

ASIDES

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The Importance of Being Earnest

Director Keith Baxter
Talks Oscar Wilde
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Cover: *The Importance of Being Earnest* costume renderings by Robert Perdziola.



Dear Friend,

In keeping with STC's mission to bring the world's best dramatic and comedic classics to the stage, I am delighted to bring *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the Lansburgh as the third title in our Season. I am equally thrilled to welcome back the inimitable Keith Baxter. STC audiences will remember his prior directorial turns at STC, the gorgeous *An Ideal Husband* and the hilarious comedy *The Imaginary Invalid*. Now he is returning to direct Wilde's most famous play.

Keith has assembled a brilliant cast to deliver the high comedy that this play so rightly deserves. Making her STC debut is the incomparable Siân Phillips, best known for her award winning performance in the BBC television series *I, Claudius*. Joining Ms. Phillips are two STC audience favorites, Anthony Roach and Gregory Wooddell, playing Algernon and Jack, respectively. We also welcome back an incredible design team who Mr. Baxter has worked with in eight previous productions, including the designers that created the stunning mansion for Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*.

In this issue of Asides, we delve deeper into Oscar Wilde's enveloping artistic worlds. In Drew Lichtenberg's interview with Keith Baxter, "Talking Wilde," we learn more about Keith's stylish approach to directing Wilde. We also have commissioned two contrasting essays on Wilde, providing perspectives both academic (Margaret D. Stetz) and professional (erstwhile STC playwright Jeffrey Hatcher). Finally, STC staff writers Hannah Hessel-Ratner and Laura Buda explore Wilde's profound love of art, which he saw as an alternative to daily life, and his adoration of paradox and language.

Be sure to visit Asides Online (Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org) to learn even more about this and upcoming Season productions.

Read on to discover what makes this "Trivial Comedy for Serious People" Wilde's most enduringly popular play.

Warm regards,

Michael Kahn

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director
Shakespeare Theatre Company

Talking Wilde: An Afternoon Tea with Keith Baxter

by Drew Lichtenberg

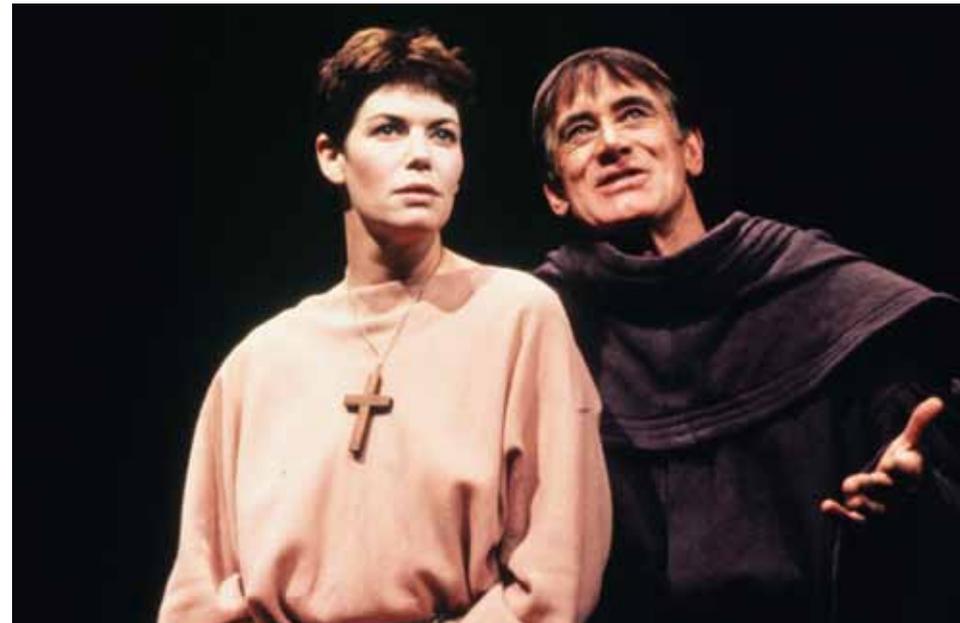


Photo of Kelly McGillis and Keith Baxter in STC's 1992 production of *Measure for Measure* by Joan Marcus.

Hearing Keith Baxter talk is like peering behind the curtain and realizing that the wizard is real. He is a one-man Brockett book of theatre history, peppering his conversation with names such as Irving and Tree, Coward and Olivier. He has acted with Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Scofield, been mentored by Orson Welles, roomed with Sir Alan Bates, and directed such longtime friends and STC mainstays as Elizabeth Ashley and Dixie Carter. A born storyteller, Baxter is prone to delightful shaggy-dog stories, filled with catty one-liners that can connect past and present in one breath.

"One of my oldest and dearest friends," Baxter says, "was Tennessee Williams. I miss him very much. I had acted in a play on Broadway, which closed on opening night. We were all glad it closed because it was written by Christopher Isherwood, who was a very unpleasant man. Tennessee called me and said, 'Come down to Key West.' I've licked an awful lot of my wounds in Key West, and so I did. I remember, *I, Claudius* was showing on television. And Tennessee said, 'We've got to eat dinner early. We've got to see how many more people Siân Phillips has murdered.' She played the wicked empress Olivia.

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Photo of the cast of STC's 1998 production of *A Woman of No Importance* by Carol Rosegg.

And every time you turned around, she was poisoning her husband with figs or something. She was stunning.”

Siân Phillips—who Baxter, of course, had already known (they grew up in neighboring South Wales towns)—has reunited with him for the Shakespeare Theatre Company's current production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Like Baxter, Phillips is a RADA-trained classical actor with an impressive stage-and-screen resume. She won a BAFTA for *I, Claudius* and appeared alongside her former husband, the late Peter O'Toole in the 1964 film of Anouilh's *Becket*. Onstage, she made an early reputation as one of the iconic leading ladies of the postwar era. At STC, she is playing Wilde's ultimate monster of maternal malignity, Lady Bracknell. Baxter himself seems to marvel at his casting feat. “She acted in *Under Milkwood*, you know,” he says, a mixture of amazement and patriotic pride. “She knew Dylan Thomas.” He elongates the poet's name, pronouncing it in the correct Welsh dialect. He pauses and looks triumphant. “Siân speaks fluent Welsh.”

This mixture of backstage history and Anglophile detail is characteristic of Baxter. He has made a name directing productions at STC (eight in all), which boast sensuous production values (the *Washington Post* has referred to him as a “stylistic hedonist”) as well as sociological nuance. He is also a specialist in Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the third Wilde that Baxter has directed, following triumphant prior productions of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 2003-04 and *An Ideal Husband* in 2010-11 (the Shakespeare Theatre

Company produced *A Woman of No Importance* in the 1998-99 season). To Baxter, the play is unique among Wilde's works—indeed, among all other works of drama.

“Wilde wrote about 11 plays, but four of them are absolute rubbish,” he says, reeling them off. “*Vera, or the Nihilists*, *The Duchess of Padua*, *A Florentine Tragedy* and *La Sainte Courtisane*. Producers have tried to put one over on people with *Salomé*—those long, prolix, purple speeches. They're very boring and they don't work at all. It was written for Sarah Bernhardt in French but it's utterly dreadful in English, though it did serve as a wonderful libretto for the Richard Strauss opera.

“Of his other plays, this one is in a category all by itself. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, without any argument at all, is the greatest example of high comedy writing in the English language. Wilde, of course, was an Irishman, as Shaw was Irish, as Sheridan was Irish, and so many more—Farquhar, Goldsmith, Joyce, Beckett. Thank God they all wrote in English! Joyce once wrote that ‘Ireland is the brain of the United Kingdom. Condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, the Irish have stamped on it the mark of their own genius. The result is then called English literature.’”

The key to producing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, according to Baxter, lies in embracing Wilde's radical simplicity. “His other plays demand huge casts, 25 people, opulent sets. But *The Importance of Being Earnest* has no stage effects at all, no flying Dutchmen, no animals onstage, which was all the rage in back then.” He digresses into the history of



Photo of the cast of STC's 2011 production of *An Ideal Husband* by Scott Suchman.

electric lighting, the theatrical effects of Sir Henry Irving and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, before swooping back, elegantly, to the subject at hand. “Imagine, if you can, the effect on an audience in 1895. The lights go out, they come back up, and there you are in Wilde’s world, bright and dazzling. There are no shadows. There’s not a dark word or duff moment in the entire play.” He looks mischievous again. “Noël Coward, you know, could only sustain it for one act,” he says, cocking a wry eyebrow at *Private Lives*. “Those of us who have played Elyot, as I did, with Joan Collins, know that that second act is very... **heavy...going**. But the first act is superb.” He sniffs, and continues. “In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, every word is perfect. It’s an absolute miracle of a play.

“Wilde broke the mold of the theatre with it.” He smiles. “When I think about this play, I think about Wittgenstein, who once said, ‘Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valley of silliness.’”

As is his wont, Baxter has surrounded himself with familiar faces and old friends. He has acted alongside and directed STC Affiliated Artist Floyd King, who is appearing here as Canon Chasuble. Gregory Woodell, who also appeared in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*, completes his Wilde trifecta by starring as Jack Worthing. Anthony Roach, seen in last season’s Free For All production of *All’s Well That Ends Well* as a picture-perfect Bertram, is playing Algernon. As for the new faces, they come from famous friends. Patricia Connelly, who plays Miss Prism, is an old costar of Baxter’s (the Cleopatra to his Antony), and recommended to him by none other than Dame Maggie Smith. Vanessa Morosco, playing Gwendolen, mentioned Baxter to a common friend when she bumped into Dame Judi Dench in London this past summer. When working with Keith Baxter, the theatre world seems very small indeed.

With so much talent assembled, as well as the design team with whom he has directed eight previous productions, Baxter is both excited and humble. He plans on letting the talent do their thing. “You know,” he says, “Tennessee used to think the art of the director was hugely overrated. There’s a part of me that agrees with that. They take all of the credit and none of the blame. We’ve all been in plays where we saved the day as actors and then the directors got the best reviews.” For a moment, Baxter has a faraway look in his eye, as if thinking of another theatre story. Then he takes a breath and looks you in the eye. “All of us people in the theatre know the true importance of this play.” He smiles. “And that’s all that I’ll say.”

Drew Lichtenberg is the Literary Associate at STC and production dramaturg for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He holds an MFA in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism from Yale School of Drama.

The Pleasure of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

by Margaret D. Stetz



An Afternoon Tea by Federico Andreotti (1847-1930).

Comedy is a genre focused on pleasure. From the time of the Greeks, it has invited us to engage in the communal pleasure of laughing with others, as well as the sharper, and sometimes darker, pleasure of laughing at the expense of something or someone else. But no comedy in history has been as concerned with the issue of pleasure itself as Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*—a subject to which it is more devoted than Gwendolen Fairfax is to bread and butter and certainly far more than Jack Worthing is to Gwendolen. Everything that happens in this play turns on the question of pleasure, as one character after another affirms the attraction of it, interrogates the meaning of it, and either announces or denounces the goal of pursuing it.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, pleasure is identified with escape from conventional expectations and embracing instead the principle of doing as one likes. For Wilde’s protagonists, the worst result of being caught indulging oneself is the temporary inconvenience of having to come up with an engaging lie (or a wittily phrased truth) to avoid the consequences. This is how audiences knew in 1895 and still know

today that the playwright has taken them into a world of fantasy. Even the servants get to enjoy their employer's champagne, and no one punishes or stops them.

Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the most effective tool to secure one's pleasure is lying. "I am afraid, Aunt Augusta," says Algernon Moncrieff with feigned dismay, "that I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight after all," for he must instead hurry to the sickbed of a friend, Mr. Bunbury. His statement is untrue on two counts: "Bunbury" is a wholly imaginary person, and it would be no pleasure whatsoever for him to dine with Lady Bracknell; for a distasteful social obligation, however, Algernon has substituted, moments earlier, the prospect of dinner at his favorite restaurant with Jack Worthing and the very real pleasure of dining at his expense. But when invented illnesses prove insufficient, actual deaths are useful in aiding the cause. Lady Bracknell describes the situation of a recent widow, Lady Harbury who, instead of showing evidence of mourning, "looks quite twenty years younger" and appears "to be living entirely for pleasure now." The pursuit of pleasure, it seems, is an equal-opportunity temptation for both women and men who are bold enough to dedicate themselves to it.

Nonetheless, in turn-of-the-century England different kinds of pleasure were available depending on one's gender (even for people who inhabited the same social class), and Wilde's audiences were likely to fill in their mental pictures of what living for pleasure meant according to their own gendered experience. Certainly, it was difficult for women to indulge themselves; attention to the demands of respectability overshadowed their lives far more than those of men and limited what they could do—or, at least, could be seen doing. Not only were women required to guard their own reputations, but to pay careful attention to the moral character of everyone and everything around them, a situation that Wilde delighted in satirizing through Lady Bracknell's hostility toward French songs and preference for German ones, on the grounds that "German sounds a thoroughly respectable language, and indeed, I believe it is so."

For working-class women employed as domestic servants, loss of reputation could mean being turned out "without a character" and being left to perish on the streets. But for women of the elite classes



Photo from the original 1895 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

too, in Wilde's day, becoming the subject of gossip could mean social death, and only the most daring risked it. The majority of upper-middle-class and aristocratic women confined themselves to pleasures such as lavish eating, dressing, entertaining, and spending that were consistent with their roles as showpieces. Over time, however, pleasures like these were often indistinguishable from indolence and stifling boredom. A year after the death of Queen Victoria, J. M. Barrie, would mock this sort of feminine idleness punctuated by the buying of luxury goods in his play *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), with a heroine who yawns from exhaustion after trying on engagement rings and wastes her afternoons in drawing-rooms where the "couches themselves are cushions as large as beds." No wonder the stage descriptions paint her as seeming "about to go to sleep in the middle of a remark." If such stultifying leisure was what ladies were offered, then even duties (the running of a household, philanthropic work on behalf of the Church, organizing charities for the poor, etc.) might sometimes begin to look like pleasures.

Far more active pleasures were open to gentlemen. They could, without finding themselves cast out of London Society, explore every facet of what the world's greatest metropolis had to offer. Not only did the West End theatres beckon to them nightly, but so did the music halls—sites of raucous and risqué entertainment frequented by the working classes and prostitutes (female and male alike). Brothels too—whether populated by women, by men, or by underage girls or boys—dotted the landscape and welcomed them, as did gaming establishments and events ranging from prizefights to races. Before and after these indulgences, gentlemen could repair to splendid restaurants such as Willis's and the Café Royal (which unaccompanied ladies could not enter), or to their clubs, which represented the ultimate gender segregation. When the usual rounds of drinking and playing card games or billiards grew wearisome, and when even the intellectual conversation that was also available to them palled, men could travel abroad, unencumbered by their wives and families. There they could "Bunbury" to their hearts' content. Oscar Wilde frequently did so, leaving his wife Constance and their two boys behind. What happened on the Continent, stayed on the Continent.

Margaret D. Stetz is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware, is author of numerous books and of over 100 published articles, many of them on Victorian literature and culture. She believes that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the greatest comedy of the last two centuries.

This essay is excerpted from the full essay commissioned by STC. Read about the contextual material for all STC mainstage shows in the 2013-2014 Season! Download the **Guide to the Season Plays** e-book for the Kindle or Nook.

Visit ShakespeareTheatre.org/Guide.

Hatching Wilde: Jeffrey Hatcher on Oscar Wilde

by Jeffrey Hatcher

STC decided to write to one of our favorite contemporary comic playwrights Jeffrey Hatcher (his adaptation of *The Government Inspector* opened our 2012-13 Season) to get his thoughts on Oscar Wilde's inimitable style. What he said might surprise you...

The major difficulty in writing a piece about Oscar Wilde is knowing that it's supposed to be funny. That while you're discussing Wilde's use of epigram, aphorism, irony, you should attempt to *top* him, preferably in a style akin to his own. I'm not even going to try, therefore relieving me (and you) of this burden. Even more difficult is writing a play in which "Oscar Wilde" is a character. I've done that, and while I don't say I've learned my lesson, I did learn *something*, and learned it the hard way.

Some years back a number of us were commissioned to write plays on the theme "The Discovery of the American West" for the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Four of us came up with plays that probed/discussed/had-a-vague-connection-to the subject. Since the Olympics were to be held in Salt Lake City, and because I had recently read a book about Oscar Wilde's 1882 tour of America, I thought it might be fun to write a play about his time there. Famously, he went to the city's new auditorium and when asked his impression, said, "It's wonderful, it has 5,000 seats and can comfortably accommodate five Mormon families." Wilde, in that period, was in the first blush of fame. He had yet to write *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windmere's Fan*. He had yet to meet Lord Alfred Douglas and his interesting father. He had yet to suffer two trials, Reading Gaol, Paris and an ignominious end. In the world of casting, that meant he didn't have to be fat (that came late in his life). Wilde was most successful in those Western mining camps filled with rugged outdoorsmen who cheered him and wouldn't let him leave (or so he said).

I concocted a plot, one part *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, one part *The Play's the Thing*, and a couple parts original, in which a woman, not unlike Baby Doe Tabor, becomes smitten with Wilde and leaves her lover to follow Oscar to Salt Lake City, where our hero must somehow, **somehow!** convince her gun-toting lover that he has no romantic interest in the woman. In retrospect, one asks, "How hard could it be?" But the joke is that, in this period, no one suspects Wilde of being anything other than a robust, beef-eating English heterosexual. The title of the play, if it hasn't already occurred to you, was *Wilde Goes West*.

The most daunting aspect was what to put into Wilde's mouth. The mouths of the local mayor and sheriff, the ladies of various cultural societies and a family of Mormons named "The Normans," were easy. But the pressure to come up with Wildean wit is like being put on stage at the Hollywood Bowl facing every famous comedian from Aristophanes to Bob Hope, Chaplin, Groucho and Woody Allen, while they chant in unison, "BE FUNNY!" I got around some of this simply by quoting Wilde: the line about the auditorium, the line about having "nothing to declare but my genius," which in my script simply perplexes the locals. It's easy to over emphasize Wilde's construction of an epigram and lose "the funny." This was most perfectly expressed in the Monty Python sketch where Wilde, Whistler, Shaw and Queen Victoria banter. Each time a famous witticism is uttered with perfect self-satisfied enunciation, the whole bunch doubles over in screaming (all too lengthy) guffaws of laughter, ending with Queen Victoria's, "Oop! I think I wet 'em!" The unmistakable subtext is, "Maybe this stuff isn't as funny as we've all been taught." And it's true, there is that danger. But it's not Wilde's fault. He wrote words to be spoken by actors, to be heard by an audience, and much as we love them—actors, directors, costumers, lighting designers—all of them can conspire to kill a joke. Hitting the line too hard, punching the wrong word, moving on the punch, speaking from the shadows, wearing a distracting hat.

Actors are often told when rehearsing Wilde, "Play it for real, for high stakes." But Wilde's characters aren't real, especially in his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Conversely, an actor shouldn't play a character like "Jack Worthing" as a cartoon with exaggerated demeanor and expression. He can't play him as he would Noël Coward; they're kissing cousins, but they're not twins. He can't play him as he would Christopher Durang, as Durang is more anarchic and cares for his characters in ways that Wilde (admirably, for the sake of his aesthetic) doesn't. The actor **can** approximate the style one would use in portraying a Joe Orton character, but the subject matter, characters and down market milieu are miles away from the Albany Hotel (at least the Albany of Wilde's fictional imaginings, if not at the Albany he *actually* frequented.) When I think of Wilde in contemporary comedy, I tend to picture David Hyde Pierce in *Fraser*, and Sean Hayes in *Will and Grace*. They played **people**, but the people they played lived inside quotes, completely aware of the type they were. The "type," capable of love, anger, despair, governs everything they do and say. They exist primarily to deliver the line, not only as **actors** but as **people**, yet they are never so self-aware as to cease being human.

Maybe this is how Wilde got his revenge, although he wasn't a vengeful type: in the conventional world's embrace of the Wildean "type" as popular hero.

Jeffrey Hatcher is a playwright and screenwriter. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife Lisa and son Evan.

Play in Process



Assistant Director Samip Raval, Director Keith Baxter and Production Stage Manager James FitzSimmons.



Gregory Wooddell (Jack) and Anthony Roach (Algernon).

The cast of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



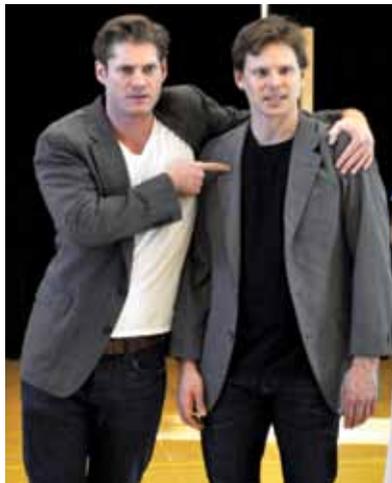
Gregory Wooddell (Jack), Director Keith Baxter, Patricia Conolly (Miss Prism) and Floyd King (Chasuble).



Floyd King (Chasuble), Vanessa Morosco (Gwendolen) Gregory Wooddell (Jack) and Siân Phillips (Lady Bracknell).



Gregory Wooddell (Jack) and Patricia Conolly (Miss Prism).



Siân Phillips (Lady Bracknell).

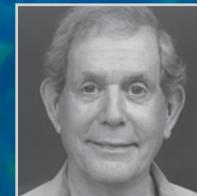
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST CAST



PATRICIA CONOLLY*
MISS PRISM



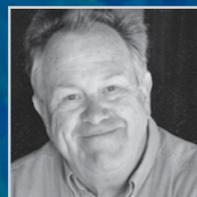
KATIE FABEL*
CECILY



FLOYD KING*
CHASUBLE



VANESSA MOROSCO*
GWENDOLEN



JOHN O'CREAGH*
MERRIMAN



SIÂN PHILLIPS*
LADY BRACKNELL



ANTHONY ROACH*
ALGERNON



TODD SCOFIELD*
LANE



GREGORY WOODDELL*
JACK

LOGAN DALBELLO
FOOTMAN

LEE MCKENNA
IRISH MAID

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST ARTISTIC TEAM

Keith Baxter
Director

Stuart Howard and
Paul Hardt
New York Casting

James FitzSimmons*
Production Stage
Manager

Simon Higlett
Set Designer

Daniel Neville-
Rehbehn
Resident Casting
Director

Elizabeth Clewley*
Assistant Stage
Manager

Robert Perdziola
Costume Designer

Peter West
Lighting Designer

Gary Logan
Voice and Text Coach

Jason Tratta
Sound Designer

Drew Lichtenberg
Literary Associate

Kim D. Sherman
Composer/Arranger

Samip Raval
Assistant Director

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Photos by Elayna Speight.

Wilde's Aesthetic Ride

A Journey through Oscar Wilde's Visual Landscape

by Hannah Hessel Ratner



The Peacock Skirt, illustration by Aubrey Beardsley for *Salome* by Oscar Wilde (1892).

Before he was known for his clever plays and essays, Oscar Wilde was known for his personality. Personality is indeed the word that Wilde chose to talk about how individuals present themselves in the world. In his 1889 story “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” Wilde writes, “all Art [is] to some degree a mode of acting, an attempt to realize one’s own personality on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammeling accidents and limitations of real life.” And craft his personality, he did. Wilde performed his life, helping to craft the Aesthetic movement. In the late nineteenth century, artists and critics were spreading the gospel of art without meaning, art for the sake of beauty: art for art’s sake.

The Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century followed on the heels of the Pre-

Raphaelite painters from the mid-nineteenth century, who created work that harked back to classical and renaissance themes. The work of painters, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was lush and colorful. Models appeared in gowns draped on skin like marble folds on Greek statuary. Attention was paid to the smallest details of nature, with the figures displayed in landscapes of rich colors, floral beds and intricate architectures.

The writing of critics John Ruskin and Walter Pater picked up the ideas incubated by the Pre-Raphaelites and articulated a new way of approaching art. Ruskin was taken with the naturalism found in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and called for art to reflect the natural world surrounding the artist. Pater’s influential book on art history took a different path, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, elevated art as the product of passions and provided a basis for the Aesthetics. The impact of this movement lies in its ability to view artists as those who can transcend the world, to create beauty that is impossible in nature. These romantic ideals were appealing to Oscar Wilde, who as an undergraduate at Oxford drank in the teachings of these two lecturers. The work of Pater, who spoke of “The House Beautiful,” those who treated their life, persona and surroundings in the spirit of art, especially sank in.

Wilde embodied “The House Beautiful” by making his personality his art. He was known early in his career for wearing velvet breeches and coat, keeping his hair long and carrying a sunflower around as an aesthetic accessory. The satirist playwright W.S. Gilbert, along with his artistic partner Arthur Sullivan, created a character modeled after Wilde in their 1881 hit *Patience*. The operetta opens with a poet wearing the characteristic aesthetic uniform surrounded by fawning women. When the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta hit New York the producers saw the need to let Americans in on the inside joke. Thus, Oscar Wilde’s tour of America was arranged. From coast to coast Wilde lectured astonished Americans on art and life. His words painted an image of a country drenched in art and beauty. His words exalted the Aesthetic way of life: “We spend our days, each one of us, in looking for the secret of life” he shared, “Well, the secret of life is in art.”

The art that Wilde described picked up where the Pre-Raphaelites left off. Though it continued to glorify the body and nature, art in the “High Aestheticism” period at the end of the century grew less naturalistic. The preeminent artists of the movement, Aubrey Beardsley and James McNeill Whistler, were inspired by east Asia. Beardsley’s work, for example, clearly shows his inspiration of Japanese block prints in its bold graphic outlines and patterned details. Whistler’s Peacock Room, on permanent display at the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery, showcases his eastern influences, as he covered the room with deep colors, golden peacocks and Chinese porcelain. Wilde referred to the homage artists were paying to the Far East in his Socratic essay “The Decay of Lying” (1891). There he comments on what he saw as the embracing of Art before the imitation of life. He thought the Japanese, in particular, were able to create an aesthetic world that did not represent the world that was but rather the world that could be. The “lying” referred to in the title is the preferred way of making art. Instead of representing the world, art should “lie” and represent a more beautiful world. As he saw it, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.” If this is the case, art displays what we may become not what we are.

Not long after his trip to the States, Wilde visited France. Spending his time with artists in Paris he took the opportunity to change his well-known style. As his own work of art, Wilde was continuing to evolve his own personality. His new look tossed aside the colorful velvet. Instead he dressed in black silk, complete with top hat, and cut his locks to a short, Roman-inspired cut. “The Oscar of the first period is dead,” he wrote, “we are now concerned with the Oscar Wilde of the second period.” Wilde’s art of personality and desire of beauty remained the central point of Wilde’s life, and his art. Nowhere is that more clear than in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the play is built around the beauty of words, fashion and pretense. With his last play, as he was unknowingly on the brink of the final period of his life, Wilde embraced the elevation of aesthetics transcending the world around him and touching audiences for generations to come.

Hannah Hessel Ratner, STC’s Audience Enrichment Manager, is in her third season at STC and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from Columbia University.

“All Existence in an Epigram”: The Paradox of Oscar Wilde

by Laura Henry Buda



Photo of Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony (c. 1882).

Entering America for the first time, Oscar Wilde reportedly told a customs agent,

“I have nothing to declare but my genius.”

There is no mistaking Wilde’s wit. Epigrams and irony are the touchstone of his works, but Wilde’s distinctive style truly grows out of his obsession with paradox. Wilde’s paradoxes upset the status quo, disrupt the thoughtless cliché, and toy with lionized rhetoric. His stated philosophy for *The Importance of Being Earnest* reveals a mutiny against the mindless tropes of somber society:

“We should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

Victorian platitudes were begging to be upended.

Wilde’s attraction to epigrams was two-fold. Words were sacred to him; each word was perfectly placed in the phrase, each phrase linked to the next. Each one-liner was its own work of art. Forget the humor—consider the contrast, symmetry and sound of the following:

“He atones for being occasionally somewhat over-dressed, by being always absolutely over-educated.”

The best of Wilde’s epigrams play directly with trite, entrenched ideas or phrases. Wilde had an encyclopedic knowledge of literary history: he studied all the great English writers and poets, was devoted to French literature, and won awards at Oxford and Trinity College, Dublin for his studies in Greek and Latin. He constantly references his artistic heritage for humor and context. For Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage...” but for Wilde,

“The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.”

As an expatriate Irishman, Wilde was intensely suspicious of preaching rhetoric. Supposed sincerity and moralistic banalities also served for Wilde’s target practice:

“Work is the curse of the drinking classes.”

With allusion and contradiction, he upset the tired conventions of language, just as in life he destabilized the rules of society. George Bernard Shaw admired Wilde’s ability to jangle the nerves of an audience. In his review of *An Ideal Husband*, Shaw mused, “They laugh angrily at his epigrams, like a child who is coaxed into being amused in the very act of setting up a yell of rage and agony.” Shaw would have aimed to use that anger for social change; Wilde just enjoyed their irritation.

Though rhetorical contradiction gives much of Wilde’s work its distinct flavor, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is where Wilde reaches the pinnacle of paradox. Form finally marries content; the symmetry of phrase matches the harmony of structure. The plot of *Earnest* is Wilde’s finest epigram. Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen and Cecily all mirror each other; their schemes, desires, and even their dialogue run parallel. Jack’s supposed lie about having a brother named Ernest is turned on its head, and his imaginary alter-ego proves to exist in reality. Contradictory lies are simultaneously confirmed true, and truth dissolves. This is the essence of an epigram.

The precision and universality of Wilde’s phrases endure, as does the magnetism of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Perhaps, then, it is fitting to let Wilde summarize his own achievement: “I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.”

Laura Henry Buda is STC’s Community Engagement Manager and served as Artistic Fellow in the 2011-2012 Season. She holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from the A.R.T./M.X.A.T. Institute at Harvard University.

Manners for Manors

An orientation for Victorian era social calls

by Garrett Anderson



CITY :

Parties and social rounds were much more common in the city: easier to both arrange and attend. One could attend around five different events over the course of a day. A breakfast in one home, another social call before lunch, some shopping before afternoon tea, and then dinner and a night out.

At the end of Act One, Jack and Algernon discuss all of their options for the evening after dinner: the theatre, the social club, or enjoying the sights around the city.

SOCIAL ROOM SETUP:

Act One is set in the **morning room** of Algernon's flat. Similar to a modern day living room, morning rooms were used only during daylight hours, for breakfasts and impromptu social calls. At the top of the play we hear Algernon playing a piano. This was probably coming from ...

The **drawing room**, a more formal room, used to receive and entertain guests before dinner parties and like occurrences. For the less wealthy, drawing rooms often served as the lone sitting room in the house. Larger drawing rooms were referred to as salons and smaller drawing rooms as parlors.

DINNER:

Dinner parties were planned with guests assigned to one another by rank. Each bite of food and drop of tea was carefully choreographed over the course of the night.

A three course meal was the smallest of meals served at dinner parties. For large affairs, the course count could reach as many as ten, not including dessert. It was understood that one could refrain from eating every course.

In Act One, Lady Bracknell informs Algernon of her plan to sit him with Mary Farquhar and her husband. Algernon's refusal causes Lady Bracknell to uninvite guests to maintain decorum.

"GWENDOLEN. Personally I cannot understand how anybody manages to exist in the country, if anybody who is anybody does. The country always bores me to death."

"ALGERNON. Tomorrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying. . . I shall probably not be back till Monday. You can put up my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits ..."



COUNTRY:

Social gatherings in the country often lasted a full day if not longer. Some travels could last weeks because of how cumbersome travel tended to be. In the country, men would often hunt whereas woman passed the time by going on walks or lounging in the garden until tea and dinner.

The Importance of Being Earnest set renderings by Simon Higlett.

"ALGERNON. Jack, you are at the muffins again! I wish you wouldn't. There are only two left. I told you I was particularly fond of muffins.

JACK. But I hate tea-cake.

ALGERNON. Why on earth then do you allow tea-cake to be served up for your guests? What ideas you have of hospitality!"

"GWENDOLEN. You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake."

TEA:

The tea party wasn't a social staple until the 1840's. Over the course of the following twenty years, afternoon tea became a ritual of varying forms; from the unceremonious family affair to the ornate, invite only to-do.

By the 1870's tea had become a social standard. Women wore tea gowns, elaborate dresses similar to dinner clothes.

Afternoon tea was a smaller affair. Specific food items such as cucumber sandwiches, cakes, and bread and butter were arranged beforehand.

Garrett Anderson is STC's 2013-2014 Artistic Fellow. He has interned with Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago and Bret Adams Talent Agency in New York. Garrett holds a B.A. in Theatre Arts from The University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas.

The Importance of Being Earnest

PERFORMANCE CALENDAR

- A AUDIO-DESCRIBED
- B BOOKENDS
- C CLASSICS IN CONTEXT
- D PAGE AND STAGE
- O OPENING NIGHT
- P POST-PERFORMANCE CAST DISCUSSION
- S SIGN-INTERPRETED
- Y YOUNG PROSE NIGHT

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
JANUARY						
				8:00	16 8:00	17 8:00
2:00	19	20	7:30	21 12:00 7:30	22 8:00	23 8:00
26 7:30	D	27 7:45	O	28 7:30	B	29 8:00
FEBRUARY/MARCH						
						1 2:00 8:00
2:00	2	3	4 7:30	5 7:30	6 8:00	7 8:00
2:00	9	10	7:30	11 7:30	12 P	13 8:00
2:00	16	17	7:30	18 S	19 7:30	20 8:00
2:00	23	24	7:30	25	26 7:30	27 8:00
2:00	2					1 2:00 8:00



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CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

Join the FREE exchange of ideas! STC's Creative Conversations provide our audience with the chance to connect deeply with the work on our stages. No matter your interest, we have a discussion for you.

FREE **PAGE AND STAGE**
 Sunday, January 26, 5–6 p.m.
 Sidney Harman Hall
 Explore the production with the artistic team and local scholars.

FREE **POST-PERFORMANCE CAST DISCUSSION**
 Wednesday, February 12, post-show
 Sidney Harman Hall
 Extend your theatre experience with a post-show discussion with the acting company.

FREE **BOOKENDS**
 Wednesday, January 29
 5:30 p.m. and post-show
 The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
 Immerse yourself in the world of the play with pre- and post-show discussions.

FREE **CLASSICS IN CONTEXT**
 Saturday, February 15, 5–6 p.m.
 The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
 Discuss the production from multiple perspectives.

For more information, visit ShakespeareTheatre.org/Education.