

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde
Network DVD
(2009)

The Importance of Being Earnest is surely one of the finest British films ever made. It is therefore astonishing that, until Network released this DVD last month, the 1952 version (not to be confused with the revival 50 years later starring Rupert Everett) was unavailable in the United Kingdom.

There is a danger in succumbing to fond memories of artistic experiences that prove to be misguided on mature reflection or subsequent viewing.

However, these 91 minutes of clean, old-fashioned fun under the direction of Anthony Asquith offer nothing but pure pleasure, down to the wonders of Technicolor when allied to a spectacular set of costumes. The combination of Wilde's incomparable wit and the kind of casting that approaches perfection is hard to beat.

The story is surely well known to all. Two charming bounders, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing played respectively by Michael Denison and Michael Redgrave, set out to woo a pair of real beauties. With her smoky voice and good looks, Joan Greenwood would melt any man's heart as Gwendolen Fairfax, while Dorothy Tutin is 18-year-old Cecily Cardew, Jack's attractive "little" ward.

The path of true love was never likely to run smooth, especially when each of the young women demands that any prospective husband must be called Earnest. This is the least of the men's problems in many ways, as a trio of theatrical veterans slows progress towards their collective goal.

Dame Edith Evans' renown these days rests almost entirely on her disdainful rendering of just two words "a handbag" and they more than live up to expectations, as does the rest of her haughty, aristocratic performance.

As one would expect, Margaret Rutherford is totally dotty as Miss Prism, an ageing tutor with the kind of memory that allows her to leave a baby in the aforementioned receptacle, while mild Miles Malleon playing the vicar Doctor Chasuble is the essence of British respectability.

All comes right in the end but not before the viewer is regaled with numerous wonderful aphorisms, many great laughs and the chance to see the cream of English acting almost 60 years ago on top form.

Do not take a chance, go out at once and buy a copy before it goes "out of print" again.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)