

# London's Scars



Two scarred Londoners take center stage in award-winning playwright Richard Martin Hirsch's latest, the current-as-today's-headlines *London's Scars*, now in its World Premiere engagement as a guest production at West L.A.'s Odyssey Theatre.

For Mary Millar (Meredith Bishop), the scars are both physical and emotional, though the one which marks her right cheek pales in comparison to the invisible scars which left her semi-catatonic and wandering about at the scene of a terrorist bombing of a bus-full of innocents on the streets of London.

For "expressive art therapist" Bronwyn Styers (Imelda Corcoran), the scars are harder to distinguish, but are there nonetheless, hinted at in an early conversation with her former lover, hospital administrator Dr. Margaret Johns (Ann Noble). "It's been two years, Bronwyn," Maggie tells her. "Time to get off your pretty arse and start living again."

It takes some persuading on Margaret's part to get her ex to take on Mary's case, hoping that Bronwyn's particular brand of therapy might prove more effective at breaking through the unidentified woman's trauma-induced amnesia than "what we do upstairs."

Before long, Bronwyn has gotten her patient to begin speaking, but the bombing witness's initial words are straight out of Lewis Carroll, uttered in a high, little girl's voice. Still the therapist does manage to get the troubled young woman to identify herself as "Scarlett" and to begin her therapy-through-drawing.

There are times, however, when Scarlett/Mary's mind seems elsewhere, and though Bronwyn can only guess at what has diverted her patient's attention, we in the audience can see that it is the appearance in the young woman's mind of a dark, handsome, hooded young man dressed all in white, a man whose presence in Mary's thoughts causes chills to run down her spine.

It's not revealing too much to say that the stranger is Habib al-Harith (Ammar Ramzi), the twenty-two year old son of Pakistani immigrants and the mastermind of this latest London bombing, or that Mary's relationship with him may have been more than merely romantic.

What caused Bronwyn's and Mary's scars? Will Bronwyn find a way to help Mary heal, and in so doing perhaps also heal herself—or will Field Agent Wiggins Dowd (Rob Nagle), the relentless representative of the International Counter-Terrorism Branch investigating the bombing, prove not

only a thorn in Bronwyn's side, but an impediment to Mary's recovery?

As he did in his much lauded *The Monkey Jar*, playwright Hirsch once again takes a headline from tonight's evening news and constructs a gripping drama that is both personal and political. Written with two of his muses (Bishop and Corcoran) in mind for the leading roles, *London's Scars* not only provides the actresses with terrific, complex roles to sink their teeth into, but audiences with plenty to think and talk about once bows have been taken.

Bishop's work in Hirsch's *The Concept Of Remainders* earned her an Ovation Award nomination, and no wonder. As in over half a dozen other performances reviewed here, Bishop proves herself one of our most exciting young talents, an actress who combines beauty, intelligence, sex-appeal, and depth (in whichever order you prefer). The role of Mary is one of the very best she's had the good fortune to undertake. Sweet and coquettish one moment, sultry and seductive the next, and heartbreakingly vulnerable a moment later, Bishop grabs your attention and interest from her first entrance and never lets go.

For anyone who wonders what the talents and beauty of Annette Bening and Sharon Stone might look like if combined into one stunning actress, Corcoran provides the answer as Bronwyn. Blending glamour and intellect, toughness and compassion, Corcoran creates the portrait of a woman whose controlled exterior masks a cauldron of suppressed emotions and pain. I can only imagine the debt of gratitude Corcoran must feel to Hirsch, who has given her not only this great role to play, but a pair of scenes (an emotional meltdown and some passionate girl-on-girl action) that showcase Corcoran's talents to perfection.

Supporting performances couldn't be better. Noble, a gifted playwright in her own right, gets to play tightly-wound here, with sparks of anger and passion, and she takes the role and runs with it. Nagle is brilliant (what else?) in a pair of roles, the wily aforementioned investigator and (in a deliciously comic turn) a horny bar patron who succumbs to Mary's allure. Ramzi melds charisma and menace as Habib, a complex mix of charm and fury from an actor whose looks and talents merit Colin Farrell-type roles, and not just more Habibs.

None of these performances could have been possible without the work of a director the caliber of Darin Anthony, who follows his brilliant work helming Noble's *Sidhe* with more of the same here, aided and abetted by some of the best designers in town. Scenic designer Stephen Gifford backs Bronwyn's studio with white-on-black maps of London's metro system, suggesting the chaos outside the relative safety within, his set transforming effortlessly into locations outside the studio thanks to Christie Wright's vivid lighting, sound designer Bill Froggatt's just-right ambient noise, and the audience's ability to imagine. Edgy background music enhances moods and pumps up suspense. Sherry Linnell's costumes are excellent choices for the play's cast of characters. Laura Perez is production stage manager.

Saturday's opening night performance ran a tad longer than necessary, but Hirsch is busily working on trimming and sharpening focus.

Once again, *London's Scars* showcases Richard Martin Hirsch's ability to create riveting, substantive drama. With a director and cast that simply could not be better, *London's Scars* makes for fascinating, thought-provoking contemporary theater well worth seeing.

The Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles. Through June 27. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. Reservations: [www.plays411.net/londonsscars](http://www.plays411.net/londonsscars)

--Steven Stanley

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Photos: Chris Goss