

(MUSIC)

ANDREW SMITH: Welcome to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

(MUSIC)

HANNAH HESSEL RATNER: Welcome to STC's Prosecast for the 2013-2014 Season. This is Episode Three, "The Importance of Being Earnest," and we are recording on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, so Happy New Year from Shakespeare Theatre Company! It's a brand new year, and we are the same people (laughs), so, um, I'm—

DREW LICHTENBERG: We are unchanged, just like last year.

RATNER: Exactly. I'm Hannah Hessel Ratner, Audience Enrichment Manager, and you just heard Drew Lichtenberg, um, who is the Literary Associate. We are talking about "The Importance of Being Earnest," which is running January 16<sup>th</sup> through March 9<sup>th</sup>, a nice, a nice long winter run, and it is, perhaps, the most popular of Oscar Wilde's plays, and we've done now, I believe, every other major play of Oscar Wilde's. We've done most the major plays.

LICHTENBERG: Right, we have not done "The Duchess of Padua"—

RATNER: Or "Salome" —

LICHTENBERG: Or "Vera" or "The Nihilists."

RATNER: I love that title.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: So, we'll talk today about Wilde, about the play, and we are going to be lucky to be joined by prominent actor, very talented Floyd King. So, he'll be coming just before he pops into the Rehearsal Hall, and we'll get to chat with him a little bit about what's happening in there. But, let's start off by talking about Oscar Wilde. Mostly, when we talk about Oscar Wilde in modern society, we end up talking about the latter half of his life and about the kind of tragedy surrounding his, um, imprisonment and then his sad decline, but this play, kind of takes—was written at the peak of his career and his prominence, and, so, I think it would be helpful for our audience to kind of know what was thought about him then and what his kind of aesthetic track, and where this, this play actually comes from and what's it, what is it saying. So, Drew, can you get us started talking about Oscar Wilde, and, maybe, do a little bit of back story before we kind of explode it out?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, well, you know, there's a number of ways to begin talking about Wilde's life. He was Irish, uh, which, I think, often goes, sort of, neglected in stories of Wilde.

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde is his full birth name, and his mother was an Irish patriot at a time when Ireland was sort of still a colony. So, there's that, and he, you know, he went to Trinity College in Dublin, and then was such a brilliant scholar that he was a scholarship student to Oxford, I believe, where he really was a, a brilliant and gifted scholar. He wanted to be an academic—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and there's an interesting series of sort of guises or masks that he wears. He, he, tries to be a scholar and he goes on a, a lecture tour of North America—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: Um.

RATNER: —and he's also a journalist and a poet.

LICHTENBERG: He's a journalist. He's a, he's a writer of essays. He's the editor a women's literary magazine. Before he's a playwright, he writes children's stories, 'cause he had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, with his wife, Constance.

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Not many people know that Wilde was married. But, I think, you know, what we're interested in talking about is this, this, this aestheticist period of Wilde, right?

RATNER: Right. So, Wilde, when he first exited Oxford, he becomes part of a larger artistic movement—

LICHTENBERG: —and it's actually when he's at Oxford, he starts dressing provocatively.

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: He wears his hair long. He's kind of the first rock star.

RATNER: Right. He wears velvet breeches.

LICHTENBERG: He's fond of wearing purple and green and—

RATNER: —carrying around flowers.

LICHTENBERG: —putting daisies and sunflowers in his button hole.

RATNER: Mmm hmm, and, so, part of his influence was the, kind of, scholars talking about artistic movements of the time and especially, um, Walter Pater, who wrote a book about, um, the English Renaissance, but, more specifically, wrote about the need to find beauty in the world and art for art's sake and the idea that what we should be striving as an individual and as a country and as a civilization is beauty at the utmost.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and you see that, in, sort of, the pre-Raphaelite painters who come right before Wilde.

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: There's this rediscovery in the Victorian era of the Greeks and, you know, Wilde wrote his, I think, PhD thesis on how the Greeks were the true moderns and that we should go back to living in the Greek way of life.

RATNER: Yeah, and, and I think that it was very clear that this idea of beauty and this idea of how you live your life became the, kind of, central point of, of his life, that he become—with this persona, with the hair and the, the velvet and everything—that he became his own work of art.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, he was the first celebrity, in the modern sense of the word. He was the first, sort of, pop star or a rock star.

RATNER: Yeah, and well, popular culture caught on because then you have the very popular at the time, Gilbert and Sullivan—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

RATNER: —creating one of their musical operettas about a similar character.

LICHTENBERG: Right. In fact, he was so famous—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and that, um, "Patience," which was an operetta, he inspired a fop character.

RATNER: Well, one—so, one of my favorite tidbits about "Patience" is Wilde made a name for himself in the United States by doing this lecturing tour, as Drew mentioned earlier, but the lecturing tour was actually produced by Gilbert and Sullivan's producer, Richard D'Oyly Carte, who said, you know, "We want to bring—'Patience' has been this huge hit in England. We wanna bring it to the United States, but nobody in the United States has any idea what this aesthetic movement is or who we are satirizing, so, therefore, let's just bring Oscar Wilde over."

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: "He'll lecture all over the country. People will see him in his foppish clothing, and, then, they'll get our play."

LICHTENBERG: Right, and as he said, uh, when he was declaring customs on his entry into America, "I have nothing to declare, but my own genius."

RATNER: Well, and it's so interesting, right, because we think of him as being his own man, and his own character created this, but he's being produced by someone.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: His, his tour of the United States wasn't, you know, Oscar Wilde saying, "I've got to share this news," although, there's probably an element of that, but it was—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, he was—

RATNER: —a manipulation.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, he was very much a, uh, he was very much relying on the, on the benevolence of other people.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: In fact, he, he spent most of his American tour trying to find a patron or sponsor to produce one of his plays—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: — 'cause he never had a place produced, and that's because "Vera" or "The Nihilists" was written about a Russian baroness during the, the Revolution of 1917, which is (laughs), you know, is an unproduceable play now, let alone in 1892.

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: The things he also would lecture on—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —in America: He would lecture on women's clothing, or on wallpaper, or on how to have a nice kitchen—

RATNER: Well, so what he was really lecturing on was on this kind of heritage that he received from his teachers at Oxford, this idea of art for art's sake, that it's our job to make our lives as beautiful as possible—

LICHTENBERG: Right, and every aspect of our life, our lifestyle, is, in fact, a style—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —that the, the clothing you wear, the ornamentations in your hair, the cooking utensils you have, all of it can be beautifully designed, and, you know, we still collect our nouveau furniture—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and cooking items and China because of how beautiful it is.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: This is that revolutionary period.

RATNER: (laughs) Um, so, one of the things he said in "Decay of Lying," his Socratic dialogue, written after his tour that I, I really thought was interesting is he talks about how life imitates art more often than art imitates life, and there are all artists who think that what their job is is to represent life as it exists for the audience to see, but, in reality, what would be more effective would be to represent beauty because then we would want to live our lives like that beauty.

LICHTENBERG: Right. It's this very seductive, kind of romantic idea. You know, you see it a lot in Wagner or in Shakespeare, which is what we see in art should be better than life. It should be a world that we want to pass into that transcends. It should be a, a utopian place—

RATNER: Yeah, so what do you think about that Drew?

LICHTENBERG: Well, you know, in my program note on "Importance of Being Earnest," I mentioned Karl Marx and Voltaire and Sir Thomas More, like "Importance of Being Earnest" as a work within a utopian genre—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —that it is life as we imagine it in our dreams, not life as imagine it in reality, and I think that's true. You know, Oscar Wilde's characters always speak in a way that is more perfect than life. They speak the way we wish we could speak if we were all as smart and as well-spoken as Oscar Wilde—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —it's, it's, what does Pangloss say, um, in—

RATNER: The best of all possible worlds.

LICHTENBERG: Candide? The best of all possible worlds. That is “The Importance of Being Earnest.” I’m getting ahead of myself.

RATNER: No, no you’re not, but I think, you know, it’s, it’s very interesting because it does rub off on you. You know, you see an Oscar Wilde play or you see, as we will later this year, a Noël Coward play—

LICHTENBERG: “Private Lives,” yeah.

RATNER: —where the writing creates this entirely other world, and I find—I don’t know if this is the same view—but, I leave with those sounds in my head, and for some time, I talk as though I’m in another world, I mean, not a British accent or anything like that, but, you know, you, I think that there is some truth to you experience something that is better than you are in some way, and you hold on to parts of that until it’s kind of dribbles out with the—

LICHTENBERG: Right, right, I mean, to paraphrase Wagner, it’s the work of art is a mystic experience. It’s, it’s a metaphysical experience, almost, without going to church.

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: It’s art as a kind of religion.

RATNER: So, I feel that you and I, as contemporary theatre artists, believe that work should have, you know, a strong point of view and it should be saying something about the world. It should make us have discussions and talk, I mean, I’ve built my career about—

LICHTENBERG: You mean, like a political point of view.

RATNER: Yeah, well, political, social, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

RATNER: You know, I, we both have made careers out of having conversations about plays.

LICHTENBERG: Right, that there is deep meaning—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —embedded in these works of art.

RATNER: Right. So, the kind of art for art's sake, if, if that was espoused completely, I mean, that would put me out of a job certainly, but (laugh) —

LICHTENBERG: Well, yes, but, in another sense, it is a political point of view. One of the essays that Wilde wrote when he—before he was a playwright was called “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” and he, and in the essay, he actually rejects socialism and says “We should all be anarchists. We should all create our own political identities and personal identities through performance, through social performance.”

RATNER: So, do you think that he uses those tools in his plays? Do you think he is trying to? When we leave the theatre and we see that thing of beauty, and there's no doubt that “The Importance of Being Earnest” is really a work of beauty, is he trying to also make us leave the theatre changed in some way that will affect our world?

LICHTENBERG: Oh, I think so. You know, you know, Harold Bloom says that Wilde is a, is, is—belongs to the genre of nonsense literature, which is this Victorian-period genre of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and the Jabberwocky and stuff like that—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —which I could completely disagree with. I think that there is so much social and political meaning in these plays. I mean, look at the first scene in “Earnest” between Algernon and Lane, his butler, which is a scene in which the butler gets most of the laugh lines, right, he's smarter than Algernon—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and we learn that bachelorhood is preferable to marriage, that sentiment is more important than accuracy in art, 'cause, I—you know, he starts off playing the piano terribly, but with great feeling, and that art is preferable to science. So, in this, like, maybe five-minute snippet of dialogue, you have a complete political way of life espoused for you as an audience member, and I think it's impossible to leave the theatre and not feel as if you're looking at everything in society changed in a new way.

RATNER: So, do you think that art for art's sake is nonsense as a term, that it's a way of hiding the fact that what we're really trying to do is, in effect, a better society, but, not allowing people to realize that that's what's going on?

LICHTENBERG: I think it's a very seductive idea, and, like every utopian dream, it's probably impossible to realize to perfection, to a state of perfection.

RATNER: But, is it, is the, I guess what I'm getting at is, is the perfect idea of art for art's sake actually a political goal?

LICHTENBERG: Yes, yes. It's, it's a desire to transform the world.

RATNER: Right. So, when, when people say art for art's sake is frivolous, they're actually missing that art for art's sake is really just saying art to make the world a better place.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, yeah, I agree with you, yeah. But, you know, it's also a dangerous idea because, uh, Oscar Wilde has a lot in common with Friedrich Nietzsche. Both of them are talking about—

RATNER: Well, he's obviously interested in nihilism.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, they're both interested in nihilism, and, and they're obviously—they're, they're both creating themselves in a modern world without religion or morality or trying to create a new way of life with the absence of these things. That Wilde is such an opponent of old Europe and such an advocate for a modern way of life, and if you look at the twentieth century, that kind of nihilism can manifest itself in really disturbing ways as well as in a kind of beautiful, anarchistic, Wildian way. André Gide, the famous French writer, once said, like, reading Nietzsche meant nothing to him 'cause he had read Oscar Wilde first, and I think, he, he does have that darkness or that emptiness or that this—behind the mask is always really interesting in Wilde's plays—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: 'cause what is behind the mask? Do we even know what is inside?

RATNER: Right, and, and this, this play particularly—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —is one that really focuses on that.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: Who is, who—what names mean? What are you hiding?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, what are you really?

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Are you, are you Bunbury or are you Algernon? Are you Earnest or are you Jack?

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and what does that even mean to be one of the other?

RATNER: Well, this is a great place to pause before we, we bring on our guest, but I'm happy. I feel a lot better talking to you, Drew, 'cause now I feel like my job is secure—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

RATNER: —that actually, there are things to talk about with these plays.

(MUSIC)

RATNER: We're back and we are now joined by Floyd King, and we are very excited to have you here.

FLOYD KING: Thank you.

RATNER: Thanks for coming in. What we do with these podcasts in the, the interviews within them is really take it as an opportunity to go inside the rehearsal room where our hope is that our listeners are, you know, listening to this on their way to the theatre that night or when they get home from the theatre that night. So, they get to see something that they wouldn't otherwise know about the process.

KING: Mmm hmm.

RATNER: So, I would love if you would just start off telling us what you're working on today.

KING: Well, you mean today in particular?

RATNER: Yeah.

KING: Well, we started run—I did our first run through of the play, complete run through without stopping, last rehearsal, which was the 31<sup>st</sup>, Tuesday, and today, then, we're breaking it down again today, uh, working on particular parts of it, and then we will, uh, run it again and then break it down again and run it again.

RATNER: (laughs)

KING: It's been a wonderful process I mean well, Keith is not only fun, but he knows what he's doing. He knows the period, knows the style, runs a rehearsal that is pleasant, and hires pleasant people.

RATNER: Those are all great things. That makes a huge difference.

KING: Huge difference, yes. I mean, we're, we're having fun, and I think it's important because if we do, the audience will—I mean, the, well, the right kind of fun. It's work fun, not, you know, we don't just stop and do—

RATNER: (laughs) You're not having a party.

KING: No, no, we're not. It's a party. It's a Wilde party.

RATNER: Ha ha!

KING: There you go.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, Floyd, you're playing—well, why don't you tell us what kind of character you're playing.

KING: Well, he's Reverend Chasuble. I think he's probably the straightest character in the play, uh, but he's not particularly, not funny. He's just, it's, he's subtler, I think, (laughs), which is not my forte generally, as you know, but I, I like him a lot. He's a—they're all stereotypes. The play, I think, is actually, it may—I don't know how it was written, but I think he was—it's a satire in the sense that he's holding up an element of society not for ridicule, but just to show people who these people were, were at the turn of the Century. And then, also, the—well, this was 1895, almost the turn of the Century—and how, um, well frivolous—but, I think when you see it, that it, we're all not just as frivolous, but we all, we all have moments of frivolity. This was just a, a, not an entire society, but a certain element of society that was, you know, things that were important to them then are not at all important to us now. But, it's amazing how, I'm sure it was just as funny then as it is now. You know, it's a, it's a period piece now, but it wasn't then. It was a modern play, but a satire, but a loving satire, I think.

RATNER: So how do you think—you were talking about how the role you're playing is more subtle than roles you were used to playing, and, of course, you've made a career out of playing a lot of comedic characters—

KING: Clowns.

RATNER: Yeah.

KING: Yes.

RATNER: Um, how do you think this differs for you as a process, playing such a literal—

KING: Well, it's not so much in the sense of—because I've played lots of, lots and lots of parts that aren't particularly funny, uh, not funny at all, some of them. I hope I brought some

humor to all of them because I think that's what makes us human. Even villains have humor or can have or should have onstage to make them not just evil, but interesting, so it's not something, it's not a process that I'm not used to on some level. It's, the, the, the play is really character based. I'm saying that after, you know, all those—I think the word is aphorisms—they're just, um, each line could be crocheted, or, no, I'm sorry, embroidered onto a thing that you hang in your kitchen. But, one of the things we're trying to do with this is not have it that way, that it's real conversation. That's just the way these people talk, and they're not trying to be funny, and that's the funny part, actually. They're speaking as any actor should or any character would from the heart, and it's hilarious, but—

RATNER: —and there are no clowns in this play at all.

KING: No, no one is a clown. No. Everyone's very—it's—what's the play called again? It's, um, for serious people, but a, a frivolous—

LICHTENBERG: A trivial, a trivial comedy for serious people.

KING: Yes, yeah, and that's exactly what it is. That's a perfect, uh, description of it.

RATNER: Have you played another Oscar Wilde, and do you think that this is similar stylistically?

KING: I think it's the best of Wilde. I have played a small part in "Ideal Husband," Phipps, the sarcastic butler, and there's actually a sarcastic butler in this play, too, uh, I think it's, though, it's smaller than most of his plays. There's no intention to be serious.

RATNER: Mmm.

KING: Although, the play's not silly, but it's not a serious play, per say, but it's, but it's hone—I think it, it, it was, I think it was the last play that he wrote, and his most successful.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

KING: So, I mean, he, he, it was the culmination of his talent, yes.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it's true in a way. The other plays all have these sort of melodramatic plot lines, where there are members of parliament who are in this state of scandal—

KING: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: —or there's a woman with an illegitimate child—

RATNER: Very soap opera.

KING: —and, and very, sort of, pretensions of seriousness.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and here—

RATNER: It's about an issue.

LICHTENBERG: —here, the big conflict is over a handbag, essentially, right? It's over items of—

RATNER: Well, and it's almost—

KING: It's also about, well, really, about a man who has the wrong name for the woman he loves.

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —which, in some sense, is, is really trivial, and, in another sense, is the most serious thing in the world.

RATNER: Right.

KING: Well, it certainly is to Gwendolyn—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

KING: —in the play.

LICHTENBERG: It must be Earnest.

KING: Yeah.

RATNER: Right, well, right, exactly, the title kind of says it all, that—

LICHTENBERG: It's important, but what is the importance of being Earnest?

RATNER: Yes, exactly. (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: You said you, uh, you're working with Keith again—

KING: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and with many people that you've worked with in the past, and you're also working with some new people, right, like Siân Phillips?

KING: Siân Phillips.

LICHTENBERG: —and Patricia Connolly Siân

KING: Siân Patricia Connolly, both expert actors. Siân, of course, is someone that I've wanted to meet for a very long time, and this is, it's a thrill to meet her. She's a wonderful woman. And Trish, of course, is quite an accomplished actress, who's doing many, many, many things in her life, uh, acting wise. She's wonderful, wonderful.

RATNER: And we have these people really because of Keith Baxter, 'cause he has these strong relationships—

KING: Absolutely, absolutely. He knows a lot of people. That's why he's able to bring in his friends, who are right and talented, and, hopefully, will draw as well. I mean, uh, Siân—I first saw her in, um, —although she'd been quite famous in England for years and Britain—but in, uh, "I, Claudius," was her claim to fame—

RATNER: Yeah.

KING: —as far as I was concerned. She's done many other, but I've also seen her since then. I saw her do a one-woman show of Marlene Dietrich, which was wonderful—

RATNER: Wow.

KING: —in London.

LICHTENBERG: I think she was also, um, in "Tinker Taylor Soldier Spy"—

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —the original BBC miniseries—

RATNER: That doesn't surprise me.

KING: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —with Alec Guinness. She was the main female protagonist in that series.

RATNER: Well, I like her 'cause she comes through the Education door, rather than the other door, every day—

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

RATNER: —and she always says hi to us, and, so, she, she wins big gold stars in my book for that.

(LAUGHTER)

LICHTENBERG: It's the thrill of your day.

RATNER: It's really lovely.

LICHTENBERG: And Trish is playing Miss Prism opposite you.

KING: Yes. We're, um, mates.

LICHTENBERG: Right. Have you guys gotten off and had coffee and figured out any private bits or—

KING: No, no, no. Actually, that's not the way she works or the way I work. You just rehearse the play, and these things develop, rather than faces in the mirror that you bring in—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

KING: —you know, that sort of thing now. It's not my style, nor is it—although it may look like it sometimes—but it's not my style, nor is it hers, and it's because we are trained actors—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

KING: —and that's what you learn in your training, sort of, not to do that kind of thing, to let things happen, let, let it come from reality or based on reality, you know. It's not necessarily naturalistic acting—

RATNER: Yeah.

KING: —in fact—

RATNER: Have you started to find those things with her?

KING: Oh yeah. Oh God, yeah, the first day, but, they just—those are the things that happen when experienced actors get together. It's nothing like, "Oh, we could do this funny bit here." I mean, that, that's not the way it goes in rehearsal, generally. It's you rehearse the play, and the play will tell you—

LICHTENBERG: So, if you trust the training and trust the mechanism to—

KING: —and trust the play and the director.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Right.

KING: Anything—as you were talking about bits—most of those things will come from the director generally, and, then, they will inspire us to have ideas, but it's nothing I, I don't think about what I'm going to do too much before a play starts rehearsal. I become very familiar with who I am in the play, but not, like, "Oh, and then I'll do a flip here or, you know."

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

KING: "—or do my old shtick there." It's not—you know, I try, in fact, not to repeat myself, and I think that's why I've, sort of, have lasted in Washington for so long. It's not, you know, it's, it's me, but I'm not doing exactly what you saw last time. That's what an actor always wants to do, is to surprise himself as well as the other people watching the play—

RATNER: And you're working with Keith as a director who also is an actor.

RATNER: Yes, that's helpful. Therefore, he has an understanding that, I mean, I don't think it's necessary for a director to be an actor, but you have a, there's a bit of an understanding that a director who was an actor or still is an actor, as Keith is, has: a sympathy, an understanding that, uh, maybe a brilliant, brilliant director does not have.

LICHTENBERG: Are there any favorite Keith stories that you have?

KING: Oh, lots of them. Most of them cannot be told.

RATNER: (laughs) Well, one of the things before, before we let you go back to rehearsal, one of the things that Drew and I were talking about before you came in was the, the masks that are put on in a lot of Oscar Wilde's work, and, particularly in "Earnest," how people—the bunburying and who one really in inside verses who one displays—

KING: Yes.

RATNER: —and I'm curious, conversations that have happened in the rehearsal room around those ideas at all or—

KING: Well, hmm, I believe that we think—I can't speak for everyone—but, I believe that, that is that if you take a play that is not—this is not a shallow play, but it's not a deep play, and if you try to make a deep, a, a play like this deep, you're going to confuse us, the audience and the actors. It's just what it is. My character, I think, though, my particular character, which is

interesting to me about him is he's not like that. What you see is what you get. That may be true of all of them, actually, but he's not—he has not pretensions.

RATNER: Mmm.

KING: Well, of course, he does. He thinks he's a wonderful, um, Vicar, and he has many unpublished sermons—

(LAUGHTER)

KING: —that he refers to, and that amuses me. He, he could be a stick in the mud if he weren't written by Wilde.

LICHTENBERG: Right. He does have this frustrated literary life.

KING: Indeed he does. Yes, yes.

LICHTENBERG: Um, you get the sense that he, he's the kind of Vicar that Wilde would have been, were he a Vicar.

KING: Right, right, and, on the outside looking in at him, he's funny because he's so, well, serious, and very, very, very British.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

KING: It's one of the—what I want, I want, I want him to sound, I want the way for him to sound onstage is old fashioned—

RATNER: Mmm.

KING: —even an old-fashioned Brit, even to the people that he's talking to. I think they think he's an era. He's, he's Raj.

RATNER: Yeah, he, he harkens back to a pre-Victorian era.

KING: Yeah, he does. He does. His intent of, of the way he sounds, it's very “here” and “hello” and, you know, that sort of British accent, which we're—well, everyone except me—is not using. They're using British accents of course, and to varying degrees because no one—what is a British accent? What is an American accent? It's—no one onstage should sound like another person.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: Wow.

KING: I mean, there's no homogenous sound that you want with a British accent, but it should be British.

RATNER: Are those choices the actors the actors are making?

KING: Yes, yes. Well, with Patricia, who is Austrian to Britain to America, that's a natural accent of hers—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

KING: Uh, certainly Siân, um—

RATNER: —who's Welsh, correct?

KING: Who's Welsh, but—

LICHTENBERG: —but she studied at RADA, so she got that—

KING: Yeah, yeah. That's all gone—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

KING: —you, know, but she, but she speaks Welsh—

RATNER: Mmm.

KING: —which is really interesting, too. The others, the boys are just trained, so they know an accent, and there's an Irish accent because one, one of the—Merriman, who's one of the servants, has an Irish Accent in this play, which would be typical of the period, I think.

RATNER: Mmm.

KING: Yeah. This is all upstairs of the upstairs downstairs—

RATNER: Yes.

KING: —and very upstairs, you know.

RATNER: Even the servants are particularly upstairs. (laughs)

KING: Indeed, indeed. Yes, yes. Yeah.

RATNER: Well, thank you so much for joining us. We'll let you—

KING: Thank you! I enjoyed this very much, easy.

RATNER: —get upstairs and, and keep going.

KING: Alright.

LICHTENBERG: Always fascinating, Floyd.

RATNER: Yeah.

KING: Thank you. Thank you very much.

RATNER: We look forward to seeing you onstage soon.

(MUSIC)

RATNER: Well, that was a lovely time with Floyd.

LICHTENBERG: Yes, I, I love Floyd. He's always—not all comic actors have his gift for talking about the craft of comedy.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Um, he's an unusually, I would say, intellectual clown—

RATNER: —and he's, and he's very open and, and giving—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm.

RATNER: —which is, is really wonderful. But, let's, let's move on and go a little bit deeper into “Earnest” before we, we stop for the day. And I realize we, we really didn't do a plot summary, and it's a frequently done play, so we assume that some of our listeners are familiar with it, but others may not be. But, Drew, do you think you could give a short outline of what happens, or, at least, what the set-up is at the beginning of the play?

LICHTENBERG: Hmm. Well, okay. The set-up is, the set-up is relatively simple. We have these two London gentlemen: Jack and Algernon, except Jack is pretending to be Earnest in the city and Jack in the country, whereas Algernon pretends to be a man named Bunbury, or to visit a friend named Bunbury, in the country, and Algernon in the city. So, there's a, uh—mistaken identities arise as a result of this naming business. Jack is in love with Algernon's cousin, and Algernon is in love with Jack's ward, so both of them, in other words, are thought to be Earnest, whereas neither of them is—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and the name of the play is “The Importance of Being Earnest,” and you can see quickly how what seems to be a simple play about naming business can open on to serious or trivial avenues—

RATNER: —and it’s a three-act play with the first act taking place in the city and the second two acts taking place in the country—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —as things get—

LICHTENBERG: —Right, and, in fact, it was—the, the original draft was four acts, and it was much more about money. Uh, it was much more of a melodramatic potboiler plot—

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and Wilde, in condensing the play to three acts, eliminates much of the “Real World” details, and makes it much more of a kind of floating metaphorical—you know, Floyd was—he calls it a satire, which is sort of close to what Wilde’s doing, but it’s a very hard play to actually describe in terms of its genre—

RATNER: —and, and yeah, there are not many plays that do the same thing, that present—

LICHTENBERG: Right

RATNER: —at the same time a society as it is, a society as an elevated version of what it is—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —but without any sort of moral—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —that comes from that.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, in some ways, it’s a cross between a Gilbert and Sullivan world of elevated, farcical, fantasy-like creatures and a kind of George Bernard Shaw play, which is filled with these characters saying philosophically provocative things—

RATNER: —and then you just add in these amazing one-liners that could become—could stand on their own and could—

LICHTENBERG: Right, which, and which are—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —famous on their own, and, you know, Wilde is justifiably famous as the King of the English epigram or the, uh, bon mot, right?

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: The, uh, these, these paradoxical sentences that seem perfectly balanced, and it's hard to actually say what he's saying in them.

RATNER: Yeah, so you feel that it's a play that's, that's written at once for the kind of charming comedic plot of "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl," but then is also just impeccably crafted, in terms of the language, where every word is chosen for some sort of effect.

LICHTENBERG: Well, yeah, and there's also, you know, at the core of this play, you know, you could almost call it "The Importance of Being English," and Floyd was sort of talking about that as well, that every character is so British in such a, a kind of satire of a British person that the play seems to be suggesting that there's no such thing as British-ness, you know, that British-ness is performed, uh, identity is performed, that anybody can become British and old class—

RATNER: Right, and, well, that's interesting coming from someone who is Irish—

LICHTENBERG: —who is Irish and took on a—

RATNER: —and actually changed his accent.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and he's a very self-made, self-made man—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Uh, in some way, the, the play, itself, is embodying what happened in Wilde's own life, which is becoming more British than the British people, themselves, are. I'm confused now, but, it made sense when I started that sentence.

RATNER: (laughs) No, I think there is something to that, though.

LICHTENBERG: But, you know, Wilde was also dangerous. He refused to take seriously the British people. He refused to take seriously the social mores of British society, and they cast him out. They put him in prison. They, they made him move to France.

RATNER: See, I don't know, I think I would argue with that he refused to take seriously. I think he did take seriously, but part of what he saw as British was "You are one way in public and you're another way in private."

LICHTENBERG: Mmm. That's also a possible reading. I think, yeah, like, I'm sure—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —people still argue over who Oscar Wilde really was, and he remains, I think, a very modern, mysterious ambiguous figure to many—

RATNER: Yeah, especially at that point of his life when he hadn't had to face the aftermath of what he was doing—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and Keith, you know, Keith Baxter's, I think, rightfully suspicious of reading Wilde, in this play, as solely about, um, a kind of performance of gayness or homosexuality or gay rights icon that Wilde has become, because it's a shrinking down of what Wilde really represents—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and its importance in letters and in culture and in society.

RATNER: Indeed. Speaking of what people represent and culture letters and society, uh, what we've been doing for all of these podcasts this season is kind of reflecting on how these plays influence pop culture or contemporary culture, and what are things that we think of when we think of these plays or that come up, um, so, we're gonna just kind of talk about that and also invite our Sound Engineer, Andy Smith, to join in that discussion as well.

SMITH: Hi. Yeah, I've got two books and a television show. One is—I've been going through William Manchester's three-part biography on William Churchill, which is amazing, it's called "The Last Lion." But, the first volume, which is everything from the time of his birth in 1874 through the 1920's, and then the prologue to this, it is called "Land of Hope and Glory," and it's all about Britain at the height of Empire, and, most importantly, the aristocracy that Churchill came from—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

SMITH: —at the height of Empire, and it's all about putting this world in a context, and what you're talking—

RATNER: —aristocracy and an American, right, so it—

SMITH: Well, very much, that, that, uh, his mother, she was an American, but also mistress of Edward VIII—

LICHTENBERG: Wow.

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

SMITH: Yeah. The second book is, uh, Bill Bryson's "At Home," which came out a couple years ago, and he lives in this 1850 house that was for the parish and, um, he goes through every room, he goes to the dining room, and that becomes a talk about the furniture in your house, and it's an amazing little read.

RATNER: I wanna read that.

SMITH: Yeah, the bathroom becomes a discussion about the history of sewers

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

SMITH: —which were very important at this point in English history, so—

RATNER: So, Bill Bryson "At Home." I'm, I'm making myself a note because I wanna read that.

SMITH: —and then the last thing—and it got brought up a little bit—is "Upstairs, Downstairs," the 1970's TV series, not the remount, which is basically a reaction to "Downton Abbey," but the, the original one with Jean Marsh, which is superior, so—

LICHTENBERG: Also, "Gosford Park," the Robert Altman film—

RATNER: Oh yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —written by Julian Fellowes, who would go on to write "Downton Abbey" is a really spectacular movie. I think it's a little bit later, it's Edwardian—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: Not Victorian.

SMITH: It is.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —but it gives you that—

RATNER: —as is "Downton Abbey"—

LICHTENBERG: Right, it gives you that special feeling—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —inside.

RATNER: Speaking of “Downton Abbey,” tomorrow night, I am judging costume contest that Maryland Public Television is putting on for the premiere of this season of “Downton Abbey,” so—

LICHTENBERG: Oooh.

RATNER: I’m excited, guys. Thank you, Andy. Those all sound great, and I’m gonna definitely look up that book, and, yeah, “Downton Abbey” premieres this weekend, I think, so, we can all get a taste of British-ness there, if we so desire. But, one of the things that I’ve been thinking about, in thinking about Oscar Wilde, himself, and this idea of celebrity and performing appearances, is the kind of selfie culture that we are currently living within. And, particularly, James Franco wrote an article for the New York Times recently, and James Franco is kind of an interesting Wildean character of, you know, someone who’s tried all sorts of different things, who believes that he—and, I mean, who isn’t at once—an intellectual and an artist and creates a, a role in society around that, and so he was writing about how one uses selfies and what the purpose is and, and that for him it has become almost a marking tool.

LICHTENBERG: So, Franco is pro-selfie.

RATNER: Franco is pro-selfie because he has noticed that when he posts a selfie on Instagram, it gets infinitely more likes, shares, whatever than anything else he posts, so, he uses it as a tool, he says, to do one-on-one—one-and-one with the marketing of himself, and the presenting of things he thinks are important. So, he will do a selfie to get the attention, and then the next thing he posts will be a work of art or a book—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

RATNER: —or something that he wants to share with greater culture at large that he thinks he wouldn’t have the audience for, if it weren’t for the fact that people wanna see his face or see him with his shirt off—

LICHTENBERG: So, using his good looks for good purposes—

RATNER: —using his fame—

LICHTENBERG: Right, which are built on, let’s say, his good looks.

RATNER: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: It's, it's an interesting question: Who is the modern day Oscar Wilde? I feel like that each era kind of has the Oscar Wilde that reflects certain truths about that era. Like, I would say, in post-war America, it's Andy Warhol, is that character who creates a version of himself. I'd say in the '60's, it John Lennon, right

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —who said a lot of very Wildean things, like the Beatles are bigger than Jesus, which caused a lot of controversy. And I would say now, it's, uh—and the people in my office hate this—but I think it's Kanye West. I think there—everything he says is a provocative thing. It's not witty in a Wildean way, but it is emotionally inflaming and infuriating and titillating in equal measure. He's interested in fashion, he's interested in, like, the curation of lifestyle, right—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: He proposed to Kim Kardashian at the San Francisco Giants ballpark privately, but with a huge orchestra conducting a song. You know, he's just, he just does these things that are, you can tell, are not for any public reason, but are private works of art, right? Every moment that he's alive, he's trying to live—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —like a work of art.

RATNER: I guess there are, there are a lot of people who are, like, Lady Gaga is another person who lives her—

LICHTENBERG: Oh, she would—

RATNER: —life like it's a work of art.

LICHTENBERG: —she would love to be called the Oscar Wilde of—

RATNER: I, I wouldn't go there and say that, but I do think that, yeah, that that's certainly someone who she's emulating in some ways—

LICHTENBERG: What about Nicki Minaj?

RATNER: Totally.

LICHTENBERG: She's totally a Wildean character, right?

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: She's had all this surgery to make herself look like a plastic work of art. Yeah, and, you know, it's—I always gravitate towards pop stars or rock stars, but, there's nobody who really bridges that—the world of the Avant-garde and the popular like Oscar Wilde did, I don't think.

RATNER: I don't know, maybe—

LICHTENBERG: And you know what is it—I'm just figuring this out right now—it's the shift from a literary culture to a visual or digital culture. The Oscar Wildes we have in contemporary culture are not people who write things.

RATNER: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: They are people who say things or post things on social media or digitize the versions of themselves—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —they make those into manifestations of themselves—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —as a work of art.

RATNER: Yeah, and I think that's right, so—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —the selfie, if the selfie has been around—

LICHTENBERG: —Kim Kardashian—

RATNER: —during Oscar Wilde's time, it would have been—

LICHTENBERG: —So, the video for "Bound 2" by Kanye is like a Wildean work of—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —self creation—

RATNER: —or, or, thinking about Beyonce's album release—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: —where it's all visual and it's, you know

LICHTENBERG: Right.

RATNER: I think the Kardashian thing is also really interesting 'cause I was trying to think what are, what, what do what "The Importance of Being Earnest" do, which, they're contemporary, they show a facet of real life, maybe a heightened real life, but not unnecessarily overtly satirical way, but in a way that still makes us, that we're looking at this element of society that's real, they're really living their lives, but it's so over the top.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm, yeah. My drama school professors would be ashamed of me—

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: —for propagating such rubbish as "Keeping up with the Kardashians" as, like, a valid work of art, but, in some ways, it is, you know. Maybe we're just fallen down the post-modern rabbit hole.

RATNER: It happens.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. It happens.

RATNER: But, luckily, we will be able to turn to the beauty and simplicity of Oscar Wilde (laughs)  
—

LICHTENBERG: —the triviality, maybe, more than simplicity.

RATNER: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: But, thank you—

LICHTENBERG: Thank you, Hannah.

RATNER: —Drew, and thank you, Andy, and, thanks, of course, to Floyd King, for being with us today. We hope you enjoyed listening to the podcast. There are lots of opportunities during the run of "Importance of Being Earnest" to hear your voice, um, so we hope that you will stay for a post-show discussion, come for a pre-show discussion or just join in online. Thanks!  
Bye!

(MUSIC)

SMITH: You've been listening to the Shakespeare Theater Company's Prosecast, Episode number fourteen, featuring Hannah Hessel Ratner, Drew Lichtenberg, Andy Smith, and, special guest, Floyd King. You can find additional episodes and subscribe to the podcast by searching iTunes for Shakespeare Theater Company Asides, or visit the Asides webpage at [shakespearetheatre.org](http://shakespearetheatre.org). Tickets can be purchased by calling our Box Office at (202) 547-1122, or simply visit [shakespearetheatre.org](http://shakespearetheatre.org).