



*Leave room
for 2 photos*

✓ 8/04

CELTIC NEWS SERVICE

For immediate release
July 1, 2004
(630) 969-4141

Rev. Kevin O'Neill Shanley
8433 Bailey Rd., Darien, IL
60561-5305

Drama Review

WILDE'S "IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST"
IS DRAMATIC DELIGHT AT SHAW FESTIVAL

by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, ONT.: Although the principal focus of the Shaw Festival Theatre each season is the presentation of the dramatic work of George Bernard Shaw, great attention is also paid to the works of his contemporaries of the second half of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th.

Major among these dramatists is Irish playwright and author Oscar Wilde who ^{se}play "The Importance of Being Earnest" is featured at the Royal George Theatre of the Shaw Festival until Dec. 4th. It is well worth attending.

Under the excellent direction of Christopher Newton, former director of the festival theatre, the play focuses on the manners and mores of Victorian Society at the end of the 19th Century. There also seems to be a play on words in the comedy's title. Not only are the principal characters of John Worthing (played by Evan Buliung) and Algernon Moncrieff (played by David Leyshon) admonished to be "earnest" in their intentions towards the female leads of the play, especially Gwendolen Fairfax (played by Fiona Byrne) and Cecily Cardew (played by Diana Donnelly) — but to actually have the name of "Earnest."

-more-

When the play opens at the Royal George, a former movie theatre, the audience is immediately transported back to late Victorian London. The setting and lighting create the atmosphere of the Victorian Age. But even moreso, the impeccable diction and pronunciation of the cast create for the audience a return to former times. Each syllable is clear and distinct, and each movement of the actors adds to the total credibility of the production.

Wilde, who dubbed his production as "a trivial comedy for serious people," is a true Anglo-Irish writer as a critic of the mores and manners of the Victorians. Their life is presented as often focused on trivial matters and seems quite unrelated to the lives of ordinary people. Both Wilde and Shaw were born in Dublin and interjected their drama with an underlying criticism of Victorian Society. However, this did not prevent their creating great works, especially in drama.

The comedy is built on the notion of mistaken identities, the creation of people who don't exist, and the discovery of the true identity of a main character, John Worthing. His misplacement from a baby carriage to a large hand-bag¹ and left at a London railway station is handled well. It is an important turning point in the comedy and carries the plot to a quite successful conclusion. The couples involved find true love and eventual marriage of "happily ever after."

CNS/ Wilde's "Importance of Being Earnest"/ 3

The play on words and the paradoxes that Wilde uses produce a sense of comedy while poking fun at the mores of the Victorians who sometimes seem quite vapid and without purpose in life. The great threat to their way of life seems to be the supposed eroding of Victorian morals which the playwright Wilde, himself no great moralist, shows to be as much hypocrisy as morality.

But fortunately, the play is not an exercise in the whys and wherefores of society but rather a delightful romp through the sometimes confusions of life, and especially the affectionate relationships of people to one another.

As Shaw wrote about Wilde years ago: "In a certain sense Mr. Wilde is to me our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre."

And director Newton notes that late Victorian England "is a fantastical world that never really existed in this form, and yet the strange thing about 'The Importance' is the number of realistic touchstones." And adds, "... the play transcends its time because it knows its own time so well. It is a perfect example of a playwright being so specific that his work becomes universal."

The resounding applause of the audience confirms these opinions. It is a play well worth attending not only for the great comedy it presents, but also for the great human wisdom contained therein.