Review: The Importance of Being Earnest

The Bunbury Company of Players present a unique interpretation of The Importance of Being Earnest. Jess Burgess reviews

Thursday 19 November 2015

Venue: York Opera House

★★★★☆

This week at York’s ‘Grand Opera House’, the suitably named ‘Bunbury Company of Players’ presents their sixth revival of ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’; Oscar Wilde’s frivolous comedy of manners. Directed by the innovative ‘Lucy Bailey’ (Titus Andronicus, The Globe), adapted by ‘Simon Brett’ (A Shock to the System) and designed by the distinguished ‘William Dudley’ (BBC’s Persuasion) it is certainly expected to be an interesting interpretation.

The set-up was at first a little confusing, but once the context was established and the audience on board, an enjoyable experience that enhanced the play’s original source of joviality. In the program Lucy Bailey explains the reasons behind her creative reimagining stating that, ‘we were intrigued by the challenge of creating a framework that would allow older actors to take on the younger roles.’ Indeed all of the characters (most supposed to be in their twenties) were played by performers twenty or thirty years their senior. Yet, with an esteemed cast on all fronts, it works; the age gaps are played up and used as an alternative source of comedy, creating a perfect juxtaposition that reinforces core themes of mistaken identity and irrelevant values.
The other additional element concerns an ‘other world’ which envelopes the start and end of the production. We begin in the house of two ‘Bunbury Players’ (George and Lavinia Spelman). Built in the 1890’s (the same time at which ‘Earnest’ was written) and maintained in the ‘Arts and Crafts’ movement of the time (cue a lavish and elaborate set design by Dudley) the living room acts as the stage space through the entirety. We watch as the ‘Bunbury Players’ prepare to run a rehearsal of their production of ‘The Importance of…’ which is due to be performed the next day. The world within world set-up allows us an insight into the actors who are to convey Wilde’s outrageous characters and throughout each transforms from their ‘Bunbury’ character into their ‘Importance of’ character seamlessly and within mere seconds. In fact none of the actors can be singled out as the star in this production; each played their part admirably with a sense of true camaraderie on stage. Above everything else this was a cast who were having fun.

The progression into the play itself is initially a little jarring as the action is stopped and started with comments from the on-stage director ‘Martin Jarvis’ (also portrayed ‘John Worthing’), whilst the presence of the prompt reader throughout the first act (albeit sitting in a corner) also breaks the illusion of Wilde’s world. Yet, Wilde’s dialogue is not specifically naturalistic, and lends itself to a reimagining that places a heavier emphasis on spectacle than realism. They are also several appreciated alterations to the script that give a direct nod to the humour of a modern audience; the exclamation of ‘fifty shades of grey!’ by ‘Christine Kavanagh’ did not go unnoticed.

The play is almost at the end of its tour, yet is appearing in York until the 21st November before moving onto Glasgow. Perhaps not a version for hardcore Oscar Wilde fans with expectations of a straight interpretation. Yet, this production pays homage to the original in a number of delightful and unexpected ways; all that is required is an open mind and a sense of humour.