

## Halden Theatre presents Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'

The funny thing about the Halden Theatre Company is that you *think* you're going to watch an amateur production – which in some ways you are, because the group is largely volunteer-run and it's hard to imagine that there is anything approaching professional funding for its activities – but the end result is far from amateur, I assure you. This fairly new company, based in Nottingham, has aims to 'bring theatre to the people' by placing it back in everyday social environments such as bars & cafes, whilst promising not to 'succumb to the low standards of many forms of modern entertainment'.

The company's first production - Sartre's existentialist play *Huis Clos* - was a hard act to follow, but its latest offering – an execution of Wilde's classic social comedy was able to stand up and be counted alongside its somewhat high-brow stable mate.

I saw it performed in the Congregational Hall - a spectacular backdrop in which director Daniel Hallam and producer Barry Paul Horrell had created an instantly believable Victorian drawing room with only the scantiest of set dressing. Unfortunately, the audience on the night was rather thin, and was mainly bunched at the centre of the hall's semi-circular seating. This meant that Hallam & Horrell's attempts to create separate stage areas for the different acts was somewhat ambitious and, because of the lofty acoustics of the hall, we found it difficult to hear all of the central act of the play. Hopefully, the more intimate venues that will house later performances of the play will eradicate this slight shortcoming. That notwithstanding, the entire company were so conscientious in their immaculate enunciation of Wilde's (sometimes) tortuous dialogue, that very little was lost.

I've never actually seen the play performed before (or any of its film adaptations), but I did read the script some years ago and I *think* that this was an abridged version – if so, it was skilfully done with no loss of structure to Wilde's somewhat convoluted plot.

The cast was superb – and impressively hard-working too, as I would have expected. Two refugees from the previous production of *Huis Clos* reappeared – both Guy Evans as the deliciously camp and foppish *Algernon*, and Natalia Douglas as the delightfully coquettish *Gwendolen*, did not disappoint. Ken Watt multi-tasked with aplomb in various roles of manservants and vicars, carrying off the deception with a deadpan conviction. Stephanie Collyer, Philip McGough and Elizabeth Smith all delivered equally convincing and agreeable performances as *Lady Bracknell*, *Jack Worthing* and *Cecily*, but it was possibly Irene Button as the twittering and toadying *Miss Prism* who (almost) ran away with the play. She was superb.

One slight criticism I would make is with the length of the musical interlude before the action begins. A device often employed in Victorian theatre as a 'warmer' for the audience, it felt somehow out of place as entertainment for a modern audience and could perhaps have been shorter.

But what of that most famous of lines in English drama? There have been many interpretations of Lady Bracknell's celebrated expostulation of "*A handbag?*" and - whether it was Hallam's direction or Collyer's interpretation which caused it to be delivered as more of a baffled response, rather than emulating Dame Edith's legendary scandalized retort - it worked well, and was certainly no anti-climax.

Another triumph for the Halden Theatre Company. Well done.

For further information go to: [www.haldentheatre.co.uk](http://www.haldentheatre.co.uk)