The Importance of Being Earnest

November 18 - 21, 1999
Lydia Mendelssohn Theatre
UM School of Music
Dept. of Theatre and Drama
University of Michigan Department of Theatre and Drama presents

The Importance of Being Earnest

by Oscar Wilde

Director Robert Knopf
Scenic Designer Vincent Mountain
Costume Designer Lea M. Marzonie
Lighting Designer Aaron Sporer
Sound Designer Henry Reynolds
Dramaturg Jennifer Schlueter
Vocal Coach Annette Masson
Stage Manager Patrick K. A. Elkins

Setting:
Act I — Algernon’s apartment in a posh section of New York City
Act II & Act III — Patio of Jack’s house in the Hamptons

Time: Summer, the early 1960s

There will be two intermissions.

Latecomers will be seated at a suitable break or scene change.
As a courtesy to others, please set pagers to silent mode. Cellular phones should be deactivated.
Please deactivate your electronic watch alarm so it will not interrupt the performance.

The School of Music acknowledges the generosity of McKinley Associates, Inc.
whose support has helped make this production possible.
Cast of Characters

Algernon Moncrieff................................................................. Charlie Jett
Lane.......................................................................................... Philip Pirkola
John Worthing........................................................................ Matthew H. Urban
Mrs. Bracknell.......................................................................... Krista Braun
Gwendolen Fairfax..................................................................... Sandra Abrevaya
Cecily Cardew........................................................................ Cortney Wright
Miss Prism................................................................................ Jennifer Lima
Rev. Chasuble........................................................................... Aral Basil Gribble II
Merriman................................................................................... Ethan B. Kogan
Maids...................................................................................... Katherine Banks, Julie Strassel
Guests, Understudies............................................................. Michelle Billingsley, Jessie C Antrell

About the Play

“It is absurd to say that there are neither ruins nor curiosities in America when they have their mothers and their manners.”
— A Woman of No Importance

By calling The Importance of Being Earnest a “Trivial Comedy for Serious People,” Oscar Wilde is, as ever, defiantly artificial, setting up a world in which truth can be found in appearances, and where morality may be determined by what is fashionable. The characters that inhabit this brittle world both exemplify and mock various dramatic types. The ingenue, the matron, the spinster, and the rascal all exist dually: simultaneously portraying and satirizing themselves. In no other world could an ingenue hold as her idealistic goal for happiness “to love someone whose name was Ernest.” This play on words allows Wilde to use the forms and values of High Society to undermine themselves. In fact, Wilde lampoons nearly everything held dear by the upper classes, including birth, religion, manners, and property—while at the same time providing his audience with a truly witty comedy. In this magical balance we find the enduring appeal of Wilde’s play.

At the same time, we cannot dismiss this play as a simple farce. Though The Importance of Being Earnest appears to be, in Wilde’s words, “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy,” it has a sharper edge as well. In The Modern Theatre, Eric Bentley suggests that the play’s surface charms conceal a deeper social critique:
Nothing is easier than to handle this play without noticing what it contains. It is so consistently farcical in tone, characterization, and plot that very few care to root out any more serious content. The general conclusion has been that Wilde merely decorates a silly play with a flippant wit.... Wilde is as much a moralist as Bernard Shaw, but... instead of presenting the problems of modern society directly, he flits around them, teasing them... intermittently revealing the upper class of England in a bizarre light.

Insofar as it serves as a critique of class structure, worship of money, and convenient use of manners, we have chosen to shift this production of Earnest from Victorian England to early 1960s New York High Society. Although popular history has taught us to associate the 1960s with hippies and psychedelia, the more conservative world of High Society existed beyond the tumult and the trends of the times. The main problem concerning 1960s Society was the question of who was in and who was out: the perpetual tension between “new money” arrivistes and “old money” traditionalists, which was in fact at an apex in this cocktail-soaked decade.

At the same time, the issues of women’s rights and integration began to contribute to the growing sense of class-consciousness. The already matriarchal world of High Society saw the arrival of the New Woman, opinionated and sexually liberated, who began to reject the debutante “role” her mother had arranged for her. And in a “world” where African-Americans had most frequently appeared as servants, High Society was suddenly confronted by the emergence of a black upper class.

We have attempted to address these issues playfully, by fully embracing the Wildean spirit of joy in contradiction.
— Jennifer Schlueter, dramaturg
**About the Setting**

**On High Society** from Stephen Birmingham’s The Right People: 1958-1968

“In Society, one must serve drinks, and one must drink them. One must drink them not only often, but well... Outsiders are frequently impressed — if not astonished — at the amount of liquor consumed throughout a perfectly average, unremarkable Society day. It is consumed steadily, slowly, in regulated amounts, throughout every waking hour. While it would be incorrect to say that Society is intoxicated all the time, it is certainly true that most of Society is never entirely sober most of the time.”

“When a person says, with a little sigh, that Real Society is dead and gone, it is reasonably safe to assume that that person is not a member. People in Real Society know that their world is very much alive. But they don’t think it quite polite to say so.”

“If there is one consolation for an old-rich-new-rich marriage, it is that, two generations from now, the money will all be old-rich.”

“In America, there is Society. Then there is Real Society. Real Society is a part of Society—the upper part. Everybody who is in Society knows who the people in Real Society are. But the people in Real Society do not necessarily know who the other Society people are. The two groups seldom mix. Real Society is composed of older people. It is composed of older families. Older families are better people. Better people are nicer people. Newer people may be richer people than older people. That doesn’t matter. Ordinary Society people may get to be Real Society people one day only if they work at it. It sounds confusing, but it is really very simple. Cream rises to the top.”

“‘Cocktails,’ the late Elsa Maxwell once said, with more than a bit of a sneer in her voice, ‘are Society’s most enduring invention.’”

“Let me tell you about the very rich,” F. Scott Fitzgerald begins the third paragraph of his 1926 short story “The Rich Boy.” “They are different from you and me.” To which, Ernest Hemingway is alleged to have replied: “Yes, they have more money.”

**Martinis**

“A martini should always be dry, never sweet. It should have a twist of lemon peel in the container in which the martini is stirred, or the peel may be twisted over each glass so a bit of oil drops in. Some experts insist that the ingredients be stirred all in one direction with the cracked ice....”

_Vanderbilt’s Complete Book of Etiquette, 1963_

“Nothing is so horrid as a martini with too much vermouth.”

_Vanderbilt’s Complete Book of Etiquette, 1963_

“And, I suppose, nothing can be done with people who put olives in martinis, presumably because in some desolate childhood hour someone refused them a dill pickle and so they go through life lusting for the taste of brine. Something can be done with people who put pickled olives in: strangulation seems best.” — Bernard De Voto, as quoted in The Martini
About the Playwright

OSCAR (FINGAL O’FLAHERTY WILLS) WILDE
No name is more inextricably bound to the aesthetic movement of the 1880s and 1890s in England than that of Oscar Wilde. This connection results as much from the lurid details of his life as from his considerable contributions to English literature. Born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854, Wilde was the son of Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca. He was a brilliant student at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Oxford. Between his first work Poems (1881), his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884 (with whom he had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan), and his lecture tour of America, he continued to build his reputation as the most sought-after dinner guest in the British Isles. Frances Winwar in Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties described this social aspect of his fame: “His life from now on assumed an air of arrogance. He would do nothing in moderation—except work. But then, his real work was accomplished when he talked. Before a group of listeners, especially if they were young and handsome and titled, he outdid himself. In the spark of their admiration his mind quickened. Epigram followed epigram, one more dazzling, more preposterous than the other, yet always, like the incandescent core of the firework, with a burning truth at the heart.”

While his next major work, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), has an assured place as a serious work of art and a document of fin-de-siècle aestheticism, it did not gain for its author a reputation as a great novelist. It is rather because of his dramas that Wilde’s reputation has been most secure in the twentieth century. Though Wilde wrote nine plays in all between 1879 and 1894, his fame as a dramatist rests on four comedies, Lady Windermere’s Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband, and The Importance of Being Earnest— and the infamous tragedy Salomé, all of which remain in the active repertoire of English-speaking theatre.

In 1895, against all advice, Wilde decided to sue for libel the Marquess of Queensberry, who had objected to Wilde’s association with his son. Wilde lost the lawsuit. As a result of the testimony against him at the lawsuit, he then was arrested and tried for homosexuality. After the jury failed to agree on a verdict, Wilde was tried a second time and ultimately convicted. The Ballad of Reading Gaol (published in 1898 under the pseudonym C.3.3., his cell number at Reading Gaol) and De profundis (not published until 1905) reflect his experience serving two years’ hard labour for homosexual practices. Wilde avoided public attention after his prison release. He wandered Europe for three-and-one-half years under an assumed name, Sebastian Melmoth, and died bankrupt in a Paris hotel on November 30, 1900.

About the Cast

SANDRA ABREVAAY (Gwendolen Fairfax) sophomore, BFA Performance, Wilmette, IL
KATHERINE BANKS (Maid) freshman, BFA performance, Plymouth, MI
MICHELLE BILLINGSLEY (Guest, understudy for Mrs. Bracknell) sophomore, BFA Performance, Lowell, MI
KRISTA BRAUN (Mrs. Bracknell) senior, BFA Performance, Cleveland, OH
JESSIE CANTRELL (Guest, understudy for Gwendolen Fairfax) freshman, BFA Performance, New Canaan, CT
ARAL BASS GRIFFIE (Rev. Chasuble) junior, BFA Performance, Hamburg, MI
CHARLIE JETT (Algernon Moncrieff) senior, BFA Performance, Los Angeles, CA
ETHAN B. KOGAN (Merriman) freshman, BFA Performance, Los Angeles, CA
JENNIFER LIMA (Miss Prism) junior, BFA Performance, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
PHILIP PIRKOLA (Lane) senior, BFA Performance, Sterling Heights, MI
JULIE STRASSER (Maid) freshman, BFA Performance, Ypsilanti, MI
MATTHEW H. URBAN (John Worthing) junior, BFA Performance, Cissna Park, IL
CORTNEY WRIGHT (Cecily Cardew) senior, BFA Performance, Saginaw, MI
**About the Artists**

**Patrick K. A. Elkins** (Stage Manager) is a BFA candidate in design and production in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama. **UM**: Asst. stage manager: Magic Flute, Volpone, Antigone; stage manager/lighting designer: Split, lighting designer: Zastrozzi, Master of Displine, Basement Arts.

**Robert Knopp** (Director) is an asst. professor and coordinator of graduate studies in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama. **UM**: Blood Wedding. **Regional Theatre**: Crutch One, Circle-in-the-Square Downtown; WacoWoman, Circle Repertory Lab; Miracle Mile, Theatre Row Theatre; Sidekick, Body Beautiful, Theatre North Collaborative; Neo-Retro-Woyzeck, Performance Network. **Other**: Director/adaptor, Hidden Dragons, NPR Playhouse; author of The Theater and Cinema of Buster Keaton, Princeton University Press, 1999.

**Lea M. Marzorie** (Costume Designer) is a BFA candidate in the design and production program in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama. **UM**: Razzmatazz! - Passageways, Assistant costume design, Anything Goes. **Regional Theatre**: Costume design: Lost in Yonkers, Saline Area Players; On Golden Pond, Ann Arbor Civic Theatre; Best. On T he M oon, The Stage Presence. **Other**: BA in Philosophy from UM.

**Vincent Mountain** (Scenic Designer) is an asst. professor of design in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama. **UM**: Blood Wedding, The Turn of the Screw, Le Rossignol/L'Enfant et les Sortilèges, Pamela, Gianni Schicchi/I/I Canamello, Twelfth Night, Born in the RSA. **Regional Theatre**: Macbeth, Orpheus Descending, Alley Theatre, Playland, Intiman Theatre, Roosters, Seattle Group; Love, Langston, Seattle Repertory Theatre. **Other**: MFA in Design, UCSD: Bill Irwin's The Regard of Flight, La Jolla Playhouse; O restes, UCSD, directed by Robert Woodruff.

**Henry Reynolds** (Sound Designer) is an asst. professor in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama and the sound engineer and computer administrator for Univ. Productions. **UM**: Sound designer: Our Country's Good, I Am A Man, Born in the RSA. **Regional Theatre**: Production manager, Ann Arbor Summer Festival.

**Aaron Sporer** (Lighting Designer) is a BFA candidate in design and production in the Dept. of Theatre & Drama. **UM**: lighting designer: Orphan Train, Dido and Aeneas, The Rape of Lucretia; scenic designer: Semele, master carpenter: The Best People, master elec.: The Shattered Mirror; Grease, Pippin, MUSKET; asst. master elec.: Endgame. **Regional Theatre**: Lincoln Center Out of Doors; Spoleto Festival; Apartment 3A, Purple Rose Theatre.

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**The Tempest**

by William Shakespeare

December 9 - 11 at 8 pm
December 12 at 2 pm
Power Center
League Ticket Office • 734-764-0450

featuring:

Beverly Pooley, Leigh Woods, John Neville-Andrews, Joan Morris, Malcolm Tulip, Deanna Relyea, George Shirley, Shirley Verrett, Phillip Kerr, Erik Fredricksen, Peter Sparling, and exceptionally talented School of Music students

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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Patty O'Connor for playing the “Wedding March.”

The performers in this production are composed of undergraduate students in the School of Music. The designers are composed of faculty and undergraduate students in the Department of Theatre and Drama. Scenery, costumes, properties, sound and lighting were realized by the students and staff of University Productions, the producing unit of the School of Music.

This production is entered in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KC/ACTF). The aims of this national theater education program are to identify and promote quality in college-level theater productions. To this end, each production entered is eligible for a response by a regional KC/ACTF representative, and certain students are selected to participate in KC/ACTF programs involving awards, scholarships, and special grants for actors, playwrights, designers, and critics at both the regional and national levels.

For Your Information

LATECOMER POLICY
Latecomers will be seated at a suitable break or scene change.

PAGERS, CELLULAR PHONES AND WATCH ALARMS
Please set pagers to silent mode. Cellular phones should be deactivated. Please deactivate your electronic watch alarm so it will not interrupt the performance.

EMERGENCY PROCEDURE
In the event of fire or severe storm, you will be instructed by an announcement from the stage indicating the best method of exit. Please notice the multiple red exit signs in the theatre. For your safety, please exit in a calm and orderly manner.

CAMERAS AND RECORDING DEVICES
The use of cameras — with or without a flash — recorders, or other electronic devices inside the theatre is strictly prohibited.

FOOD AND DRINK
No eating or drinking is allowed in the theatre.

CHILDREN
As a courtesy to our audience and the performers, children under the age of three will not be admitted to performances. All children must have a ticket. If your child proves disruptive or excessively restless, you may be asked to leave by House Management.

TICKET SALES AND INFORMATION
Hours: Monday – Friday 10 am – 6 pm
Evening of Performance 7 pm – 8:30 pm
Phone: (734) 764-0450 • FAX: 647-2282
Address: 911 N . Univ., Ann Arbor, MI 48109

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ACCESSIBILITY
Accessible ramps, elevators, parking, restrooms, and wheelchair seating are available for patrons with disabilities. Parking is located on each level of the Fletcher Street Structure on the north and south sides and on the first level of the Thayer Street Structure. Accessible restrooms are located off the main lobby.

SOUND ENHANCEMENT
The theatre is equipped with an infrared listening system for listening enhancement. Lightweight, wireless headsets are available free of charge from House Management.

RENTALS
The Power Center, Lydia Mendelssohn Theatre, Hill Auditorium and Rackham Auditorium are available for seminars, meetings and private parties. For more information contact the Scheduling Office at 647-3327.

PARKING
For your parking convenience, we recommend entering the Fletcher Street Parking Structure using the Palmer Drive entrance. Prepaid parking passes are available at the League Ticket Office.

Comments on the production or our service? Write us at:
University Productions, Attn.: J. Kuras, 911 N. University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1265

Looking for that perfect holiday gift for family friends and colleagues?
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Staff for Earnest

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Assoc. Technical Director (Power) ............ Donald C. Watkins
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Costume Shop Manager II ....................... George M. Draper
Costume Shop Manager III ....................... Virginia R. Luedike, Vicki L. Sadler
Assistant Costume Designer ..................... Susan A. Hamilton
Crafts Artisan/Stock Manager ................. Rebecca Valentin
Sound Engineer ........................................ Henry Reynolds
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Assistant to the Scenic Designer .......... Heidi K. Meisenhelder
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Stage Managers ....................................... Jennifer Levin
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Assistant Stage Manager II ..................... Nancy Uffner
Assistant Stage Manager III .................... Mark Sullivan
Assistant Stage Manager IV ..................... Mark Sullivan
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And thank you,

Charlene McNamara, Chair
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