

Majestic Theater, West Springfield, MA

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. Directed by Rand Foerster.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“A handbag?”

Oscar Wilde wrote great comedies; personal, political, pre-eminently focused laugh-filled presentations about people who represented his audience. “The Importance of Being Earnest” is about a first name which, spelled with an “a” also forced the listener to question the reliability of the characters. John Worthing uses the name “Ernest” different ways in different places to provide himself with an alternate identity and an excuse for two lifestyles. When it becomes vital for him to be Ernest he earnestly seeks help to alter his name legally. His friend Algernon Moncrieff adopts the identity John doesn’t use in the country estate he controls for a similar purpose. Let the laughter begin.



Rylan Morsbach and Peter Evangelista; Photo: Kait Rankins

This is a comedy without many genuine laughs in the first act. By the second act, and then the third act the laughter is irrepressible. The current production of Wilde’s wild human parody is on stage at the Majestic Theatre in West Springfield, Massachusetts through the month ahead. With a cast of players who have clearly understood their characters the show has a smooth set of transitions from social dramedy to high comedy. Worthing intrudes on his friend Algy in order to

propose to Gwendolyn Fairfax whose mother, Lady Bracknell objects to him. Then Algy follows Worthing to his country home to meet, and woo, John's ward, Cecily whose tutor/companion Prism is too busy wooing the celibate Chasuble to pay attention to what's going on with Cecily. Everyone is forced to deal with Lady B. In spite of universal desire not to do so.



Peter Evangelista, Lisa Abend; Photo: Kait Rankins

She is at the center of all things, as the aristocracy in England always has been. She is played by Lisa Abend who makes the character her own with ease and a certain peculiar pleasure. She appears to be too young to play this character but after a momentary shock, her visual age is no longer a problem. I applaud her portrayal and the immense social sense she brings to the play.

Her nephew, Algy, is played with style by Peter Evangelista who seems to overact but really is only playing the part as written. His work, directed by Rand Foerster, is highly stylized into a

sort of period imitation that ultimately works for him and for us, though it takes a full act to do so.

As his friend, John Worthing, Rylan Morsbach doesn't go quite as far into the period sensibility but still manages to seem to be from a different era than ours. He gives John an honest reading that allows him to be the hero of his own story without becoming an obsessive or domineering personality. His relationship with Gwendolyn Fairfax, played perfectly by Alexandra O'Halloran, is totally understandable until the final moments of the play when their actual relationship is strained by a new reality which doesn't seem to move them at all.

Her new friendship with Cecily Cardew, John's ward, played by Caelie Scott Flanagan, is a comic delight of the



Alexandra O'Halloran, Rylan Morsbach;
Photo: Kait Rankins

play. Cecily is 18 passing for 20 behaving like 14, a perfect charmer for Algy. Flanagan bring



Peter Evangelista, Caelie Scott Flanagan;
Photo: Kait Rankins

Cecily a flirtatiousness that is totally real and devastatingly controlling. She makes Cecily into the most realistic character in the play. Her work at the start of the third act is very impressive and very funny and sets up the comedy to come very well.

Krista Lucas is a wonderful Miss Prism. Unlike any other Prisms I have seen before she employs physical reaction to things going on around her brilliantly. Her deep sorrow over past incidents in her life is matched by her total glee in her friendship with Peter J. Hicks's comic Reverend Chasuble who keeps making his stoic romantic principles known.

As both servants Tom Dahl gives two very fine performances that cannot be confused with one another. Bravo!

The show is interestingly designed. Michael Lounsbury's sets range from suggestive to complete and work well for the play. The costumes by Dawn McKay give us the people and their time extremely well and Lady Bracknell's Act Three outfit is a total delight as is John's mourning suit. Ideal lighting designed by Daniel D. Rist lets us enjoy every moment of the play. It is the excellent vision of director Foerster, though, that holds the whole

enterprise together so well. What seems awkward at the outset soon becomes honest and real and when the show turns to outrageous comedy his control of the whole thing is superb. This is an earnest Earnest and highly recommended for all audiences.

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The Importance of Being Earnest plays at the Majestic Theater, 131 Elm Street, West Springfield, MA, through February 11. For information and tickets visit www.majestictheater.com.