

British Theatre Guide

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The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

31 May–6 July 2025

Beautifully designed, artfully presented and played with tongues firmly in cheeks, Jimmy Fay's revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest* brings the Lyric Theatre, Belfast's season to a winning conclusion with a quirky, hugely entertaining staging that has all the makings of a summer hit.

Glossing Wilde's deliciously caustic take on late-Victorian manners and mores with a touch of Lewis Carroll (and much else besides), this *Earnest* lives in its own eye-popping, colour-saturated wonderland. Colliding lacy chintz, William Morris wallpaper, Art Nouveau detailing and leg-of-mutton sleeves with Pop Art psychedelia and Monty Python-inspired animations, Fay's *Earnest* is anything but. On paper, such era-splicing shouldn't work. On stage, it fizzles with vitality.

Fay has cleverly lit upon Lady Bracknell's lament that "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces"—a pointed but overlooked line in a play hardly short of choice, acid-laced *bon mots*. Everything is surface here. And everything is in flux. For all its prim, whalebone-girdled propriety, the era of Wilde's last stage masterpiece was a period of profound social and cultural change.

The feckless posing and pretence designed to attract attention even as it claims to be deflecting it of his archly self-possessed characters—call them 'Generation W'—strikes an obvious chord in an age of celebrity fame, assertions of glamour and social media solipsism.

There's something, glancingly, of [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (which Fay imaginatively staged *en plein air* last year) in the confusion of identities that afflict Wilde's quartet of young would-be lovers. Except here, the resulting bedlam is of the image-conscious protagonists' own making as frivolity and flamboyance go hand in hand.

The success of the production lies as much with Clare Gault's casting as with Fay's direction and the contributions of his design team. Conor O'Donnell's bravura Algernon courts high camp but stays always on the right side of it in an artfully studied, waspishly thrown-off performance, Adam Gillian's Jack is all guarded front, masking uncertainty and insecurity.

Their coquettish opposites are feistily realised in Calla Hughes Nic Aoidh's sugar-sweet but with a hard centre Cecily, and Meghan Tyler's preening, posturing Gwendolen forever striking poses that would light up TikTok and Instagram.

More Judi Dench than Edith Evans, and every bit as haughty as John Hewitt, the Lyric's last Lady Bracknell if memory serves, Allison Harding skilfully punctuates her familiar aperçus with telling pauses, withering stares and scornful turns of the head, to make the matriarch imperiously her own.

Strong support is provided by the would-be Darby and Joan of Marty Maguire's Chasuble and Jo Donnelly's Miss Prism, Neil Keery drolly doubling as pre-curtain announcer and put-upon servants Merriman and Lane.

Enormous fun is also to be had from Neil O'Driscoll's Terry Gilliam-indebted animations, a front-cloth song-and-dance routine during a set change, and scrolling period advertisements—Cocaine drops anyone?—on the iron.

The candyfloss colour palette of Catherine Kodicek's costumes, the sensual, pastel shades of Mary Tumelty's lighting, Stuart Marshall's beautifully manicured set and Garth McConaghie's pitch-perfect music and sound design add to the sensory pleasures of a production that delights in Wilde's and its own subversive intent.

Reviewer: [Michael Quinn](#)