

■ Performing arts

Jo Roberts

Tales of Oscar

DIRECTOR and lyricist Gary Young knows people are familiar with the Oscar Wilde that most befitted the writer's motto, "nothing succeeds like excess": the decadence, the posturing, the controversy. But on the centenary of the famous fop's death, Young wants people to remember the "other" Wilde.

"I often think Oscar is remembered for the wrong reasons — infamy is hard to live down," says Young. "We wanted to do something about Oscar the poet and the teller of beautiful stories."

Young, with performer and singer Paul Keelan, have written *Tea with Oscar: Four Stories by Oscar Wilde*. Set in 1901, one year after the death of Wilde, it features Young, Grant Smith, Toby Truscott, Jackie Rees and Darcy Bonser as a group of Wilde's friends who gather for afternoon tea to remember Wilde and his work. Notably, it is the stories Wilde wrote for his sons Vyvyan and Cyril that the gathering will relive: *The Selfish Giant*, *The Happy Prince*, *The Remarkable Rocket* and *The Nightingale and the Rose*.

"They were stories I loved ever since I was a kid," says Young. "Oscar wrote them for his boys, but they appeal right across the board. We're kind of hoping people will rediscover these wonderful pieces. His language is so beautiful and his wit is so extraordinary."

Young and Keelan have spent 18 months weaving music and lyrics into Wilde's stories to create an event they believe will appeal to young and old, while keeping true to the spirit of Wilde. So intent was Young on getting it right, he even travelled to Paris late last year to seek approval from Wilde himself, albeit from the grave. In a story he preludes by humming the theme to the *Twilight Zone*, Young tells how he got the answer he hoped for.

"I just wanted to tell (Wilde) what we were planning to do and kind of get the vibe that he was OK with that — that we were going to add music and do it in a slightly different way," he says. "When I was in the graveyard I couldn't find his grave, and I said 'Come on Oscar, you've got to help me'. Just then two black ravens flew down and landed beside me. Then they flew at head-height up the path in front of me and made a 90-degree turn left. And I thought, 'That's odd'. So I followed them and there was Oscar's grave around the corner, all covered in red lipstick."

"Even in rehearsals I've thought Oscar would really enjoy being here doing this."

Tea With Oscar opens Thursday at Chapel Off Chapel, 12 Little Chapel Street, Prahran, and plays nightly Thursdays to Saturdays until December 3, with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays. Book on