

FILM

A Wilde mistake

Stay away from the sanitized costume drama and head to Clinton Street instead



Rupert Everett wooing Reese Witherspoon is not the only implausibility of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
Fox Tower Cinemas

When I read that *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a screen adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play, was being done by director/screenwriter Oliver Parker, my heart sank.

Who decided that Wilde's witty, timeless amoral Victorian satires—which anticipated 20th century Pop Art's insouciant irreverence and irony—should be entrusted to someone this literal-minded, sentimental and “respectful”? Parker made a timid movie of *An Ideal Husband* a couple of years ago (he got extra demerits from me for putting the usually phenomenal Julianne Moore on that leaden, sinking ship), and *Earnest* pulls the same useless stunt.

Wilde's glimmering artificiality (call it “gay sensibility” if you want; imprisoned for homosexuality in the 19th century, he is probably the world's most widely admired gay literary icon) has been turned into something criminally dull.

The play is ostensibly about two young men—carefree bachelor Algernon (Rupert Everett) and throat-clearing, stuffed shirt Jack (Colin Firth)—and their attempts to woo brides-to-be Gwendolen (Frances O'Connor) and Cecily (Reese Witherspoon).

The men's romantic goals are comically thwarted by their own complicated untruths and embellishments. Jack especially has it tough; he was an orphan but must prove to Gwendolen's dowager mother (Judi Dench, having a wickedly good time) that he's fashionable, aristocratic and wealthy enough for her daughter. The delightful misunderstandings multiply exponentially, but the lovers are ultimately happily united, every loose end neatly tied up.

Parker clearly thinks it's just that simple, but his conception of Wilde's intent is all wet; the author's characters are such satirically conceived creatures, it's impossible to believe they were ever intended to be played as straightforward as Parker presents them. Wilde's exquisite dialogue—so hilariously formal that not even the most “real” Victorian character would utter it—can't be ruined, but its presence only reminds us that he intended every line to subvert the seemingly traditional, ingratiating boys-get-girls “story” Parker offers so unimaginatively.

Wilde's point of view is that of Alice through the looking glass, experiencing with disrespectful innocence the ridiculous randomness of prevailing social custom. Watching *The Importance of Being Earnest*,

hearing the bland score swell up at the right moments like it's some ordinary costume drama with characters we're supposed to care about in the ordinary way, is like going to the Mad Hatter's tea party and finding Martha Stewart humorlessly micromanaging the whole affair.

—Christopher McQuain

PRINCESA
Clinton Street Theater, June 7 to 13

Princesa opens with a little girl in a train furtively watching an exotically glamorous young woman who occasionally looks back at her with a knowing smile. The little girl is chastised by her parent, but she's right to be curious: The young woman is Fernando/Fernanda, aka Princesa, a Brazilian transvestite heading toward Milan, where she plans to work as a prostitute to raise money for a sex change.

Princesa pursues her dream of being a “real woman” with single-minded intensity, and she's willing to do whatever is necessary to attain it. This includes being orally raped by an immigration officer before she's allowed to enter Milan, which she takes in stride as part of her lot in life.

Once in the city she hooks up with Charlo (Biba Lerhu), who shows her the ropes and introduces her to Karin (Lulu Pecorari), madam and mother hen to the local tranny whore community and a tranny herself. Princesa is invited to move in with Karin and becomes very successful.

Of course, love intrudes in the form of handsome straight businessman Gianni (Cesare Bocci), who overcomes his initial repulsion at reaching under Princesa's skirt and finding more than he expected. In the film's Cinderella fantasy, Gianni leaves his wife and sets up house with Princesa, an act that forces her to think about what she really wants.

Based on the memoirs of a famous Brazilian transvestite (who was a consultant on the film but killed herself before it was complete), *Princesa* is powerful and poignant, subtly acted and pleasantly unpredictable. Brazilian director Henrique Goldman shot on location with a mostly nonprofessional cast to give the drama a welcome grittiness. Some of the best scenes are in Milan's red-light district, where the gaudily painted prostitutes beat the hell out of would-be bashers and alternately comfort and revile their mostly working-class tricks.

The charismatic Ingrid D'Souza brings a quiet intensity to the lead role. In a just world, that charisma would take her out of the international indie scene and into a mainstream career.

—Gary Morris

The straight guy gets more than he bargained for from Princesa




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