Centerstage: Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest

By: Aaron Dorman

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At the end of Centerstage's current production of The Importance of Being Earnest, the cast salutes a giant portrait of Oscar Wilde which descends from the ceiling. This is an appropriate gesture to honor Oscar Wilde's power with words: his Victorian sensibilities and witticisms are still hilarious, virtually unchanged since they were written for the stage over a century ago. While it's not fair to say that it is easy to do TIOBE well, Wilde's words are nevertheless extremely powerful material, and in this faithful adaptation, Centerstage does it justice.

TIOBE tells the story of two men who lead double lives: Jack Worthing (Ben Huber) becomes "Earnest" whenever he goes to London to court the lovely Gwendolyn Fairfax (Gretchen Hall), while Algernon Moncrieff (Luke Robertson) similarly changes identities whenever he goes to the country. In the event this play dramatizes, Algernon decides to woo Jack's lovely ward, Cecily (Nicole Lowrance), by pretending to be "Earnest" as well, Jack's imaginary brother. Since both of their constructed "Earnest" identities are contingent upon a careful separation of town and country lives, hilarity ensues when everyone in the play converges upon Jack's country estate. It all leads to what is probably one of the silliest endings ever written for theater, but it works well enough because this is, after all, a comedy.

This production of TIOBE, which began on October 7, is set in Oscar Wilde's England, but the set and staging is very postmodern. Giant white E-A-R-N-E-S-T letters, about ten feet tall, are laid out in various positions upstage, and the cast moves them around when the scenes change. Although the downstage set is fairly conventional for TIOBE: a parlor room, patio, etc-the cast at various points uses the letters as part of the scene, including, towards the end, a church vestibule. During the two longest scene changes, the various couples dance merrily around the set with Victorian music playing in the background. In any event, it's fun but it doesn't take too many overt risks, which is fine, because, unless you've seen TIOBE so many times before, the play is delightful as is. Wilde's witticisms are somewhat unnatural to speak but they are hilarious, and this play is not going for realism at all, anyway.

The performances are all very strong, although it seemed to take a few minutes for the two young men in the play, Huber and Roberston, to slip into their British accents-the older members of the cast seem more comfortable with that task. Nevertheless, they passed the test of two British theatergoers sitting in front of me, so at the very least, the British accents in the play can be labeled "authentic enough." The best, or at least the most audacious performance, in the play comes from Laurence O'Dwyer, dressed in Victorian drag as Lady Bracknell, Gwendolyn's mother, who feels Jack Worthing is unsuitable marriage material for her daughter. Apparently it is something of a tradition for a man to play Lady Bracknell, a la Edna Turnblad in Hairspray, and O'Dwyer, who the playbill lists as "Baltimore Magazine's Best Actor in 2009 Best of Baltimore," has a lot of fun in the role. Aside from a few silly "poo poos" and such, O'Dwyer plays it pretty straight, barely changing his natural voice to speak as Bracknell, which was a pleasant surprise, because it was still very funny-almost giving the impression he/she wasn't "in" on the joke-and I imagine there's probably an inclination to ham it up in a role like that.

In fact, I was in general very impressed by the strong ensemble feel of the production. The other three
main performers—John Rothman, Carmen Roman, and Bill Kux—all do an exceptional job with their roles, as a pompous Reverend, a mousy old school instructor, and a butler, respectively. In some ways, the older characters are more interesting than the two main couples, if only because by the end of the play those characters are reduced to being obstinate and incredulous at the events going on around them.

Centerstage is located in the Mt. Vernon district of Baltimore, just a few blocks from the Washington Monument. TIOBE, directed by Irene Lewis, runs for about 2 and a half hours, including one fifteen intermission, and plays every day except Mondays until November 8: 8 pm in the evenings, as well as 10:30 am student matinees on Wednesday, and 2 pm matinees on Saturday and Sunday. For tickets, you can call the box office at 1-410-332-0033 or order tickets online at www.centerstage.org.

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