

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde's 1895 play "The Importance of Being Earnest" could be described as a perfect comedy machine: finely oiled and exquisitely crafted zingers spinning amongst the most posh Victorians. It represented Wilde at the top of his art (and just before his swift fall). On the page, the lines seem actor-proof, showing a brilliance that merely needs to be uttered to get solid laughs. Still, the play truly thrives with a smart, disciplined cast, like the one to be seen in the latest film version, now on Washington screens).

The Importance of Being Earnest is structurally a farce of mistaken identities (a tradition since before Shakespeare), starting off with stalwart Jack Worthing (Colin Firth) being "Jack" in the country and "Ernest" in London, while his guileful friend Algernon Moncrieff (Rupert Everett) has a fantasy friend Bunbury (a hopeless invalid) who comes in handy whenever Algy wants to either go into--or out of--the country. Jack is enamored (while in the city) of the ravishing Gwendolen Fairfax (Frances O'Connor), who only can love a man named "Ernest," but he must get approval for the match from her formidable mother, Lady Bracknell (Judi Dench). Meanwhile, Algy becomes smitten by Jack's young ward Cecily Cardew (Reese Witherspoon) while pretending to be "Ernest"--in the country. All identities are tossed up into the air only to be sorted out--delectably--in the final frames. The complications are profoundly silly--and exquisite, as this comedy machine hums down to its finale without one grind in the gears.

Wildean comedy is played best when it is played absolutely straight, when the actors deliver their paradoxical lines or prattle on about muffins and cucumber sandwiches as if these were the most serious of matters (Wilde himself subtitled *Earnest* as "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People"). No knowing smirks or elbow nudges should mar the playing, only firm stiff-upper-lipping is required in this kind of performance. When Gwendolen, for instance, says that she never goes "anywhere without my diary...One should always have something sensational to read in the train," O'Connor delivers the line, as she must, as naturally as she would adjust her bonnet. All this fine cast is up to this supreme level of self-control--while we, as audience members, can lose ours.

Colin Firth (seen in *Bridget Jones Diary*) is an appropriately fetching and "earnest" Ernest/Jack, while Rupert Everett's Algy is a charming rascal with a heart. Judi Dench (most recently in *Iris*) is one awe-inspiring *grande dame*, bristling with rank and velvet, with an upturned nose that does double duty by both smelling a scoundrel and sniffing out cash. The two ingenues, statuesque Aussie Frances O'Connor (last seen in *A.I.*) and sprightly Yank Reese Witherspoon (last seen in *Legally Blonde*), handle the Britspeak blithely and incarnate nicely the assured, liberated city girl and the fresh, dreamy child of the country, respectively. Classy British actors of the caliber of Tom Wilkinson, Anna Massey, and Edward Fox decorate the character parts.

The movie is filled with wonderful moments, but none more splendid than the lordly interview that Jack must undergo with Lady Bracknell to see if he can pass muster for marriage to Gwendolen. In a gloriously overripe sitting room accompanied by two silent crones, Lady Bracknell leads an inquisition against the cowering Jack. Judi Dench is magnificent here, her initial skepticism giving way to interest as Worthing comes through with bright answers. But when Jack must admit he is a foundling--found

in a handbag at Victoria Station (on the Brighton Line)--her dudgeon soars and she dismisses him with: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness!" Delicious.

The Importance of Being Earnest has been filmed once before, a splendid--if more stagey--version produced in England just 50 years ago and starring Michael Redgrave and Dame Edith Evans. This more lavish, open version is the work of Oliver Parker, who came to the property through directing an earlier Wilde opus for the screen, *An Ideal Husband* (1999). That successful adaptation also starred Rupert Everett and also included one American star (Julianne Moore). In an interview, Oliver Parker said he was "keen to assemble a cast that would be undaunted by the language, whose individual charm would bring pathos to scenes that can seem brittle. I was after actors whose quick wits would make the insanely witty dialogue seem, well, almost natural." His generous work with his expert cast achieves that naturalness, perhaps in part because Parker is an actor himself.

As he did with *An Ideal Husband*, Mr. Parker has "opened up" the play for the cinema, using both street and outdoor scenes. Not all of his innovations contribute to the picture. e.g., the intrusions of hot air balloons and motorcars, an unlikely tattooing, and a score which includes an anachronistic jazz saxophone. But most of his devices work. One clever insert has him using a baby's-eye view from *inside* the aforementioned handbag, as Jack flashes back to his foundling stage. To underscore Cecily's reveries about a Prince Charming, we are treated to wonderful late 19th century tableaux of damsels and knights, done up to mimic Pre-Raphaelite paintings of the period. To stand for Worthing's country estate, the film offers the handsome mansion of West Wycombe Park, which functions almost as another character in the film's second half. The sumptuous interiors and costumes represent plush Victoriana at its ripest.

In language, in performance, in look, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a spring feast for the ear and the eye.

(*"Earnest"* is rated "G" for general audiences but the wit is not for children.)

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