

What Wilde has to say to us moderns

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31 March 1998

Theater review: A Woman of No Importance by Oscar Wilde, at the Hillberry Theatre, Detroit, Michigan, performances from February 13 to April 23

Irish playwright Oscar Wilde wrote *A Woman of No Importance* in 1892, only a few years before the eruption of the scandal that was to end his career and contribute to his early death in 1900 at the age of 40. It was one of a series of plays written in a three-year period, which includes *Lady Windemere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Similar themes and motifs are present in all these works: concealed identities, secret pasts and social criticism. In *A Woman of No Importance* Wilde exposes the promotion and acceptance by society of the cynicism and superficiality of the ruling circles. The work also offers hope and encouragement to those who stand for principle and reject the status quo.

The story takes place among the British nobility. A young man, Gerald Arbuthnot (Matthew Troyer), has just been offered a job as a secretary to a cynical, but amusing aristocrat, Lord Illingworth (Bret Tuomi). When Rachel Arbuthnot (Wendy Gough), Gerald's mother, comes to meet her son's mentor, she discovers that he is Gerald's father who abandoned them both years earlier. When Lord Illingworth's identity is revealed, Gerald demands that his mother marry the lord. She refuses and Gerald rejects Illingworth.

Illingworth represents the aristocracy—cynical and reckless. He, nonetheless, becomes the vehicle for many honest and amusing observations about British society. He sums up the state of society: "To get into the best society, nowadays, one has to either feed people, amuse people, or shock people—that is all!" Of the aristocracy, he says, "The English country gentleman galloping after a fox—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable." "To win back my youth, Gerald," he remarks, "there is nothing I wouldn't do—except take exercise, get up early, or be a useful

member of the community." Yet as much as Illingworth criticizes the excesses, he is a willing participant. Wilde has Illingworth, who feels nothing for anyone, express a view that lies at the heart of the play, "Nothing is serious except passion." What is that passion? Rachel Arbuthnot's love for her son and her shame about the past, both of which Illingworth is incapable of understanding.

Mrs. Arbuthnot: *My son—to go away with the man who spoiled my youth, who ruined my life, who has tainted every moment of my days? You don't realize what my past has been in suffering and in shame.*

Lord Illingworth: *My dear Rachel, I must candidly say that I think Gerald's future considerably more important than your past.*

What is Gerald's future to be? All the "best" people tell Gerald, who is young and inexperienced, that being Lord Illingworth's secretary will bring him wealth and position, and he is entranced. He accepts uncritically what society deems as successful and proper. Gerald sees his mother's redemption through marriage—a most conventional resolve—to the man who wronged her. Gerald sees the unfeasibility of the marriage only through his mother's intervention.

It is Wilde's compelling character, Mrs. Arbuthnot, the woman whom Illingworth calls of no importance, who embodies the characteristics which make the play timely: adherence to principles and respect for life. She despises the way in which Illingworth and his class toy with people's affections and ruin lives on a whim. The future she wants for Gerald is quite different, and is expressed most clearly by the character Hester (Sara Wolf), an American heiress, who becomes Gerald's fiancée: "We are trying to build up life ... on a better, truer, purer basis than life rests on here.... You shut out from your society the gentle and the good. You laugh at the pure and simple.... Living, as you all do, on others and by them, you sneer at self-sacrifice, and if you

throw bread to the poor, it is merely to keep them quiet for a season.... Oh, your English society seems to me shallow, selfish, foolish.”

One difficulty in doing a Wilde play is the balancing act one has to perform—having one foot in farce, the other in melodrama. The play is peopled with aristocrats, politicians and clergy who are unwittingly funny. Some characters are primarily there to amuse, ask leading questions and deliver punch lines. Mary Vinette’s Lady Hunstanton is right on the mark. The performance pivotal to the play’s success is that of Mrs. Arbuthnot. Under Antoni Cimolino’s direction, Wendy Gough reveals Rachel Arbuthnot’s private pain in an intelligent and impassioned, but dignified, manner. Overall, the performance was truthful to Wilde’s intentions.

In the end the tables are turned. Illingworth becomes the “man of no importance.” His view that life is a joke and designed for his amusement is rejected by his son, Mrs. Arbuthnot and Hester. They represent Wilde’s view of the future—a society of purpose, passion and principle. Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* retains all the bite of its social criticism.



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