THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST: Pre-rehearsal interview with Director Braham Murray

Braham Murray is a founding Artistic Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre Company. Directing credits include SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER and CHARLEY’S AUNT (with Tom Courtenay), LADY WINDERMERE’S FAN, OTHHELLO, COLD MEAT PARTY, HOBSON’S CHOICE and THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST was first performed in February 1895. Why have you decided to set your production in 1913?

Up until 1923, the play was always performed using clothes and styles from the year that it was produced. I’ve decided to set the play in 1913 because it’s just before the outbreak of the First World War. During the War the society depicted in the play disappeared and was wiped out. It’s also an immensely pretty period in which to set a play.

The play is subtitled a ‘trivial comedy for serious people.’ What do you think Oscar Wilde meant by this?

It’s a very complicated question to answer and it’s probably best answered by seeing the production. In the play Algernon says something like “One should take everything trivial seriously and everything serious one should treat trivially,” and what I think Wilde means by this, is that England, which pretty much ruled the world at the time, was governed by rules and regulations which were totally and utterly trivial but were taken very seriously by so many people. I think this is the key to understanding the play and how it should be performed, it has to be taken very, very seriously even though it appears to be absolutely daft.

How does THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST compare with other plays written by Oscar Wilde?

The other plays of Oscar Wilde, LADY WINDERMERE’S FAN, A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE and AN IDEAL HUSBAND are strange, broken back creatures, as you have scenes of great wit combined with scenes of intense psychological seriousness which are almost melodramatic. It’s almost as if Wilde was writing in two styles. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST is a one off, it is almost perfect. It is written in an extremely witty style, although of course underneath it, as I have already said, you have to take the style very seriously. It’s Wilde’s greatest play because it is so unique.

Why do you think it is that the play is still regularly performed?

In my opinion the play is the finest British comedy ever written. It’s just stunningly brilliant. Audiences see the play again and again because the level of wit and humour in my view is not equalled by any other playwright.

How do you define the term comedy of manners and how does it also apply to plays written by Brad Fraser, Noel Coward and Joe Orton?

Playwrights who write in this style, take a society and try and portray the way in which that society works externally but underneath the apparently witty, urbane and polished way in which the society appears to be, there is a seriousness and a humanity which the writer slowly reveals, so that you always see the gap between the surface of the society and the internal way in which it operates. To the writers you have already mentioned, I would also add Restoration playwrights who pretty much do the same thing in their plays.
Is it important to know about Wilde's private life to fully appreciate the play?
No!

What qualities did you look for when casting the production?
You need actors who understand the period and who can convincingly portray it. As we move further and further away from that time it's becoming increasingly more difficult to find actors who can do this. The actors must be funny and that's not as easy as it might sound, they have to have a kind of chuckle in them and must be able to make the characters in the play real people, with real emotions and real feelings. The stakes in the play for these characters are very high, dealing with very real concerns and issues such as who are they going to get married to and will they ultimately be happy with that person? For actors to combine all of these things is very hard and for them to be able to both say and point the lines, so that they really bite, like in a Brad Fraser, Noel Coward or Joe Orton play is not easy.

Do you believe that Wilde’s plays have to be directed and performed in a particular style?
No, I don’t think any plays have to be performed in a particular style. Obviously any production of THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST you see is going to be different. In the past I've seen productions, which have been extremely superficial, and camp, I've also seen productions which have tried to be very serious and productions which have tried to marry the two. I hope that the way that we do the play will be a marry of the two. I hope very much that the audience will find the production entertaining and will also believe in the characters. It's a play that’s very hard to do but as I've already said I don’t think that any play has to be done in a certain way.

What are the challenges of designing and directing this play in the round?
I can’t think of there being any more challenges with this play than any other one I’ve directed. It's obviously a comedy and the general opinion is that they are supposed to be more difficult to produce in the round. I've never found comedies particularly difficult to direct in this theatre. You may not be able to see the actor who is making the joke but you'll hopefully be able to see another actor reacting to it. I find working in the round much more easier than directing in any other form because it’s not artificial and I think for this play, which most people are used to seeing in proscenium arch theatres with chocolate box settings, the audience sitting in the round will be more involved with the actors and it will help to blow away some of the dusty preconceptions associated with plays of this kind and freshen it up a bit.

Have you seen either the 1952 or the 2002 film versions of the play and if so, how do you think that they compare with Wilde’s original play?
The recent film version I thought was diabolical, I started watching it and then gave up in disgust. It’s useless it has no feeling for the play, it tries to serve up a cocktail with no sense of what the play is about at all. The earlier film version of course contains some classic performances, Dame Edith Evans’ Lady Bracknell is so definitive that actresses have tried for years to get out from under the shadow of her performance and the delivery of the line “a handbag.” The play on film didn't appear to have been done with any feeling of seriousness about it. For me the point about the play is that it should be heavily charged for the young couples and indeed for Chasuble and Prism with both sexual desire and a lasting desire for union. The earlier film is marvellous in it’s own way and the recent version is rubbish. I hope that this production will offer something different from either film.