Review: The Importance of Being Earnest

Rhys Thompson gets a Wilde night out as David Suchet and co. freshen up an old bag of tricks

Monday 10 August 2015

Venue: Vaudeville Theatre, London

★★★★☆

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is one of the West End’s most revived shows; the last version, starring Nigel Havers and Siân Phillips, only ran last year. A new version has just opened at London’s Vaudeville Theatre, with a lively and spirited cast who make the whole production worthwhile. Oscar Wilde’s famously hilarious story of lies, deception and handbags is brought to life again, with David Suchet (*Poirot*) spearheading Adrian Noble’s fine production.
After more than one hundred years since it was written, the plot is rather well worn and suspension of disbelief is essential, but if you’re able to do that, *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides a hilariously sharp look at the English class system and hypocrisy that can still make an audience laugh out loud. The farcical play is based around two English gentlemen who seek to avoid their necessary social engagements by assuming false identities. Their deceptions initially go to plan, but when they both fall in love and the fearsome Lady Bracknell (David Suchet) becomes involved, their lies begin to spiral out of control.

Although famous for being the “little Belgian” Suchet is captivatingly funny as Lady Bracknell. The idea of casting the role with a man is not new (In 2011, Brian Bedford did it on Broadway), but Suchet brings a distinctive reading of the script that breathes life into the 120 year-old role. For example, he chooses not to extenuate the infamous “A handbag?” line, but focus upon the location of the handbag. To Suchet’s Lady Bracknell, the item is unimportant compared to the shocking location of a railway station cloakroom.

There are several small incidents like this, where expectations are subverted, which lift the play above the title of “just another revival”.

Michele Dotrice (*Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em*) is terrific value as the dotty Miss Prism who is supposed to be looking after the naïve Cecily (Imogen Doel). Her scenes of childish flirtation with Richard O’Callaghan (playing Reverend Canon Chasuble) are beautifully played by all involved; she leaps with joy at the prospect of a walk around the grounds with Chasuble and sweetly trifles with him upon their return. Meanwhile, Emily Barber (Gwendolen Fairfax) and Doel are great fun in their roles as the two ladies able to see past the men’s lies (eventually). Their initial mutual disdain for each other is one of the show’s comedic highpoints.

Wilde’s satire of Victorian manners remains a classic of English theatre and this spirited production demonstrates why it remains popular. Peter McKinstry’s set presents a beautiful “chocolate box” style vision of Victorian England, which is complimented by characterful music by Larry Blank. Noble’s version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* exudes class, wit and style, with a tremendous cast making it a great evening’s entertainment. Whilst it runs until 7th November in London, the show is being broadcast live to cinemas across Europe on Thursday 8th October. Whether you have seen *The Importance of*… countless times or you’ve never seen it performed before, this show is to be highly recommended.

2 comments

Anne Strick 10 Aug ’15 at 11:07 pm

I have just seen this fabulous play. The acting and comic timing were superb. The costumes and the sets (especially) should get a big mention as they set the scene perfectly. Thanks for a wonderful evening of entertainment.

David Burman 27 Sep ’15 at 9:56 am

Can’t agree. The performance I saw last week was spoiled by the poor diction of the two young female characters whose attempts a a posh accent and their speed of delivery made many of their lines incomprehensible. Apart from David Suchet, the other actors need to improve their stage craft by not dropping their voices at the and of lines.