

Theatre's version of Earnest flawed

There are few plays that can be seen (or read) over and over again without losing their freshness and charm. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of them.

A marvel of scintillating wit and elegant phrasing, it ranks high among the world's comic masterpieces. Its frivolous plot is as light as air, but in the telling, Wilde's genius pricks the pretensions and pretences of the social order of his day (and ours) with barbed invention.

"Fortunately, in England at any rate, education produces absolutely no effect whatsoever," says the formidable Lady Bracknell, while cross-examining her prospective son-in-law, Jack Worthing. "In married life, three is company, two is none," later observes his friend Algernon Moncrieff.

Deception unmasked

Jack, a rich young man of uncertain origins, has invented a ne'er-do-well brother called Earnest, whose imaginary escapades in London alleviate the boredom of the country with frequent obligatory trips to town.

THEATRE IN REVIEW

Liz Wyatt

His deception is unmasked by Algy, who has himself invented an ailing friend called Bunbury whose frequent relapses provide an excuse to visit the country whenever he chooses.

Under his alias, Jack falls in love with Algy's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. Algy, in turn, poses as his friend's mythical brother and falls in love with Jack's pretty young ward, Cecily Cardew. Their "Bunburying" comes unstuck when each discovers that his chief attraction to the girls is his name. It becomes vitally important to be called Earnest, which they earnestly set out to do.

This delicious nonsense was brought to the Markham Theatre last week, as the third presentation of its drama series, by Vancouver's Art Club Theatre. But not quite as deliciously as might

have been expected from a company of such fine reputation.

A mix of acting styles robbed the production of cohesiveness and a curious lack of interaction among some of the players raised barriers to our suspension of disbelief, willing though we were.

No feeling

Norman Browning was a wonderfully Wilde-ian Jack in pose, gesture, movement and delivery. But hardly a flicker of feeling animated his face. This Jack appeared not to care tuppence for Gwendolen — or anything else.

Daphne Goldbrick was equally impassive. Far from dominating her every scene, her Lady Bracknell appeared detached from the other characters and too often faded out of the picture on their lines.

Norma Matheson's Gwendolen was witty and stylish, but Matheson undercut the punch of some of her best lines with a silly, affected little laugh that was horribly reminiscent of the irritating Gwendolen in the Wendy Hiller telefilm that aired on public television a couple of years back.

And much of the comedy built

into the role of the delightfully dotty Miss Prism, Cecily's governess, was lost in the naturalistic, oversimplified playing of Kate Robbins, pleasant though she was.

At the opposite end of the extreme were Russell Roberts as Algy, and Martin Evans in the dual roles of the servants, Lane and Merriman. These two behaved at times as if they'd escaped from a Cooney and Chapman farce — where no doubt they'd be marvelous.

But in Wilde's drawing rooms and country gardens, where the worldly insouciance of the raised eyebrow, frosty stare or curled lip are de rigueur, their mugging, triple takes and signalling of lines are wildly out of place.

But there were two flawless performances. Corrine Hebden and Bernard Cuffling were utterly enchanting as Cecily and the Rev. Dr. Chasuble, respectively. Both walked the fine line between excess and underplaying with nary a mis-step. And their charm convinced as much as it delighted.

And the production was a visual treat. Phillip Clarkson's decep-

tively simple sets were at once graceful and opulent and allowed director Mario Crudo scope for some artfully pleasing staging.

Directorial laxity

(Crudo sometimes, however, sacrificed dramatic impact for symmetry — notably in the confrontation scene between Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell. Perhaps directorial laxity, not self-indulgence or exhaustion of actors on tour, was responsible for the production's uneven style.)

Clarkson's costumes, too, were elegant and eye-catching, if not always strictly true to the period. Lane's outdated knee breeches and powdered wig would be worn only in the grandest of establishments on the grandest of evening occasions in 1895 (not in 1885, as the program erroneously placed it).

That this flawed production was still so delightfully enjoyable is a tribute to Wilde's genius: Nothing can seriously dim the lustre of this almost perfect play. If the Arts Club Theatre version didn't sparkle brilliantly as it might have done, it was lively enough to please.



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