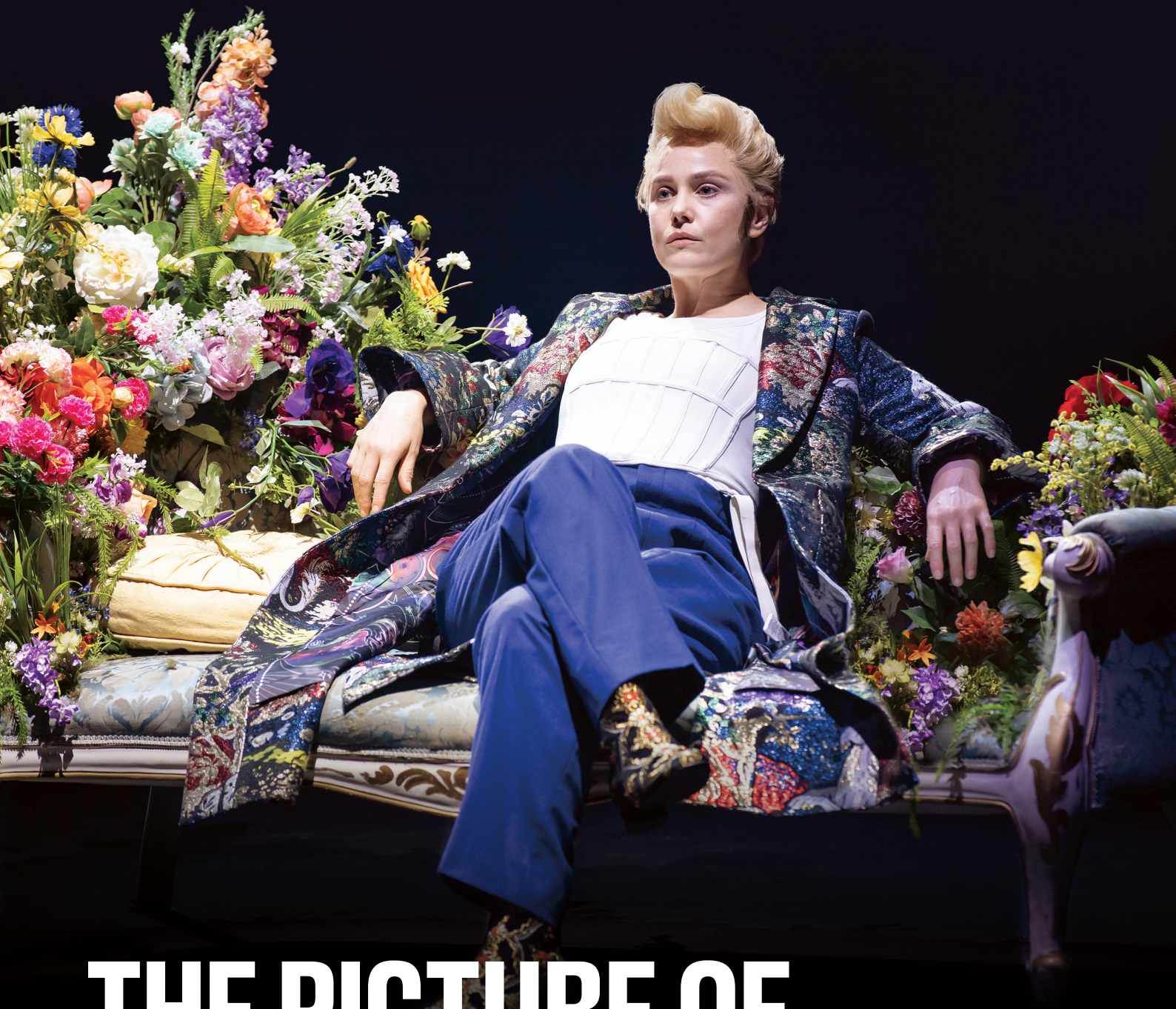
SYDNEY THEATRE CO EDUCATION

DESIGN SKETCHBOOK



THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: KIP WILLIAMS



Kip Williams. Photo: Daniel Boud

One of the things I find most remarkable about Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the way in which it imagines a physical form for the dialogue of one's interior. That physical form is, of course, the magical portrait Basil Hallward paints of Dorian Gray. It is Dorian's relationship to this ever-evolving picture that forms Wilde's metaphor for the relationship each of us experiences in virtually every moment of our lives, the relationship with one's self. Just as Dorian possesses in his painting a witness to his spiralling behaviour, so too do we possess within each of us an omniscient and omnipresent observer that records our every action. Some might call this the "ego", others our "conscience" or "soul". However you name it, Wilde posits that this witness is ultimately inescapable, and I would agree with him.

Pivotal to Wilde's story is Dorian's unchanging youth and beauty. In essence, Dorian can behave however he likes and his actions will be free of any immediate, personal consequence, other than that which is recorded on the hidden portrait, known only in full by the forever blemishless Dorian. And herein lies the provocation at the heart of *Dorian Gray*, regarding the moral responsibility of the individual: how do we choose to live if we are removed from the consequences of our actions? It's a thoroughly modern question.

Indeed, Wilde's novel is also modern for the way it examines the pursuit of individual pleasure. This idea is most explicitly expressed in Lord Henry's solipsistic belief that every individual must, at all costs, pursue a life of self discovery, sensory expression and beauty, before time robs them of the youth in which to relish it. The collision of Henry's paradigm and Dorian's ability to escape consequence is one that speaks, almost prophetically, to the moral crises of the twenty-first century. As Dorian navigates the question of how to live, a contradiction emerges: pleasure acts as both a marker of self-actualisation and a harbinger of self-destruction. On one hand, Wilde paints, with seductive compulsion, the importance of the liberation of the individual from the bonds of conservative stricture in order that they might realise a form of authenticity, an expression of true desire and, in turn, a manifestation of pure gratification. On the other hand, Wilde is quick to foreshadow the dangers of excess and the damages of ego and narcissism. These are paradoxical outcomes, the simultaneous liberation and destruction of self, and Wilde is deliberate in laying out the argument for both. After all, paradox is central to the Wildean worldview.

Wilde's work is often profoundly concerned with the way people perform in life. While the portrait reflects the truth of Dorian's being (or his soul), like us, Dorian is free to evolve a persona (or personae) to suit his agenda and circumstance, in turn masking that which is beneath. Gender, class, and sexuality play key roles in Wilde's thinking here, as they do in this production. Indeed, Wilde himself was acutely aware of the ways in which a life might be viewed as a grand act of theatre, filled with not one, but many characters that one performs. Wilde was forthcoming in the way he saw the three central characters of *Dorian Gray* as expressions of three parts of his own personae: Dorian, who he sought

DIRECTOR'S NOTE: KIP WILLIAMS

to be, Lord Henry, who people perhaps saw him as being publicly, and Basil Hallward, who he felt he probably was privately. These three characters alone experience different pressures and circumstances, public and private, and, like different-angled lights shone through a prism, they reflect the wide and shifting scope of an individual's conception of self, both real and imagined, both as pursued fantasies and hidden realities. At the core of this story is an awareness of how we construct identity, how we both express and conceal self in the act of its construction, and how anxious we are in the act of revealing and concealing truth. The story begins with an artist so paralysed by the fear that their work of art will reveal too much of themself that they refuse to exhibit it. This meditation on artifice versus the authentic is also the root of much of Wilde's Queer subversion and sense of Camp. With it comes his trademark humour and satire that punctures the pretence of life, exposing its artifice and allowing us to laugh at its absurdity. In a work that explores the complexity of living authentically, Wilde entangles his characters in a world obsessed with pretence, where youth, beauty, pleasure, wealth, status, power, and the individual take primacy – all values that are finding their apotheosis in our age of late capitalism.

Wilde writes in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all". Some might interpret this as Wilde being morally ambivalent, but I do not see this as so. Rather, I see it as him lovingly embracing the paradoxical forces that exist within the human condition; I see it as him attempting to truthfully express the problem of their collision; I see it as him empowering us to find an answer to the problem of our lives, both singular and collective. As he goes on to write "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors".

The theatrical form (or mash up of cinema and theatre that I call cine-theatre) of this work, in concert with the adaptation of Wilde's book, are all responding to the above ideas, as well as to others that I would prefer for you to discover in experiencing our telling of this story. I have loved writing and directing this adaptation, and, above all, collaborating with EJ, Marg, Nick, Clemmie, David, Ian, Paige, and the incredible technical crew and production workshops and teams – all profoundly gifted storytellers – to conjure this tale into the present for you. Like Basil, we have each poured our soul into the making of this work, and we hope you find yourselves in it.



Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

SET DESIGN: MARG HORWELL

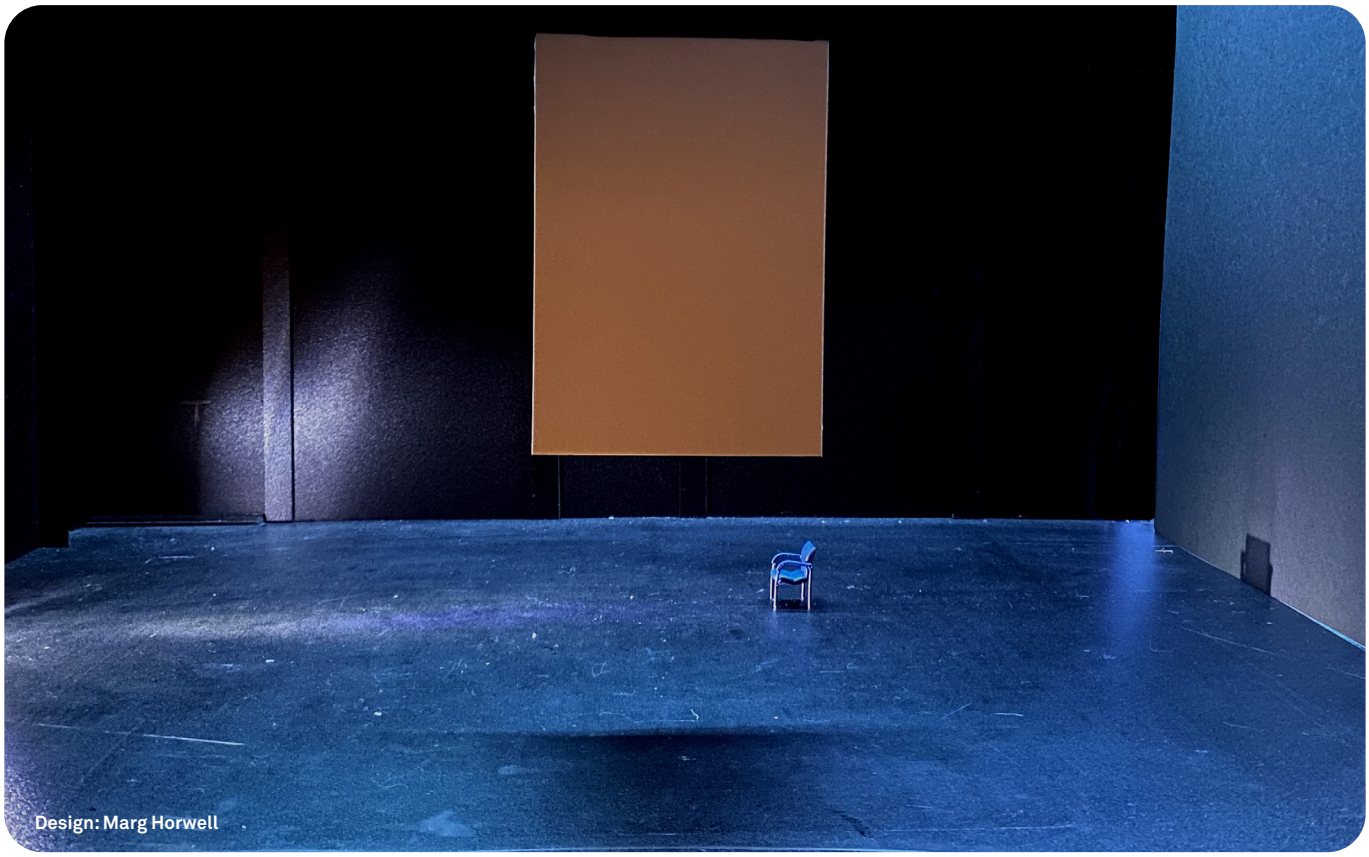
Model box and costume sketch images are courtesy of Designer Marg Horwell, sourced from her original designs. Production images are courtesy of Daniel Boud.

The set of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, designed by Marg Horwell, reflects the key ideas of the production whilst also allowing for ease of transformation between many different places and situations – both real and imagined.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, reflective of both Victorian London and contemporary experience, gathers the strands of consumer capitalism, mass consumption and notions of identity in a digital environment to explore the way in which an individual constructs themselves in a world dominated by beauty and excess.

Horwell's set design began with considering each of the screens and how they might fit into the set, and later costume design. This was an organic process that occurred in the rehearsal room and was intended to avoid fitting the projected images into the design at a later date. The choice to use portrait layout for the screens, rather than landscape, also suggests the notion of the original painted image.

The use of more than one screen heightened the audience's understanding of contemporary identity construction, in which we understand our identity as a multiplicity of different parts. Director Kip Williams and Designer Marg Horwell have made the choice to employ the Brechtian convention of the visible empty stage space that sits behind the transformational props and costumes. The design image below, from the beginning of the production, emphasises the blank walls of the theatre. Symbolically, the audience is reminded that human experience and our understanding of our identity is constructed by social, cultural and historical contexts.



Design: Marg Horwell

SET DESIGN:
MARG HORWELL



Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

Set against the blank, black walls of the theatre, Horwell's images of Victorian London, mirrored and exaggerated by the digital technology employed by Director Kip Williams, are eclectically mixed with contemporary images of modern capitalist cities. Victorian clutter, lines, shapes, fabrics and textures have been used to create Dorian Gray's social and economic privilege. The set mirrors Dorian's trajectory, in which wealthy upper classes are able to curate their lives by surrounding themselves with beauty and consumables in the absence of personal meaning.

The disparity between Dorian's London and the London experienced by the working classes is created on stage by foggy street lighting, shadows and darkness in which danger lurks. Dorian, interested in experiencing this world, is able to prowl about these parts of London, which have been impoverished by the economic forces that have divided the people of the city. The forces of capitalism have placed Dorian in very different circumstances to most Londoners, allowing the pursuit of pleasure to be the foundation of identity.

"Dorian watched with listless eyes the sordid shame of the great city...the way seemed interminable, and the streets like the black web of some sprawling spider."
(Wilde pg. 44)

Dorian's fascination with the seamier side of London is reflected in Horwell's simple and evocative creation of the nightclub, in which Nick Schlieper's contemporary laser light design and tinsel streamers suggest the lure and ultimately transient beauty of a hedonistic lifestyle, lived without consequence.

SET DESIGN:
MARG HORWELL



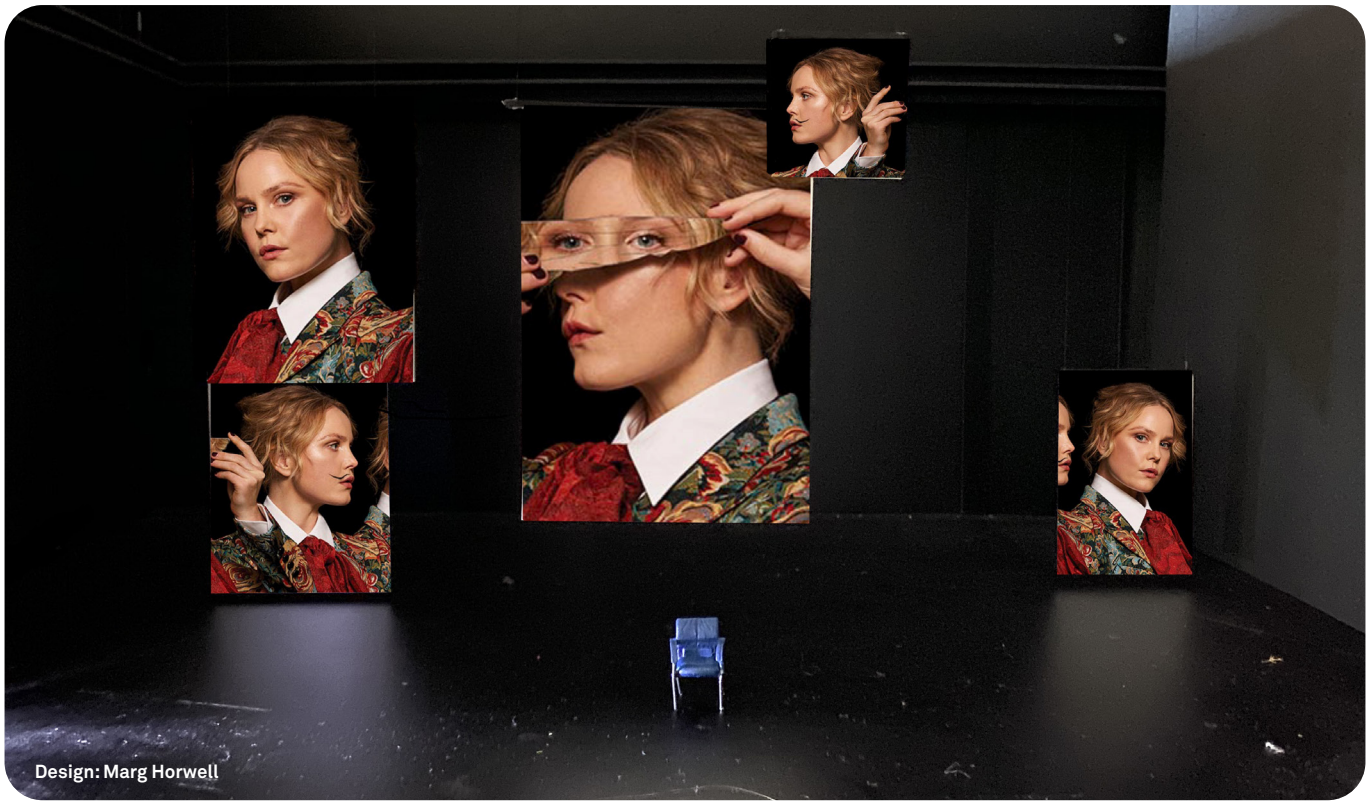


Horwell's sumptuous and symbolic use of flowers in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* speaks to the pursuit of youth and beauty throughout Dorian's exploration of his identity. The original novel, and Williams' adaptation, begins with beautiful descriptions of flowers and a garden, with Dorian moving amongst the exquisite array of blooms as an equally beautiful young man. As Dorian ages, his understanding of beauty changes, ravaged by his excessive behaviour. Beginning with one bloom, Horwell has included an increasing number of flowers on the stage during Dorian's journey, serving as a motif for the sickly abundance of death and decay beneath.

The obviously artificial flowers that adorn the stage by the end of the production, alongside the enormous, tasteless flowers on the wallpaper, symbolise the destructive end result of excess and overconsumption.

Left: Design: Marg Horwell
Right: Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

SET DESIGN:
MARG HORWELL

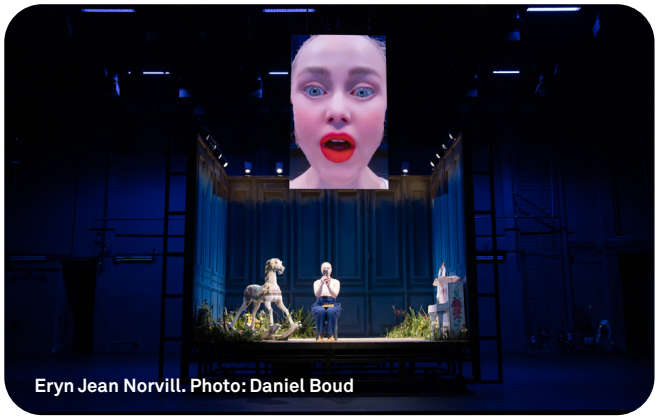


Design: Marg Horwell

The use of digital media in this production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers Dorian as both a 'live' subject and a 'digital' one in the same performance space, blurring the audience's understanding of the 'real' Dorian. Like the 'real' set pieces, Dorian's material reality is blurred by the use of screen images that reproduce this reality. The magnitude of the digital screens dwarfs the 'real' furniture, directing the audience's focus away from the set in front of them to that which is projected, implicating the audience in Dorian's experience of identity creation.

Much of Dorian's world is created behind screens which directs audience focus to the digital image, mirroring our experiences within a digital culture. The large size of the images reminds us that, metaphorically, the reach of the digital image is enormous. As Dorian's narrative progresses, the screens multiply and move, reinforcing the pervasive nature of the digital image. The audience becomes an active participant in Dorian's story, as they are encouraged to make the same decisions as the ones that Dorian is making: Where do I look? Which image is real? And the final decision is a question for us all – Who am I if I am not represented digitally?

The pre-recorded footage was designed to be as theatrical as possible which meant that it was captured in one take. This process was meticulously planned so that the live actor appears to be listening to the pre-recorded footage. This is suggestive of a conversation between the characters that is occurring in real time, blurring the audience's understanding of what is 'real' and what is not, whilst simultaneously fragmenting our understanding of the construction of self.



Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

SET DESIGN



Design: Marg Horwell



Design: Marg Horwell

COSTUME DESIGN: MARG HORWELL





Williams and Horwell, much like their approach to the set, have used the Brechtian techniques of the actor playing more than one role and adding or subtracting costuming elements in front of the audience. The actor who plays Dorian Gray also plays 25 other characters, both live and digitally, transforming in front of the audience using voice, movement, gesture and costume changes.

"I wouldn't consider myself a designer who attempts to create totally, historically accurate period designs."

Marg Horwell, 2022

Horwell's costumes, like the set, are a fusion of period costumes and contemporary pieces. As mentioned above, the actor's transformation, initially performed in front of the audience, becomes less obvious as the narrative progresses. Dorian's costume moves on a trajectory from obviously Victorian clothing to a fusion of historical periods and cultural references, reflecting the character's journey through a multiplicity of identities.

Horwell's sketch above is an example of the Narrator character who appears at the beginning of the production. The base look is simple and relatively neutral. It allows the addition of different costume items – most notably the Victorian top hat and glove that symbolises Lord Henry Wotton and the painter's rag that symbolises the painter, Basil Hallward. Importantly, these costume elements are introduced in front of the audience as the actor changes their voice and movement for each character, drawing the audience's attention to the technique being used. When placed within the enormous portraiture of the digital screens, the audience is reminded that not only is identity constructed and unstable, able to be taken on and off at will by the individual, but also that each human has a multiplicity of identities within.

Left: Design: Marg Horwell
Right: Eryn Jean Norvill and Sarah Hadley, Steadicam Operator.
Photo Daniel Boud

COSTUME DESIGN: MARG HORWELL

"It's the nineteenth century, but it's also Prince, and it's Harry Styles, and it's Liberace, it's Tilda Swinton and Vivienne Westwood"

Marg Horwell, 2022



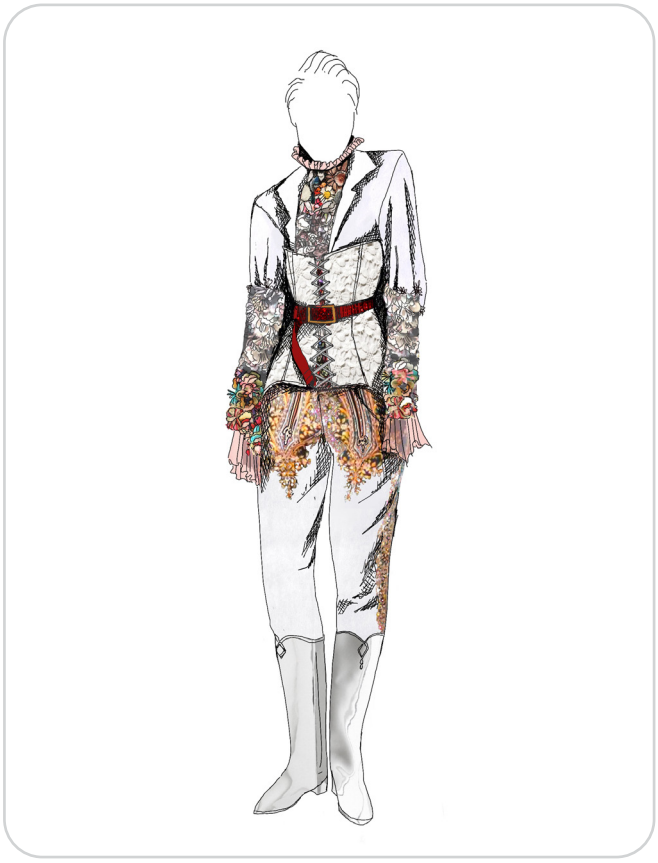


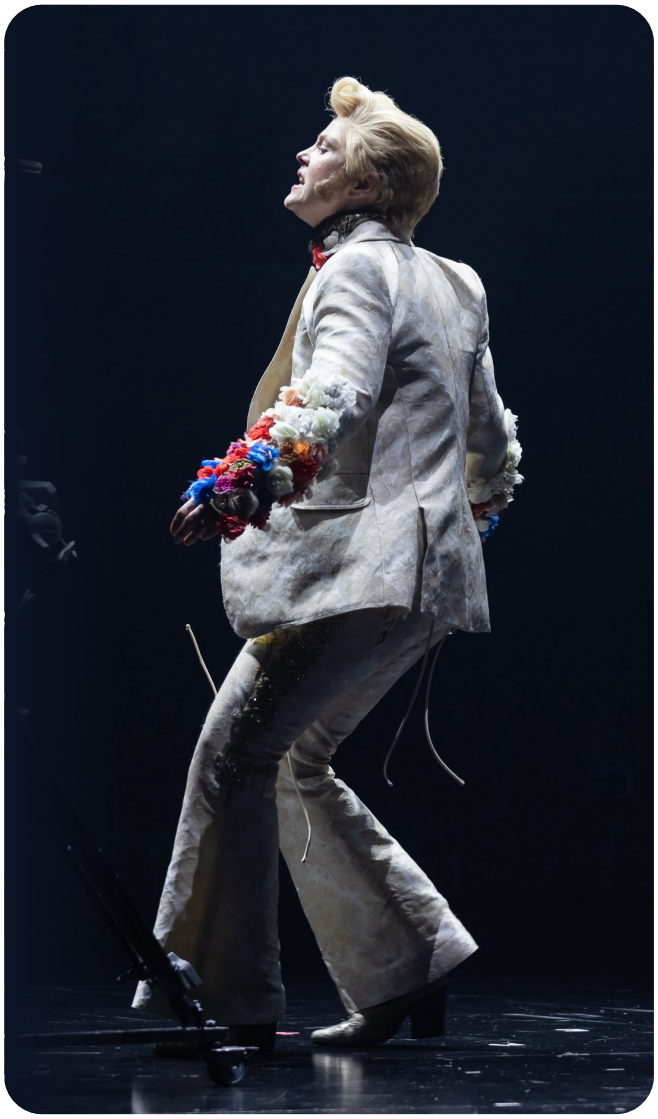
Left: Design: Marg Horwell
Right: Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

COSTUME DESIGN: MARG HORWELL

One of the key visual developments in the production is that as Dorian explores both identity and desire, the costumes become increasingly extravagant in shape, line and materials. The seamless change of costume and pace of the frequent changes, combined with the impact of the digital projections of images of Norvill, blurs a traditional understanding of identity, including gender, and renders it obsolete.

Marg Horwell (2022) has said:
"The costumes are a deliberate mixture of masculine and feminine elements. Dorian is a traditionally male-identified character that we're presenting through a female-identified actor. So I started looking at a lot of traditionally masculine period clothing that embraced bold feminine silhouettes and details, big puffy sleeves, cinched-waists and frock coats with flared skirts, heels on men's shoes. Then we've combined it with traditionally feminine elements like corsetry and lingerie and also with a more androgynous aesthetic incorporating more contemporary pieces. It creates this fabulously camp, eclectic look, it feels like a collage of the many facets of a person to me."





Left: Design: Marg Horwell
Right: Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud



"Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp' not a woman, but a 'woman'...It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre".

SUSAN SONTAG
1966

Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud

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Compiled by **Kelly Young**.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly is the Education Manager for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on **kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au**

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Eryn Jean Norvill. Photo: Daniel Boud