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THTR 1300

October 26, 2017

Critique on “The Importance of Being Earnest”

Oscar Wilde’s “The Importance of Being Earnest” is a farcical comedy that follows two men who complement and contrast each other in equal measure. John “Earnest” is a serious, matter-of-fact man who wears the mask of a well-to-do, upper-class man with an appealing last name so that he can one day marry the wealthy Gwendolyn Fairfax. Contrarily, Algernon escapes his suffocating upper-class background to live as a man about town. When Algernon discovers John is the ward of a beautiful young lady named Cecily, Algernon takes the opportunity to approach her as John’s fabricated brother, and hijinks ensue as lie upon lie piles up until the two men’s false images come crashing down on top of them in hilarious fashion.

Presenting a story like “The Importance of Being Earnest” comes with a variety of challenges, not the least of which is engaging modern-day audiences. The production is rooted in the late 19th century, and without convincing performances, 21st century audience members may well have tuned out purely because of the premise. However, North Greenville University’s Theatre Department lured its audience in hook line and sinker, thanks to the chemistry and investment of its ensemble. Combining authentic dialects with fittingly broad yet convincing physical acting, the cast showcased their investment in the material through their genuine performances. John and Algernon in particular sell their sharp contrast and bizarre friendship without any caveats. As Algernon saunters from chair to chair, John remains composed and self-conscious. While Algernon swings his arm out and displays a sneaky grin, John stays stone-faced. Each actor displayed a strong rapport with their fellow cast mates, allowing this long-past society of upper class snobs and frilly dresses to truly come to life. Each actor clearly understands the super objective of their respective character and never once did I question a character’s actions in light of an actor’s uncertain take on the script.

“The Importance of Being Earnest” takes a light-hearted yet cynical pot-shot at its cast of characters. Everyone in the cast, apart from the un-ironically earnest pastor, is self-absorbed and shallow to some extent. Even when John and Algernon’s lies about themselves are revealed to their respective love interests, the two women forgive the young men because they believe their hearts were in the right place. Such short-sighted thinking strikes me as a wry commentary on how humans often overvalue petty, superficial details about each other. John and Algernon thought the key to winning a young woman’s heart was simply to have a then trendy last name. Neither of them considered for a moment that their respective love interests might value them for who they were as people and sought to win them over through vain measures. I see Wilde communicating to his audience that shallow people like John Earnest and Algernon could only ever be happy in the company of other shallow people. Cecily and Gwendolyn even point out how manipulative and deceitful the actions of John and Algernon were but decide to see the “good” in them anyways, the implication being that had it been better people, John and Algernon would have been rejected without a second thought. Additionally, I see a message about how someone’s wealth and status can make one blind to what’s right and wrong. Raised by his stern and ignorant aunt, Algernon has no qualms about lying about his status to Cecily in order to win her over. Often times, fame and fortune can make people blind to their own iniquities and make them feel entitled to more than what they reasonably deserve. Through Algernon and John’s farcical adventure, I see clearly a warning to see the people around you as human beings to be treated as equals, rather than objects to be won over in the pursuit of money and passion.