent.

Schnitzler's original afforded almost no airtime to women, a fact Icke corrects at a stroke by turning the male professor into Dr Ruth Woolf (Juliet Stevenson). She is the founding director of the prestigious Elizabeth Institute, a stern professional with an attitude of 'trademark disdain'. The catalyst for the drama is when a 14-year-old, dying of sepsis after a botched at-home abortion, comes into Dr Wolff's care and she refuses admittance to a priest (Paul Higgins) who wishes to administer the last rites. Dr Wolff asserts firmly that her patient's religious convictions are uncertain and the girl must be left to die in peace.

Arguments and recriminations about religion – Dr Wolff's parents were Jewish – are the first to bubble up, followed swiftly by race, gender and education, as various interested parties engage in a ferocious battle, stoked by social media, to stake out the greatest claim of victimhood. In a script note Icke states that 'each actor's identity should be directly dissonant with their character's in at least one way' and he embarks upon a thrilling series of games of theatricality and rug-pulling in which nothing is quite what – or who – it seems. We are, the play says from its slickly impersonal set on a slow revolve, far more complex than a series of simplistic labels. This assertion is underscored by Dr Wolff's home life, which comprises two shadowy figures whose truths are only revealed late on.

Stevenson has shone for Icke in two of his previous Almeida productions and does so again here, in a towering performance that will surely win awards. Her uncompromising mien starts to crumble and she becomes a rumpled, hounded figure whose certainties are brutally chipped away. There's strong support too from that intriguingly shape-shifting actress Ria Zmitrowicz as a gauche, truth-telling teenager. It is greatly to be hoped that Icke does not stay away too long.

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## FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Hemming

★★★★★

“I’m a doctor,” says Juliet Stevenson near the outset of this scintillating piece of theatre. It’s a phrase her character will repeat again and again — with certainty, with passion, with defiance, with anguish — as her life crumbles around her. Robert Icke’s riveting production takes a century-old drama and turns it into a devastating play for today, led by Stevenson’s superb performance.

Arthur Schnitzler’s 1912 original, *Professor Bernhardi*, tells of a Jewish physician who treats a 14-year-old girl dying of sepsis following a botched abortion. When a Catholic priest arrives to administer the last rites, Bernhardi refuses him access, arguing that he will make the girl aware that she is dying and so fill her final moments with distress. The ensuing row pitches reason against faith, science against religion, principle against pragmatism and explores the toxic nature of prejudice.

In Icke’s hands, this becomes a gripping moral thriller and a scorching examination of our age. The core of the story remains, but here the doctor is female (Ruth Wolff), the clinic is a modern institute treating dementia, and the ethical debate swiftly ignites a social media firestorm. The anti-Semitism depicted in the original is joined by gender, race, class and identity politics and the ugly phenomenon of trial by Twitter.

Is Ruth under fire because she is Jewish? Did she reject the priest’s request because he was black? Should the parents’ wishes outweigh those of the medical staff? Everyone has an opinion — informed or not — and every opinion is loaded. The argument spreads like a virus. The more Ruth adamantly clings to her ethical code as a doctor, the more perilous her position becomes. Meanwhile the future of the institute itself comes under threat.

In many ways, this is a successor to Icke’s *Mary Stuart*: it shares with Schiller’s drama an appetite for moral debate and the ability to make that debate both moving and theatrical. Just as *Mary Stuart* opened, electrifyingly, with a coin-toss, here too Icke brings dramatic immediacy to the issues. The simple gesture of having the cast walk on to Hildegard Bechtler’s clinical set, don their various uniforms, and with them their roles in the argument, emphasises the complex layering of identity and the reductive nature of labels. Meanwhile, unexpected cross-casting frequently pulls the rug from under us, prompting us to re-evaluate events and question our assumptions. Perspectives shift; certainties dissolve.

It’s delivered by a fine ensemble, at the centre of which is Stevenson’s beautifully pitched Ruth. A woman of crystalline integrity, she is also waspishly funny, prickly, proud — and caring. It’s a magnificent performance, culminating in a revelation that sheds new light on all that has gone before.

There are a few too many issues and hefty arguments loaded into the mix and the critique of identity politics sometimes threatens to undermine the serious concerns at stake. But this is a galvanising piece of theatre and a stark health warning for an increasingly divided nation.

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## SUNDAY TIMES

Quentin Letts

★★★★★

They are Death's rival attendants, medicine and religion, the white coat versus the dog collar. In 1912 an Austrian, Arthur Schnitzler, wrote a play about a Jewish doctor who comes unstuck after preventing a priest from giving the last rites to a young patient. Now Robert Icke, the UK's sparkiest director, has adapted that story and set it in 21st-century London. The result is explosive.

With a characteristically magnetic central performance from Juliet Stevenson, *The Doctor* blasts the mad, destructive politics of minority identity. I thought this vital task would only ever be done by mocking comedy. Icke achieves it with throbbing intellectualism.

Most medical dramas feature hospital beds and beeping monitors. Here, tellingly, we have only a committee table in a sanitised pale-wood set, plus persistent percussive commentary from a cool drummer. The drama's debates are played out while the stage revolves at an almost imperceptible rate. At crucial moments, the lighting swells slightly. There are a few white coats, but not a single colostomy bag to be seen.

This is not really a story of clinical care. It is about the egomaniacal politics of control and managerial "gatekeeping" that have become the new Jesuitism. All the lunacy of non-meritocratic racial and gender balance, and of brilliant people's careers consequently being wrecked by Twitter storms and corporate cowardice, is slowly skewered. This production does for today's moralising elite what *The Bonfire of the Vanities* did for Manhattan's money men in the 1980s. Heck, it's good. Even better, it is being pushed down the gullets of an audience in Islington. You could sense the privileged Almeida-ites shifting on their bottoms.

Icke shows are never boring to watch. At a mere 32, he has become the most skilled (or perhaps least irritating) proponent of the ambient-noise/video-screen brigade. His *Hamlet* had CCTV in the corridors of Elsinore, and in his *Mary Stuart*, the two main actresses decided only at the start of each performance which of them would play which part. With other directors, this sort of thing can feel forced. With Icke, there is usually enough artistic truthfulness to get you over any grumpiness.

Stevenson plays Professor Ruth Wolff, founder of a top private clinic. Wolff is autocratic and brilliant, and there is talk that she could bag a Nobel prize. But Wolff is bad at the politic compromises — another word might be "lies" — required if you are to be given public money for your work. When she prevents a priest from seeing a dying girl, there is a scuffle in the corridor. The priest records the incident on his mobile. Soon an online petition has thousands of signatures, amid claims that Wolff's hospital is "exclusively Jewish". Wolff claims she is blind to gender and race, but once you have been hooked by the cultural grievance gang, the only way to save yourself may be a swift apology. This she won't do.

The main staging stunt is in the casting. Icke confounds us. Some black characters are played by whites, some men by women. This is fashionably tricky and will, I suppose, buy Icke credit from the very monsters he is attacking. But it has a cost in terms of full theatrical engagement. That is balanced by the marvellous Stevenson, who slowly opens her emotional throttle as Wolff's world disintegrates. Brilliant stuff. And brave.

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## WHAT'S ON STAGE

Sarah Crompton

★★★★★

What a clever director Robert Icke is! He ends his six years as associate director at the Almeida with a savagely brilliant version of an early 20th-century classic, which he has both translated from the German and transformed into a challengingly humane examination of many of the issues of our times.

It stands alongside his productions of the Oresteia, Mary Stuart, Hamlet and The Wild Duck at the same address for its clarity of purpose and its willingness to breathe new life into old plays, while never betraying their intention.

Here the text is provided by Professor Bernhardt, by Arthur Schnitzler, first produced in 1912, and controversial even then. Its subject is a Jewish doctor who refuses a priest admission to the bedside of a young woman who is dying of sepsis following a botched abortion. The doctor wants his patient to die in peace, without the knowledge of her death; the priest to forgive her mortal sin.

The collision between the rationalities of science and the sanctities of religion, between two types of comfort and care, between a Catholic and a Jew spins into a huge scandal. Icke, pulling the play into the contemporary world, has made the doctor a woman, Ruth Wolff – known by her cynically conspiring male colleagues as BB, as in big bad – and she is played by his regular collaborator Juliet Stevenson with an upright, uptight belief in her own integrity, a quick wit and what another character calls her "trademark disdain."

Because she is a woman, the cycle of accusation that unfolds around her is complicated not only by anti-semitism (as in Schnitzler), but also by a heaving tangle of gender and identity politics. Icke has further complicated an already murky situation by casting his excellent actors against the descriptions of their characters; white actors play black characters, women play men. Some roles – such as Wolff's 'partner' Charlie – are deliberately left non-gender specific although he/she is tenderly embodied by Joy Richardson.

Because the priest is played by the white actor Paul Higgins, it completely pulls the rug out from your assumptions when it is revealed that he is black – and Wolff is herself accused herself of racism and unconscious bias. The ground of accusation is constantly shifting, and the only thing that is absolutely clear is that everything is political, and self-interest and ambition will always have a role to play even at an institute, like the one where Wolff works, that is supposedly devoted to the disinterested pursuit of finding a cure for dementia.

These themes are given a physical manifestation by Hildegard Bechtler's clinical set, with a table at the centre which sometimes revolves as the arguments unspool, creating a sense of an endless round of accusation and counter-charge. Icke resolutely refuses to give anyone a clear argument; in a world where everyone is totally sure of their opinions, his point is that nuance is all. Nothing is entirely black and white; everything shimmers in shades of gray. This is best illustrated by the terrible moment where – in order to preserve her integrity and make her case – Wolff betrays a teenager she has befriended. Our sympathies may be with her as she faces the court of public opinion, enduring a witch hunt ill-informed and inflamed by lies being spread on social media, but she is not without flaw.

Icke directs all this like a thriller; the air positively crackles with the difficulty of the raging debate. It is a play entirely made up of ethical argument, yet it is so tense there are moments when you stop breathing – or when someone's point of view seems so outrageous that it demands a sharp intake of breath. It can be uncomfortable but it's also fiercely funny. The electricity is increased by the sheer tautness of Icke's direction; the way the lights barely flicker at each revelation; the freeze-framing of moments of violence; the live score played on drums by Hannah Ledwidge.

The performances too are excellent, with Ria Zmitrowicz in particular gently and truthfully touching as Woolf's teenage friend and Naomi Wirthner positively terrifying as her odious rival. But it is Stevenson who towers over the evening. She barely leaves the stage, as she registers each moment of Woolf's decline from powerful leader, in charge of her world and her emotions, to the haunted and hunted tragic figure she becomes at the end of almost three hours. It's an astonishing, gripping evening – and a testimony to Icke's unparalleled ability to make theatre that you can't turn away from.

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## **THE GUARDIAN**

Michael Billington

★★★★★

As a director and writer, Robert Icke specialises in updating the classics. But where his version of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* struck me as an impertinence, this adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt* is a brilliant expansion of the original's themes. Icke's production also yields a performance by Juliet Stevenson that is one of the peaks of the theatrical year.

First performed in 1912, Schnitzler's play offers a devastating portrait of Viennese antisemitism in showing a Jewish doctor attacked for refusing a Catholic priest permission to administer the last rites to a patient. Icke retains Schnitzler's premise while subtly rewriting it. His protagonist, Ruth Wolff, is a secular Jew who runs a prestigious institute specialising in Alzheimer's disease. But when Ruth prevents a priest seeing a 14-year-old girl dying from a self-administered abortion, the incident acquires a toxic publicity. It goes viral on social media, provokes petitions and TV debates, and jeopardises not only Ruth's future but that of the institute and a government-bankrolled new building.

Impressively, Icke enlarges the original to take on not just religion but also race, gender and class. He even adds a creative dissonance in casting women to play male roles, black actors to play white characters and vice versa.

At the heart of the play lie two crucial issues handled with exemplary fairness. One is whether the purity of medical ethics supersedes all other considerations. The other related topic is the danger of constantly playing identity politics: as one of Ruth's colleagues points out, it is irrelevant whether a doctor is white, Jewish, godless or a woman, and even more destructive to allow the professions to be judged by sanctimonious trolls.

All of this is debated with fierce clarity. Icke, following Schnitzler, shows his protagonist as a victim without totally exculpating her. This double vision is magnificently captured by Stevenson. She shows Ruth to be brusque, politically naive and intolerant of other people's failings, especially when it comes to the misuse of language. But while Stevenson shows how integrity can turn into obduracy, she also beautifully portrays the human cost of making medicine one's god. Her features look memorably pained when seen in closeup during a hostile TV encounter, and she confronts the sacrifice of her relations with her lover and a transgender teenager with an unbearable sense of loss. This consummate performance shows Ruth in all her complexity.

In fact, everything about Icke's production feels right. Hildegard Bechtler's design has a clinical simplicity, and the cast, although not identified by character, inhabit their roles perfectly. Paul Higgins as the impassioned priest, Naomi Wirthner as Ruth's most implacable opponent, Pamela Nomvete as her fiercest champion and Ria Zmitrowicz as her betrayed friend all perform with great skill.

This is not the only way to approach Schnitzler's play, as shown by a 2005 production at the Arcola in London, with a text by Samuel Adamson, that respected its Viennese setting. But what

Icke has done is heighten the play's contemporary resonances and movingly suggest that the doctor and the priest, while dramatic antagonists, have more in common than they realise.

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## THE TIMES

Sam Marlowe

★★★★

Trust Robert Icke to leave us with our heads spinning. Signing off as an Almeida associate, the dazzlingly clever director offers a final production that asks huge questions about faith, medicine, mortality and culture wars. It's freely adapted by Icke from Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 work *Professor Bernhardt*, a drama of ethics, power play and insidious antisemitism. In Icke's hands it's as slippery, muscular and complex as a human heart, more intricate the deeper his dissection goes. Juliet Stevenson is impeccable as Professor Ruth Wolff, a Jewish doctor at the centre of a witch-hunt who, for all her chilly intellect and toughness, is as vulnerable as an open wound.

Hildegard Bechtler's clinical design of blond wood and stainless steel rotates on a slow revolve, overhung by strip lights that flicker, as moral certainties shift, flare and dim. On a platform above sits a drummer (Hannah Ledwidge), rhythmically underscoring the action with thumping cardiac beats, the drip and rattle of hospital machinery, the gentle tick of time running out. A 14-year-old girl is dying from sepsis after a botched home abortion. Her parents are Catholic, and a priest arrives — a lone black-clad figure among the white coats — demanding to administer the last rites.

Convinced this will traumatise the semi-conscious patient, Ruth, as the institute's director, refuses. This enrages the girl's family and causes schism among Ruth's staff. The incident becomes a national scandal, pitting religion against science, and Christianity against Judaism, as Ruth fights for her professional survival.

There's Shavian heft to these debates; then Icke adroitly twists our perspective. Ruth's home life, with a watchful partner she never talks about (Joy Richardson) and a lonely neighbourhood teenager who visits (endearingly gangly Ria Zmitrowicz), has a dreamlike quality for reasons revealed in gradual layers, like peeled-back bandages. Meanwhile, not only are self-important male doctors portrayed by women, but white actors play characters who, we come to realise, are black, and vice versa — and we grow sharply aware of how this shift in perception alters our interpretation of events. Suddenly, Ruth — who insists she sees herself simply as a doctor — is being publicly pilloried as the discourse, on TV, in parliament, in newspapers and on Twitter, descends into a bloody battle of identity politics.

Icke's scalpel is double-edged: the anti-PC and devoutly woke alike are baited, yet both factions are also permitted persuasive eloquence. There are ideas too about what it truly means to live and love. The institute's specialism is dementia care: what happens to our relationships, and our sense of self, if we can't remember who we are?

Some sequences are overworked, and the painstaking pace demands patience. But the ensemble acting is engrossing, and the play skilfully takes the pulse of our divided nation. Provocative, deft and disturbing.

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## **CITY AM**

Steve Dineen

Robert Icke approaches a classic play the way a mechanic might approach a motor, breaking it down to its constituent pieces, working out what makes it tick, and then replacing half of it with gleaming new parts. Here he dissects Arthur Schnitzler's 1912 medical ethics drama Professor Bernhardt with the exacting hand of a brain surgeon.

For a play that runs to almost three hours (a fact barely worth mentioning in this era of interminable productions), it's remarkably dense, ruminating on issues as diverse as ethics, religion, identity politics and internet culture, yet somehow weaving it all into a coherent, magnificent whole.

The central conflict arises when Professor Ruth Wolff, the founding physician of a cutting-edge dementia research facility, refuses to allow a priest to perform the last rites on a teenager dying from a self-administered abortion. She says the decision was based on her desire to give the girl a peaceful death, but she does little to hide her contempt for the Catholic church, or for religion as a whole.

Juliet Stevenson is imperious in the central role, bringing just a flicker of warmth to the hard-nosed Wolff, a formidable intellect who suffers no fools, even if they happen to be medical consultants or hospital board members. Her politically naive refusal to concede even an inch allows the growing scandal to snowball into a nation-wide controversy.

Icke obsesses over the role identity politics has to play in the drama. How much can we read into the fact that Wolff is a secular Jew? Or that she is on the cusp of overlooking a black Christian doctor in favour of a Jewish woman? Or that she is gay? Nothing, probably, but that's not the way a vocal chorus of internet trolls read the situation.

Muddying the waters further is the play's blind casting. The priest, for instance, is played by The Thick of It's "angriest man in Scotland" Paul Higgins, who is white, but is revealed mid-way through to be black. Elsewhere, male actors are revealed to be women and vice versa. Any prejudices unconsciously brought to the table are ingeniously turned against us.

Icke refuses to say who's right in this whole sorry mess, which descends into antisemitic hate crimes and shamings on national TV, only suggesting that Wolff is perhaps less wrong. It's a masterful exploration of some of the most hotly debated topics of our time, presented in the unmistakable timbre of one of theatre's most exciting voices. This will be Icke's final play as associate director of the Almeida – he will be a difficult man to replace, but what a way to sign off.

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## **THE INDEPENDENT**

Paul Taylor

★★★★

In a magnificent central performance, Juliet Stevenson plays a female counterpart of Schnitzler's protagonist. Dr Ruth Wolff is the founding physician of the Elizabeth Institute. She is brilliant and award-laden, and mainly because of her, the institute is looking to move into a bespoke new building, in which it will embark on a determined search for a cure for dementia. She is also an atheist, culturally but not religiously Jewish. The future funding of the institute comes under threat as a result of her action at the start of the piece. She refuses to grant admission to a Catholic priest (Paul Higgins) who has come (at the request of the girl's parents) to give the last rites to a dying 14 year old, whom Wolff wants to protect from unnecessary fear and stress. It's characteristic that in Icke's version, the teenager is dying from the sepsis caused by a botched abortion attempt.

So, though Ruth had no hand in this, pro-lifers feel free to join in the witch hunt that causes her first to relinquish executive control, and then get struck off. Stevenson superbly captures the contradictions in the idealistic medic who, again reminding you of Moliere, is reprehensibly naive as a politician. She's ultimately no match for the people who try to intimidate her through the intolerant identity politics exacerbated by the internet. It's typical of the production's bitter comedy that Oliver Alvin-Wilson plays both the doctor who offers the most galvanising diagnosis of where the "simplistic bullshit" of identity-group-doctoring will end up, and – after the interval – the unprincipled host of *Take the Debate*, a medical ethics TV show more interested in generating heat than light.

As the panel frisk every aspect of her identity for possibly incriminating evidence, Stevenson's face (blown up on two screens in live close-up) is the picture of contemptuous dismay. Her ravaged nervous system underscored by boisterous drumming, she races frantic, wall-bashing circuits of Hildegard Bechtler's blond wood, calculatedly anonymous conference room. Ria Zmitrowicz is excellent as the young transgender teenager who discovers that Ruth's house is the last place in which to take refuge. Stevenson witheringly communicates the doctor's sharp intransigence (what have the "woke" awakened from, she'd like to know) and aching registers her shyness over ordinary intimacy – as when she awkwardly thaws into a dance with her (never officially acknowledged) lesbian partner (movingly played by Joy Richardson).

Audiences may be divided over the addition of a psychological hinterland for the initial fatal decision. And yes, the piece does at times feel top-heavy. But this swansong is immensely stimulating.

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## THE ARTS DESK

Aleks Sierz

★★★★

After six years, associate director Robert Icke bids farewell to the Almeida Theatre. In this time he has pioneered contemporary versions of classic stories, such as *1984*, *Oresteia*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Mary Stuart* and *Hamlet* with Andrew Scott. Against the trend for short and snappy shows, some of Icke's plays are examples of marathon theatre, where the sheer length of the performance wears down audience resistance and creates an experience of deep immersion. Now, directing his own very free adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt*, which stars the brilliant Juliet Stevenson, Icke challenges us once again to stay the three-hour course.

Schnitzler's original, which was first staged in 1912, concerns an ethical conundrum, and Icke at first faithfully reproduces it: Ruth Wolff (Stevenson) is a Jewish doctor treating a teenager who is dying from sepsis following a botched abortion. When a priest (Paul Higgins) arrives to give her the last rites, pointing out that her Roman Catholic parents have asked him to intervene, Ruth refuses on the basis that she doesn't want to distress her semi-delirious patient. Is the doctor right to protect the patient? Is the priest right to insist on a religious ritual? Is there no way of resolving the clash between science and religion?

At work, Ruth leads the Elizabeth Institute, a private foundation whose main project is to treat, and investigate the causes of, dementia. Her colleagues are a collection of high-powered doctors (Oliver Alvin-Wilson, Pamela Nomvete, Daniel Rabin, Naomi Wirthner), as well as as the press officer (Mariah Louca) and young new colleague (Kirsty Rider). As the repercussions of her decision to bar the priest escalate, fueled by social media and a kind of mass hysteria, a Health Minister (Nathalie Armin) becomes involved. At home, meanwhile, Ruth lives with her partner Charlie (Joy Richardson) and opens her doors to Sami (Ria Zmitrowicz, pictured below with Stevenson), a schoolgirl who seeks sanctuary from her own home life.



Icke's version recasts the original in one radical way: he twists the ethical debate into a question of identity politics. So not only is the original antagonism between a Jewish healer and an apparently Roman Catholic patient preserved, but this is presented through the thoroughly contemporary lens of the woke generation. So issues about ethnicity, in several different dimensions, gender and sexual preference are aired with passion and clarity, especially in the compelling Act Two television debate scene in which Ruth is has to defend herself from the attacks of several religious and ideological interlocutors.

Stevenson, who is on stage for the entire show, including the interval, makes Ruth a monumental and mesmerizing character. For all her faults (she is arrogant, pedantic, sharp, sarcastic and a bit of a snob) she is totally convincing as an inspiring clinician, dominating the play with an effortless authority, stamping her will on all the opening scenes. Gradually, however, as events crowd in on her, her vulnerability begins to appear: at first it's just a change in her eyes, then an altered glance and finally a visible weight on her shoulders. As the crisis deepens, her anger is scalding hot and she radiates raw loss. By the end she is haggard, death-like.

Icke not only discusses the arguments for and against Ruth's actions with her patient, but he also brings in plenty of material about institutional politics, with a committee meeting scene where a new appointment is discussed (are there too many female Jewish doctors at the institute?) and then political considerations of funding and donors. As the tide of opinion swings against Ruth, we get insights into her character: in one lovingly awkward scene, her lover tries to get her to shrug off her middle-class cool and just dance. At every point, Icke underlines the doctor's discomfort at losing a patient, and questions how free we are to define ourselves and choose our own identities.

Despite several moments of repetition, this all works well, and Icke ups the stakes by playing a daring game with his casting. Every one of his choices of actor, apart perhaps for Stevenson, differs in a significant way from the character they are playing, but this only becomes stealthily apparent. So you can expect women to play men, men to play women, black actors to play white and white to play black. And then there's religion: who is Jewish and who Christian (and what does any of that mean?). And then what about sexual preference? The result is theatrically inspiring, often astonishing and always thought-provoking.

On Hildegard Bechtler's neon-lit set, so reminiscent of hospital corridors, the play runs smoothly through scene after scene on a gently revolving stage while a lone drummer (Hannah Ledwidge) provides a percussive commentary. Although the story is dominated by its portrayal of Ruth, who slowly evolves into a genuinely tragic figure, and Icke provokes the white middle-class members of his audience by forcing them to acknowledge the uncomfortable relevance of identity politics, all of the acting is first rate. And there are even subtle suggestions of Brexit in phrases about compromise and bumps in the road. Often funny, always engaging and with a compelling central performance, this is one theatre marathon that is moving as well as energizing.