

IT'S A WILDE WORLD

UO makes frivolous fun with
The Importance of Being Earnest

Pithy, witty and wise, Oscar Wilde remains the toast of the sniff set. Though dead all these long and tedious post-industrial years, Wilde, the foremost icon of soft-soap Victorian sabotage, is always good for a sharp, stinging rebuke to the narcissistic pretensions of the bourgeoisie or some feisty fillip about sexual hypocrisy of the straight crowd. His aphorisms, with their subtle swish and sting, trip oh-so trippingly off the tongues of would-be wags everywhere. Morrissey, Truman Capote and Paul Lynde, Wilde's closest modern kin, ain't got nothing on the master.

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person," Wilde quipped. (Wilde was always quipping.) "Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." There is nothing particularly startling about the content of this truism — writers as diverse as Balzac, Nietzsche and Nora Ephron have said as much — but it does serve as a perfect descriptive for Wilde's frothy comic play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, now on stage at the UO. This well-heeled and oft-produced comedy of manners has been a non-stop font of sitcom formulas since it first hit the stage of London's St. James

Theatre in 1895; I mean, how could we have had *Three's Company* or *Seinfeld* without Wilde's "trivial comedy for serious people"?

This student production of *Earnest*, directed by Oregon Shakespeare Festival veteran Kirk M. Boyd, is a winner all around. The story (about nothing) is familiar to most theater-goers: A pair of differentially ambitious swains — Algernon (Sunil Homes), who aspires to a life of carefree hedonism, and up-and-coming socialite and businessman

to hilarious romantic entanglements. It's all great fun, full of meaningless sound and fury that signifies, per Wilde, nothing and everything at the same time.

The sets are simple but elegantly appointed, and Boyd's direction, for the most part, is smart and snappy (the play does seem to lag momentarily at times, though one could chalk this up to the vast stage, which sometimes swamps the drawing-room action). Mostly, however, it is the excellent cast that makes this staging of *Earnest* such a delight. All of the actors noted above do an excellent, and above all easeful, job with the sophisticated nonsense of Wilde's lines; they are all sharp asides and grand gesticulations, and the passages of physical comedy are performed with snap. The real standout among this consistently strong cast is Olivia Walton, who turns Algernon's cock-blocking aunt Lady Bracknell into a hilarious study of pinched Victorian social climbing and gold digging without making her at all unlikable. It's a near-perfect performance.

The most discouraging aspect of UO's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, at least on the Saturday night I attended, was the audience's reaction. Though folks appeared fairly pleased by the play, there seemed to be a strange paucity of laughter, and this evinced itself in but a smattering of lone chuckles. Could it be that we 21st-century people, with our infinite distractions, are no longer attuned to the frivolous distractions provided by such a genius

as Oscar Wilde? I don't know the answer to this, but I suspect we no longer understand that it is better to be amused than to be smart, and that it's better to be smart than to be asleep. ■

The Importance of Being Earnest runs 8pm through May 11 at the UO Robinson Theatre; \$12-\$14.



CAITLIN WINKENBACH AS 'MISS PRISM' AND ALEC CRISMAN AS 'JACK'

Jack (Alec Crisman) — find themselves sentimentally and sensually drawn toward their respective distaff prospects, Cecily (Naomi Wright) and Gwendolen (Kelley Young). Both of the men practice a bit of what Algernon calls "Bunburyism," which is the maintenance of alternate identities between town and country. Of course, this leads

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