College Theatre

Presents

A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

By Oscar Wilde

The Studio Theatre
Oct. 6-23, 2016
Preview October 6

Directed by Amelia Barrett

Gerald Arbuthnot has a bright future! He is in love with an American heiress Hester Wosley, and new job possibility as secretary to the newest diplomat Lord Illingworth, a wildly attractive single man desired by many women. The ladies of society gather at Lady Hunstanton’s country party house, discussing the important matters of the day: marriage, affairs and divorce. Gerald’s mother arrives and everyone’s world is rocked as her scandalous secret threatens to ruin her son’s promising future. Blending comedy with melodrama, Wilde brings a witty and piercing look at society’s values and gender bias. Note: Adult language and themes.
Characters
Lord Illingworth
Sir John Pontefract
Lord Alfred Rufford
Mr. Kelvil, M.P.
The Ven. Archdeacon Daubeny, D.D.
Gerald Arbuthnot
Francis, Footman
Lady Hunstanton
Lady Caroline Pontefract
Lady Stutfield
Mrs. Allonby
Miss Hester Worsley
Alice, Maid
Mrs. Arbuthnot

The scenes of the play
ACT I. The Terrace at Hunstanton Chase.
ACT II. The Conservatory at Hunstanton Chase.
ACT III. The Conservatory at Hunstanton Chase.
ACT IV. Sitting-room in Mrs. Arbuthnot's House at Wrockley.

Time: 1894
Place: The Shires.

The action of the play takes place within twenty-four hours.

There will be a 15 minute intermission between Act II and Act III.

Director's Note
Lady Stutfield: Ah! The world was made for men and not for women.
Mrs. Allonby: Oh, don't say that Lady Stutfield. We have a much better time than they have. There are far more things forbidden to us then are to them.

The Victorian rules that dictate the behaviors of men and women are at the very center of this
social commentary. A weekend party allows this exclusive group of peers to gossip and comment on one another and the consequences of all their behaviors. Most interesting, perhaps, is that Wilde undercuts the social norms of his time, and offers the true power to the women, rather than the men. And for me, I find the play’s true power in its discourse on love.

~AB

*The following passage is taken in its entirety from Gregory Brdnik’s Wilde-online.info*

Oscar Wilde was an Anglo-Irish playwright, novelist, poet, and critic. He is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of the Victorian Era.

In his lifetime he wrote nine plays, one novel, and numerous poems, short stories, and essays.

Wilde was a proponent of the Aesthetic movement, which emphasized aesthetic values more than moral or social themes. This doctrine is most clearly summarized in the phrase “art for art's sake.”

Besides literary accomplishments, he is also famous, or perhaps infamous, for his wit, flamboyance, and affairs with men. He was tried and imprisoned for his homosexual relationship (then considered a crime) with the son of an aristocrat.

Wilde's greatest talent was for writing plays. His first successful play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, opened in February 1892. He produced a string of extremely popular comedies including *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These plays were all highly acclaimed and firmly established Oscar as a playwright.

In April 1895, Oscar sued Bosie's father for libel as the Marquis of Queensberry had accused him of homosexuality. Oscar's case was unsuccessful and he was himself arrested and tried for gross

---

indecent. He was sentenced to two years of hard labor for the crime of sodomy. During his time in prison he wrote De Profundis, a dramatic monologue and autobiography, which was addressed to Bosie.

Upon his release in 1897, he wrote The Ballad of Reading Gaol, revealing his concern for inhumane prison conditions. He spent the rest of his life wandering Europe, staying with friends and living in cheap hotels. He died of cerebral meningitis on November 30, 1900, penniless, in a cheap Paris hotel.

Grave of Oscar Wilde in France
Wilde's tomb in France (covered in lipstick kisses)

Chronology of Wilde's Life

1854
Born in Dublin

1864 - 1871
Attends Portora Royal School, Enniskillen

1871 - 1874
Attends Trinity College, Dublin

1874-1879
Attends Magdalen College, Oxford

1878
Wins Newdigate Prize for Ravenna (poem)

1881
Publishes his first collection of poetry – Poems

1882
Lectures in the United States and Canada. Writes his first play - Vera, or the Nihilists (was not a success)

1883
Lectures in Britain and Ireland. Writes his second unsuccessful play, The Duchess of Padua

1884
Marries Constance Lloyd

1885
His son, Cyril, is born
1886
His son, Vyvyan, is born

1887-1889
Edits Woman's World magazine

1888
Publishes The Happy Prince and Other Tales

1889 - 1890
Publishes several essays

1891

1892
Writes two plays: Lady Windermere's Fan (great success) and Salome

1893
Writes A Woman of No Importance

1894
Writes The Importance of Being Earnest

1895
Writes An Ideal Husband. At the height of his theatrical success, he sues Bosie's father for libel, which leads to his own arrest for homosexual offenses. He is found guilty for the crime of sodomy and sentenced to two years of hard labor.

1897
While in prison, he writes De Profundis

1898
Writes his best known poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol. His wife, Constance, dies.

1900
Dies of cerebral meningitis in Paris
The following passage is taken from “What Wilde has to say to us Moderns, ” in a review of another production.

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, has just been offered a job as a secretary to a cynical, but amusing aristocrat, Lord Illingworth. When Rachel Arbuthnot, 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, 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...The performance pivotal to the play's success is that of Mrs. Arbuthnot. ...Rachel Arbuthnot's private pain in an intelligent and impassioned, but dignified, manner...

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.
The following passage is taken in its entirety from Napoleon Sarony’s for Agora-Kolleg, A Woman of No Importance 3

Historical Background – 19th Century

Oscar Wilde lived between 1854 and 1900. He was born in a time which was very much influenced by new inventions. This upheaval started in the end of the 18th century. 1782, for example, James Watt invented the first steam engine. The industry became more and more important and its growth was increasing and far-reaching. In former days most of the areas of common land had been available for everybody’s use. But now rich landowners, who incorporated these common pieces of land into very big farms, took up the possibility of working in the country. As a result thousands of people moved to the cities.

These new cities and towns were often in the north of England, because raw materials for industrial purposes were available there.

The importance of London grew in this time. It became the business and trading centre of England, and already by the end of the 18th century it had a population of close to a million. But in spite of all the urban progress, people with possession of land in the countryside still had the social power and the prestige.

Oscar Wilde lived in the time of Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. Although she had less power than other Kings and Queens had had before her, she became an increasingly popular person. She was a symbol of Britain’s success in the world. Unlike the monarchs before her, she set an example to people by being a representative of a hard-working mother of nine children, being very religious and devoted to her husband. Because of this she was regarded as the personification of contemporary morals.

In the end of the 18th century the war of independence had taken place and Britain had lost its most important colonies in America (in 1783 Britain recognizes the independence of the American colonies), but soon after the end of the 18th century Britain controlled the biggest empire the world had ever seen (Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, large parts of Africa). This, together with long years of political stability, gave the British a sense of supreme confidence, even arrogance, about their culture and civilization. The British came to see themselves as having a duty to spread this culture around the world.

The beginning of the 19th century was the beginning of industrialization. Factory owners offering work, children aged 12 to 16 working eight, ten, twelve hours a day – unprotected by law – for almost no money, thousands of them dying, social injustice everywhere, classes coming into being (working class – middle class – upper class), in other words great changes in social structure. These factory owners held the real power in the country, along with the new and growing middle class of tradespeople. As they established their power, they did so following Victorian values.

Victorian Set of Values such as:
A. hard work
B. thrift

C. religious observance  
D. family life  
E. awareness of one’s duty  
F. absolute honesty in public life  
G. extreme respectability in sexual manners

**Queen Victoria**  
Reigned from 1837 to 1901. During her reign, although the modern powerlessness of the monarch was confirmed (she was often forced to accept as Prime Ministers people she personally disliked), she herself became an increasingly popular symbol of Britain’s success in the world. As a hard-working, religious mother of nine children, devoted to her husband, Prince Albert, she was regarded as the personification of contemporary morals. The idea that the monarch should set an example to the people in such matters was unknown before this time and created problems for the monarchy in the twentieth century.

1833  
The first law regulating factory working conditions is passed. (It set a limit on the number of hours that children could work.)  
Slavery is made illegal throughout the British Empire.

1868  
The Tuc (Trade Union Congress) is formed.

1870  
Free primary education (up to the age of eleven) is established.

1893  
The first socialist, Keir Hardie, is elected to Parliament. He enters the House of Commons for the first time wearing a cloth cap (which remained a symbol of the British working man until the 1960s)

*The following passage is taken in part from A Woman of No Importance, Student Guide, teach it, UK.⁴*

“The main theme is obviously that the betrayed woman, who becomes, in the eyes of society, ‘a woman of no importance.’ It is a subject that has occupied other Victorian writers and artists…who were aware that the men who seduced and abandoned these often naive girls were still welcomed into society, while for the woman it meant social and often financial ruin. If she was pregnant, her child would be illegitimate and, as Mrs. Arbuthnot reminds Hester at the end of the play, “But we are disgraced. We rank among outcasts. Gerald is nameless.”

Wilde felt strongly that men and women should be treated equally when it came to sexual matters…As several writers have suggested, it is not difficult to see that a concealed sin, especially a sexual one, and a plea for forgiveness might well reflect Wilde’s own situation in a society where his homosexuality ultimately made him an outcast.”

---
Things to think about prior to the performance:

- The Shaw Festival in Canada produced this script in 2016. Their publicity team wrote the following commentary about the production: “In this society, if you want to know what’s really going on, join the women on the terrace at Lady Hunstanton’s country house party. Marriage, affairs, divorce – and, of course, the wickedly attractive and scandalously unmarried Lord Illingworth are all thoroughly discussed. Word is that Illingworth would like to become a diplomat and make the young Gerald Arbuthnot his protégé. But when Gerald’s mother arrives at the party, their world is rocked when her long-concealed secret comes back to haunt them all. Wilde’s witty and piercing look at society’s public values and their impact on private lives.” What do you expect to see from this promotion? And, does this seem something of which you can relate?

- There has been some criticism aimed at Wilde about this play, which suggests the witty dialogue of the upper class characters he created, does not stand up with the more moral characters he created. What might be the challenge in marrying these two worlds and why?

- In the play, Oscar Wilde explores the double standards that existed between men and women in the Victorian Era. Women had few rights, and generally, men were forgiven for their indiscretions far more readily than women, and women were more condemned for moral failings. Does this still exist today?

Things to watch for in performance:

- Notice the set - the environment in which the actors will exist. What does the color, texture and space suggest to you?

- Notice how the set gets reconfigured during Act I, II, and IV. What does it communicate to you? Why do you think the design team chose these elements for this play?

- Notice the furniture in each act. Is there a difference?

- Notice the musical choices that the designer chose to underscore and augment each scene. How do you think the sound adds to the action of the production?

- Notice the cut, color and style of the costumes. How do these elements add to character?

- Notice the movement of the actors. Are there certain elements which repeat themselves? Do the costumes effect their movement or is it an affectation?

- Listen to the language that each character uses. How does their language differ from one another and what does it communicate to you?

- Look for the relationships of each woman, and each man, and each couple. What is communicated through dialogue, and yet remains unspoken?
Things to think about after the performance:

- Oscar Wilde referred to *A Woman of No Importance* as “a woman’s play.” Do you agree with this assessment and why or why not?
- What does Wilde’s presentation of Hester Worsley tell an audience about Victorian upper class attitudes to America?
- Who might represent the character of Oscar Wilde himself and why?
- What is the relationship between Mrs. Allonby and Lord Illingworth?
- What is Lady Stutfield’s relationship to all the men?
- What is the role of the Arch Deacon? Why is he in this play?
- What is the reason that a member of Parliament is in this play?
- Who has the most power in the script and why?
- What happens to Gerald, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Hester after the play ends?

Other Analysis “Tools”:

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, WHAT happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is ‘about’?

- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for his work?

The running time for this production is approximately 2 hours, with one 15 minute intermission between Act II and Act III

Thursday: October 6, 13, 20  
Friday: October 7, 14, 21  
Saturday: October 8, 15, 22  
Sunday: October 9, 16, 23

Please note the pre-show discussion will take place prior to the preview performance, Thursday, October 6, in MAC 140 from 6:45 pm – 7:15 pm. The pre-show discussion will include the director and designers, and will be a discussion of the approach to this production.

The post-show discussion will take place on Friday, October 14, following the performance. The post-show will include the director, cast and crew who will answer questions from the audience.