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**The Hollywood Reporter**

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Written by Oscar Wilde in the late Victorian era and first produced at the London's St. James Theatre in 1895, "The Importance of Being Earnest" is one of the wittiest plays in the English language.

Under the careful and astute direction of Sir Peter Hall and an outstanding ensemble from the Theatre Royal Bath, the current version of Wilde's masterpiece -- a blend of farce comedy, comedy of manners and social criticism -- simply dazzles.

As Wilde put it, "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." And "Earnest" has a super-abundance of style: verbal wit and banter, elegance, merciless social criticism, self-parody and an astute awareness of the follies and foibles of his own latter Victorian Age. All of these seemingly diverse elements are molded into a coherent vision by Hall and his company of talented and stage-savvy actors.

Credit Kevin and Trish Rigdon for the lovely production design.

All begins in the tasteful flat of London dandy Algernon Moncrieff (the excellent Robert Petkoff as the voice of Wilde). He is a bachelor gentleman of wit and pleasure, somehow above the fray. With him is the somber bachelor Jack Worthing (a first-rate James Waterston), also a gentleman but much more a Victorian. Jack confesses his love for Gwendolen Fairfax (the wonderful Bianca Amato), Algy's cousin. He also mentions that he has an 18-year-old ward living in his manor house in Wooton [sic, s/b Woolton]. Algy is intrigued. Jack admits that he has created a ne'er-do-well "brother" and Algy confesses to have created Bunbury, a fictional character for when he wants to play in the countryside.

Soon Gwendolen and her social-climbing mother Lady Bracknell (Lynn Redgrave at her finest) arrive. Lady Bracknell interviews Jack. He fails to pass her test as a suitor for her daughter. Worse yet, Jack is a foundling, discovered in a suitcase in Victoria Station.

Act II is set in Wooton [sic, s/b Woolton]. , where Cecily (a first-rate Charlotte Parry), the dreamy romantic, lives. When Algy suddenly arrives claiming to be Jack's imaginary brother, Cecily falls madly in love with him and he with her. But then Jack shows up in mourning for his imaginary brother. And the indomitable force Lady Brackwell [sic] appears with Gwendolen in tow.

All doesn't end until after a classic series of more startling revelations: a lost piece of luggage, a discovery of brothers and a name from the war records. All of it is tied together in the rich, witty, playful and exquisite language of Wilde, including the pun on Earnest/earnest [sic, s/b Ernest/Earnest].

Bottom line: More than a century old, "The Importance of Being Earnest " is still very much a classic.