**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST** – by Oscar Wilde

* Written in 1895.
* Farce, comedy of manners, clever, witty.
* Mocks Victorian social customs, marriage and the pursuit of marriage in particular.
* In Victorian times, earnestness was considered to be the overriding societal value. Earnestness is repeatedly referred to in the dialogue.
* Wilde said, “We should treat all trivial things in life very seriously and all serious things of life with a sincere and studied triviality.”
* Themes:
  + - triviality
    - the nature of marriage and whether it is pleasant or unpleasant
    - the constraints of morality
    - the importance of NOT being earnest
* General tolerance of hypocrisy in Victorian morality –
  + Jack is supposed to be an upstanding gentleman but he leads a double life
  + Algernon is amoral and a dandy
  + Gwendolen is supposed to be the epitome of womanhood but she is artificial and pretentious
  + Cecily is innocent but fascinated by wickedness. She is the only character who does not speak in epigrams – the most realistic.
  + Lady Bracknell – in her, Wilde satirizes the stupidity and hypocrisy of the British upper classes. She is cunning, narrow-minded, authoritarian and quotable.
* All the characters make outrageous pronouncements.
* Earnestness implies seriousness or sincerity. It takes many forms – boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self righteousness, sense of duty. When the characters in the play say ‘serious’ they mean ‘trivial’ and vice versa.
* The superficiality of the upper classes is lampooned by Wilde.
* Motifs –
  + - Puns
    - Inversion – ‘terrible for a man to discover he has been telling the truth all his life’
    - Death – several jokes about death
* Symbols –
  + - The double life – Ernest in town and Jack in the country, Bunbury, Cecily’s diary
    - Food – cucumber sandwiches, cake, muffins

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**The Auckland Theatre Company production** took the play out of the Victorian era and modernised it, possibly to appeal to a modern audience. There are references to the 60s, Lady Gaga, modern music, etc. A Victorian audience would have been appalled at the sexuality of this production.

**INSPIRATION**

As a director, Colin revels in the theatricality of THEIMPORTANCE OF BEINGEARNEST.

“One of the great things that theatre has over other mediums is the eloquence of language,” he says, “and this play is a superb example of that. The way Wilde turns commonplace sayings on their head to make them funny is terrific.” In this production, Colin wants to capture the energy and verve of Wilde’s writing. According to Colin, “Wilde had such a capacity for life. He loved all these characters, and we need to get that wonderful sense of playfulness in the way that we present it, so that it zips along.”

Colin also feels it’s important to present this period piece in a way that is relevant to a modern audience. He loves the way the language and the wit are robust enough to be transposed, saying “the sophistication is very appropriate for a bling city like Auckland.”

**TRANSPOSING THE PERIOD**

So how do you make this very Victorian piece into something that sophisticated Aucklanders can appreciate afresh?

EARNEST was written at the end of the nineteenth century, a time of massive change in English society. This prompted Colin to think about other points in history when change was a big factor. He came up with the idea of the 1960s as major turning point, when society was being radically reorganised and ideas of class and role were being re-examined.

“I got quite excited about the idea of the revival of the dandy in the late 1960s, with the Rolling Stones wearing their velvet suits and top hats, and hanging round in their country mansions, taking nefarious drugs and doing naughty things.”

With this image in mind, he talked to the design team about a ‘60s look for the production. They eventually decided, however, that the play needed something more than a strict period handling, even if it were shifted to a non-Victorian period. The final concept is a created world “which is contemporary, and late 1960s, and Victorian, all at the same time.”

Over the course of the play, Colin wants the audience to be” taken from something that seems relatively normal into a crazy Alice in Wonderland sort of world.”

**VISUAL**

**REFERENCES**

For ideas about how this world might look, Colin scoured magazines, plundering pictures of the rich and famous. One key image is “a photograph of Rupert Everett, lying in his apartment in London. He’s just got a mattress on the floor, and a beautiful eiderdown over it, and an angle poise lamp, and his cigarettes and his coffee, and I thought, ‘what if Algernon is squatting in his uncle’s expensive Mayfair apartment’?”

Colin imagined a fairly bare space filled with “an eclectic collection of beautiful things. They might not relate to each other – the chairs might be completely different, but they’re beautiful chairs. And then there’s a Chinese take-away stuck on them, so it’s not an elegant set. It’s contemporary, so the audience can say ‘I know someone like that; that’s just like so-and-so’s son who’s bludging off his parents’.”

**ADVICE TO THE ACTORS**

The radical new context doesn’t mean that the text comes second, however. Colin insists the actors start with the text, and glean everything that is said about their characters. For example, Gwendolen admits to being “extremely short sighted” when she first meets Cecily. Such facts can be used for comic effect elsewhere in the play.

The actors also have to have a clear sense of their characters’ intentions. As Colin puts it, “It’s very important that the characters all have a very strong objective, or a mainline of action in terms of what they’re doing and what they want.”

Colin observes that the actors can bring different ideas to the table, and that mix makes the process exciting. At the read-through, for instance,” Cameron was playing Chasuble in a much more aggressive way than maybe I read it, but that’s really interesting, because it’s so funny. So there’s a rich inner life for the characters.”

In terms of the performance style, Colin is keen to explore “the juxtaposition between a very modern style of playing and the very formally structured kind of language.”Handling the language well is vital to the success of the production.

As Colin explains, “Comedy is terribly difficult to play and pull off, particularly this kind of comedy, where the sentences are so long. Things have to be placed and then thrown away, undercut and then built up; it has to have a musicality about it. That’s what you’re working with the actors to try and get a sense of. They’ve got their characterisations, but also you’re looking at the music of the language. I’m a kind of conductor, really! It’s the sort of play where you need to do some vocal warm ups and tongue twisters before you start each night. It’s quite deceptive – it seems simple, but it’s not. You have to make it look like it’s effortless – but it takes a lot of precision, hard work and technique to do that.”

Without energy and technical skill, the pace will lag and the play’s lightness will be lost.

**STRUCTURE**

One reason for keeping up the pace is to give the production a real sense of building up to “where it all gets out of control”. Another reason is that Colin wants to present the play in 105 minutes. To achieve this Colin will do “a judicious bit of trimming where there’s repetition.” Repetition for comic effect will stay, of course, but any out-of date jokes that slow things down will be cut.

Colin says cheerfully “I don’t think the audience will notice because none of the famous lines have gone.”Many of the famous lines relate to the upending of social expectations – dichotomies get reversed for comic effect. As Colin puts it, “The delicious thing about the play is that everything trivial is treated very seriously, and anything that’s serious –like marriage – is treated in a very trivial way. We can have great fun with that.”

Some of these dichotomies also relate particularly well to the renewed context, such as the city/country conflict. “The city people are all incredibly stylish– a triumph of style over substance,” just like the modern celebrities of those glossy fashion magazines.

In the country scenes, Colin says, “we suddenly see a difference from the sophistication of the people in the city.” He describes the country folk as “much more earthy” and aims to bring out those qualities: Cecily, for example, is likely to be dressed in clothes reminiscent of jodhpurs andgumboots, and to have a big horsey laugh. “She finds life very amusing” Colin says. “And she’s a good eater. That’s why she’s going to make a great partner for Algernon, who never stops eating!”

The process of discovery for this production is clearly going to be a lot of fun, between the laughs and the cucumber sandwiches. But there is a serious point to Colin’s decision to present this play. He wants to ensure that plays like this don’t disappear from their rightful place in the theatrical tradition. “We have to perform this stuff, otherwise actors will lose the ability to play it, and then audiences will lose the enjoyment of it” he says firmly.