

THEATER REVIEW

By Charles McNulty, L.A. Times

Witty words in search of wise companionship.

The Wildean humor of "The Importance of Being Earnest" marks time with a bunch of hams and stiffs.

"In matters of grave importance," Oscar Wilde tells us, "style, not sincerity, is the important thing." Yet when it comes to making us laugh, sincerity is every bit as necessary as style.

Peter Hall's Theatre Royal Bath production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," which opened Wednesday at the Ahmanson Theatre, serves Wilde's witticisms on a silver platter garnished with plenty of ham. But without any genuine conviction behind the ceremonial frivolity, this staging makes one of the most effervescent plays in the language seem comically effortful if not downright earnest.

Not that this glorious anthology of priceless epigrams is easy to pull off onstage. Hall, who's made Shakespeare the centerpiece of his distinguished career, faces a similar problem with Wilde's masterpiece as he does with "Hamlet" or "King Lear," in that an audience is waiting expectantly for all the best lines. It's the theatrical equivalent of an over-prepared honors class in which all the students are ready to shoot their hands up the moment the teacher asks one of the assigned questions.

The difference, of course, is that the Shakespearean tragedies lure you into the hypnotic pathos of their stories, and before you know it you're lost in a heartbreaking reality. "Earnest," on the other hand, derives its strength from the perfection of its language. The poet W.H. Auden famously described Wilde's masterpiece as "the only pure verbal opera in English." For him, the play creates a quasi-musical universe in which "the characters are determined by the kinds of things they say, and the plot is nothing but a succession of opportunities to say them."

Given the familiar friendliness of the dialogue - and who doesn't have a personal favorite? - it's imperative that fresh life be injected into its delivery. The only way to do this is through colorfully credible characterizations - the words have to believably tumble out of the fictional mouths forming them. And it's here where Hall's staging never gets any traction.

Hampering things are the two actors employing the same Earnest alias on the well-bred young coquettes they hope to conquer. Algernon, the foppish aesthete who can't resist his own romantic whims any more than he can the pile of cucumber sandwiches laid out for his guest, hasn't the panache to excuse his devouring appetites in Robert Petkoff's self-conscious performance. As Jack, the country gentleman who tries to protect his lovely ward, Cecily, from the designs of Algernon, whose cousin Gwendolen he's desperate to wed, James Waterston imparts a stiff and dour quality to the role.

Hall, always a sharp reader, magnifies the stern subtext of a character who feels morally compelled to invent a wayward brother in need of correction so he can routinely escape to the city and let off a little steam. But by dressing Jack as a stiff rector in the first act, he more or less kills a great gag in the second, when Jack dons his mourning suit not realizing the "brother" he conveniently just pronounced dead has already shown up at his estate and ensconced himself in deep colloquy with Cecily. This Jack has on his somber attire from the beginning.

What really prevents the first act from igniting, however, is the way the cast deals out Wilde's paradoxes in such a knowing fashion. Forget about character work - before a punch line has even landed, the actors

are congratulating themselves on their stand-up brilliancy.

Veteran Lynn Redgrave understandably falls victim to this as Lady Bracknell, the society brigadier posing as Gwendolen's "affectionate" and highly aphoristic mother. It's one of the toughest roles to pull off, so great are the precedents (Edith Evans, most notably, in the 1952 film) and so beloved are the character's tyrannical quips. (My favorite: "Come, dear, [Gwendolen rises] we have already missed five, if not six trains. To miss any more might expose us to comment on the platform.")

Decked at first in champagne-colored taffeta and a feathered hat, Redgrave appears to be having a lip-smackingly good time. Yet her unrestrained, not to say slightly burlesque, approach turns Jack's insults to her character ("never met such a Gorgon"; "she is a monster, without being a myth") into acts of dramatic criticism.

The ingénues fare a bit better. Bianca Amato finds new and amusingly self-assured shades in Gwendolen, a character who in this take will undoubtedly turn into Lady Bracknell in 150 years, as Jack momentarily fears. Charlotte Parry's Cecily, strangely fashioned as an English Goldilocks, discovers the pert willfulness in Wilde's easily infatuated caricature.

Miriam Margolyes, the British character actor you know by face if not name, plays Miss Prism, Cecily's textbook-toting governess with a not-so-secret flame for the equally smitten Reverend Chasuble (the expert Terence Rigby). Her performance hits nearly all the required humorous marks, even if it never quite transcends the joke of her bosom threatening to explode the dowdy confines of its tightly corseted dress.

The well-appointed sets and lavish-enough looking costumes by Kevin Rigdon and Trish Rigdon move from the grays and blacks of city life in the first act to the pastels of the country in the second and third. Pretty as the scenes undeniably are initially, there's a cramped, static quality to them that's of a piece with the production as a whole.

Writing about one of the first London revivals of "Earnest" in 1902 (seven years after its premiere), the writer and artist Max Beerbohm is pleased to find the play as "fresh and exquisite as ever." Ever more, he's delighted by the way "over the whole house almost every line was sending ripples of laughter - cumulative ripples that became waves, and receded only for fear of drowning the next line."

Ripples of laughter certainly could be heard coursing through the Ahmanson on opening night. But it was a humor provoked more by the recognition of an old friend's masterful wit than the tinderbox kind that leaves little room for breathing, never mind happier memories.