[This essay was prepared for the production of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* at People’s Light & Theatre Company, Malvern, PA, in June, 1993. Various parts of the essay were uused by the artistic staff and company, in program notes, in teachers’ manuals, and in press packets.]

Wilde, Society, and Society Drama

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On February 14—St. Valentine’s Day—1895, London was choked with a major snow storm. But this could not prevent the opening night of The Importance of Being Earnest, at the St. James’s Theatre, from being a major social event. This was in part due to the stunning popularity of Oscar Wilde in the theatre: The Importance of Being Earnest was Wilde’s fourth popular West End play in only three years, and An Ideal Husband had only opened a month before and was still playing to packed house at the Haymarket Theatre a few blocks away. Fashionable London was out in force, in their most elegant clothes. As a tribute to Wilde’s dandified aestheticism, women wore sprays of lilies as corsages; and many young men wore lilies of the valley in the buttonholes of lapels of their tailcoats. Wilde spent most of the performance backstage, but he was nevertheless dressed in what one biography called “the depth of fashion”: “his coat had a black velvet collar; he carried white gloves; a green scarab ring adorned one of his fingers; a large bunch of seals on a black moir ribbon watch chain hung from his white waistcoat; and, like the young men in the stalls, he wore lilies of the valley in his buttonhole.”

Audiences came dressed in evening formal to opening nights then; in fact, you *had* to wear evening formal dress *any* night if you wanted to sit in the stalls (what we call the orchestra) or the dress circle (the first balcony). And this was true not only at the St. James’s Theatre but throughout “Theatreland,” the entertainment district in the West End of metropolitan London. For theatregoing was more than an entertainment medium or an art form: it was major leisure activity for people of all social classes, part of a network of urban activities that included private clubs, restaurants, pubs, cafes, hotels, and casinos.

In the 1890s, there were over fifty theatres in greater London, most of the them in the West End, a half dozen alone along Shaftesbury Avenue, which had been completed in 1886 as part of an urban renewal plan off of Piccadilly Circus. The theatres drew their patrons from the greater metropolitan area, who came to the theatre by carriage, omnibus, streetcar, and underground railway. Each theatre was exclusively leased by a manager, often an “Actor-Manager,” who established a reputation for his theatre (the actor-managers were most often men) through the style of his acting, the physical splendor of the production, and the type of dramatic entertainment offered.

Of the older and larger theatres, Covent Garden had become the home of grand opera, and Drury lane was famous for its spectacular autumn melodramas and elaborate Christmas Pantomimes. The most famous “classical” actor of the time, Henry Irving, had managed the Lyceum Theatre for over twenty years, producing a series of major Shakespeare revivals for himself and his stage partner, Ellen Terry. (When *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened, Irving and Terry could be seen at the Lyceum in J. Comyns Carr’s *King Arthur*, a top-of-the-line costume epic with armor designed by the pre-Raphaelite artist Sir Edward Burne-Jones and incidental music by Sir Arthur Sullivan; Irving would join their ranks when he received a knighthood—the first actor to be thus honored—later that year). You could see melodrama at the Adelphi Theatre, operetta at the Savoy (where the Gilbert and Sullivan collaborations had received their premieres), and musical comedies at the Gaiety (*An Artist’s Model*, one of a series of musicals with working-class heroines, had just opened there in February, 1895). Variety entertainment of all sorts could be seen in the Music Halls, either in smoke-filled taverns in working class neighborhoods, in chic cosmopolitan halls tucked away in the West End, or in glittering theatres like the Empire on Leicester Square, which offered picturesque ballet-extravaganzas.

Several actor-managers—Charles Wyndham at the Criterion on Piccadilly Circus, John Hare at the Garrick on Charing Cross Road, and George Alexander at the St. James’s—specialized in “Society Drama,” plays of modern life set in the rarefied world of the upper classes. These plays could be witty and frivolous light comedies; or they could be ponderous dramatic treatises on difficult social issues, most often the sexual “double standard” and the “problem” of the “fallen woman.” One such play, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* by Arthur Wing Pinero, had been presented by George Alexander at the St. James’s Theatre two years earlier, with the fiery and exotic actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell becoming an instant star as the former kept-woman trying to fit into the respectable world of her upper-class husband. We hear a parodic echo of plays like *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* when Jack Worthing (played by Alexander), in the final act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, says of Miss Prism (who he mistakenly believes to be his long-lost and unmarried mother), “who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women?” But for all of their epigrammatic wit and paradoxical attitudes towards life, Oscar Wilde’s other 1890s society comedies (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*) are all serious “problem” dramas about the intractability of sexual double-standards and the personal costs of respectability, precisely those issues that Wilde appears (at least) to be satirizing in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

At the beginning of Pinero’s *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, Aubrey Tanqueray (played by Alexander) rebukes his friend Cayley Drummle (a man-about-town modeled in part on Oscar Wilde) for sharing in the values of “The Way of World” and condemning all women of doubtful moral reputation. Drummle responds, “My dear Aubrey, I *live* in the world.” Aubrey ruefully defines what Drummle means by “the world”: “The name we give our little parish of St. James’s.”

For an upper-class bachelor in the 1890s, the little parish of St. James’s *was* the world. Exclusive gentleman’s clubs line Pall Mall. Along Jermyn Street are the custom shirtmakers and bootmakers. A few blocks away are hotels, shops, and galleries of Piccadilly, and the “bespoke” tailors of Saville Row. Within a short walk or a carriage ride, a young man could leave his bachelor apartment in the Albany (where Jack Worthing resides, under the name “Ernest,” in *The Importance of Being Earnest*), shop, pay an “at-home” call in Mayfair or Belgravia, dine at his club, take in a play at one of a dozen theatres, or see a ballet at the Empire. And at the St. James’s Theatre (now demolished), right at the center of “our little parish of St. James’s,” a young man could take a seat in the stalls for *Lady Windermere’s Fan* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James’s Theatre was a Society Comedy about life in St. James’s for audiences who lived or shopped or dined in St. James’s. And Society Drama as a whole was a mirror in which fashionable audiences could see fashionable images of their own fashionable world of at-homes, dinner parties, and country-house weekends; a world in which gentlemen with hyphenated surnames, dressed in carefully-creased trousers and elegant cravats, made small talk with titled ladies dressed *a la mode*, and flirted, for a moment only, with the dreaded possibilities of adultery and interclass marriage; a world in which one could pause for a moment to consider what to do with the women of doubtful reputation in one’s midst, but where one would not hesitate to banish these “fallen” women back to their *déclassé* world of Parisian boarding houses and second-rate continental resort towns.

With regard to clothing, Society Drama at the fashionable theatres was a mirror literally as well as figuratively. Actors employed by George Alexander at the St. James’s were contractually required to dress appropriately “off-stage as well as -on,” and could be fired if spotted walking in Piccadilly during the day in anything less than a well-tailored morning coat. New Society Dramas would often premier at the beginning of the London “season,” and women would wait until they saw the fashions worn by the female characters in the play before they ordered their new gowns and hats. And would-be high-fashion couturiers with assumed French names would design theatrical costumes for Society Dramas and then, their reputations established, became high-society dress designers in the “real” world instead.

But if theatre is a mirror, it is a flattering mirror that lets the viewer see only what he or she wants to see. And the mirror-image relationship between the audience and the play in late-Victorian Society Drama is more notable for what the theatre chose to leave out than what it mirrored. For the world of high society and high fashion was more porous than anyone in society cared to admit; and the theatre, as it often does, embodied by its very theatrical nature the instability of the English class system.

This was certainly true of the theatre auditorium. Audiences in even the most fashionable theatres included members of every class, from aristocrats and financiers, to businessmen and professionals, to shopkeepers, clerks, and artisans, to servants and laborers. The lower classes had their own seating areas, with their own entrances, lobbies, bars, and bathrooms in the theatre. But, in the more expensive parts of the house, the auditorium was by no means as segregated as members of “society” might wish. After all, not everyone could be admitted to a fashionable drawing-room; but anyone who could afford the higher-priced ticket and had the right clothing could sit in the stalls or the dress circle.

The actors on stage embodied these social ambiguities. Towards the end of the century, as the theatrical profession became more respectable, acting was no longer the exclusive province of theatrical families, social outcasts, and women of loose morals—the class of people that centuries before had been legally classified as “rogues and vagabonds”; and respectable, educated people from the middle classes could now enter the profession without too much social stigma. But even then, actors were certainly not, in their social origins, the aristocrats and ladies and gentlemen they successfully pretended to be on stage in Society Drama. George Alexander was typical of his generation of actors: his father was in dry goods, and he dropped out of school when he was fifteen to be a clerk in a London office, joined a part-time amateur dramatic society, and then went into acting professionally. No wonder Alexander insisted that his actors dress well on-stage and -off: only by their ability to wear perfectly-tailored clothes and a perfectly-chosen buttonhole could actors convince audiences that they were, in manners, the gentlemen they pretended to play. One of Alexander’s most popular roles—in a dramatization of the popular novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda*—is emblematic of the actor’s theatrical status as a gentleman. In it, Alexander played a middle-class English tourist with an uncanny resemblance to the embattled King of Ruritania; just put the middle-class Englishman in the right clothes, and he can play the part of a King to perfection.

The social ambiguities present on the stage and in the auditorium of the St. James’s Theatre were present in the entertainment industry as a whole. Not all of the pleasures to be found for money in “our little parish of St. James’s” were dignified, or even legal. Then, as now, the theatre was only one of the trades that offered the spectacle of bodies for public scrutiny and sale: the West end offered patrons not only theatres, restaurants and bars, but streetwalkers and brothels. The worlds of the late-Victorian theatre and the flesh trade overlapped directly, particularly at the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square. There, in the infamous “promenade”—a wide horseshoe-shaped bar and lobby space behind the first tier of gallery seats, with an open view of the auditorium and the stage—high-priced prostitutes and elegantly-dressed gentlemen would make their assignations. Even after a well-publicized series of public hearings, the scandalous practice continued openly. And a compromise arrangement that had been reached—to let the open solicitations continue, but to screen off the promenade from the auditorium with a low barrier—did not last long: on the first night after the barrier was installed, it was torn down in protest by a gang of young, fashionable, gentlemen-about-town, led by the young Winston Churchill.

If anyone knew about the theatricality of late-Victorian High Society, it was Oscar Wilde. He was, after all, a perpetual outsider in the world of elegant fashion and society he frequented. An Irishman of middle-class origins among the English, he gained access to the upper-class worlds of Oxford and London through his sheer intellectual and artistic brilliance. An espouser of the “truth of masks,” he constantly wore the mask of the dandy and the aesthete. And he wrote plays about the impenetrability of the very “society” that he had, in fact, successfully penetrated.

All of these dualities are reflected in the fun-house mirror of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. We can see why Jack Worthing, a respectable provincial justice of the peace, would need to invent a ne’er-do-well younger brother to justify his frequent trips to his bachelor rooms up in London. We can easily picture how he spends his time in London when he is not paying at-home calls to the Hon. Gwendolyn Fairfax. We can guess why Jack (under his assumed name) and his friend Algernon Montcrieff go to the Empire. And we can only imagine where Algernon goes on his “Bunburying” expeditions once he’s gotten out of his dinner engagement with his Aunt, Lady Bracknell. We can certainly see why Lady Bracknell is so concerned about her daughter’s prospective fiancé’s qualifications for marrying into the family, and whether Worthing’s father was born in the “purple of commerce,” or whether he rose “from the ranks of the aristocracy.” And we can see why Worthing’s “contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life” reminds Lady Bracknell “of the worst excesses of the French Revolution . . . and I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?” *The Importance of Being Earnest* depicts a world in which the best kept secrets are the ones that everyone knows; a world in which everyone knows very well that their world is not as stable, as exclusive, or as moral as it pretends to be; and a world in which everyone appreciates the vital importance of maintaining at all cost what they know to be the fictions of everyday life.

Which brings us back to the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James’s Theatre on Valentine’s Day, 1895, and the lily of the valley in Oscar Wilde’s lapel. Two years before, at the opening of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* at the same theatre, Wilde, along with one of the characters in the play, had worn a green carnation, an open acknowledgement of the homosexual sub-culture to which Wilde and many of his friends belonged. In 1895, while *The Importance of Being Earnest* was in rehearsal, Wilde was in the middle of his troubled but long-term relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, and was being pursued by Douglas’s father, the pugnacious and homophobic Marquis of Queensbury (author of “Queensbury rules” of boxing). Queensbury had bought a ticket to the opening night of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, planning to disrupt the play with a demonstration. A policemen met Queensbury at the door and prevented his admission. Two weeks later, Queensbury left a calling card in Wilde’s mailbox at the Albemarle club, with a note written on it: “To Oscar Wilde, posing as a Somdomite.” The spelling error (he no doubt meant “sodomite”) and the cautious reference to Wilde’s “pose” notwithstanding, Wilde decided to take legal action and sued Queensbury for libel. Wilde lost the case; he was arrested for sodomy immediately after, tried, convicted, and sentenced to two years hard labor.

During the height of the controversy, Alexander withdrew *The Importance of Being Earnest* from performance. He revived it in 1902, without the disgraced author’s name on the program. Only in a revival in 1909 did Alexander return Wilde’s name to the bill, and the play had the long and commercially successful theatrical run that it deserved.

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/imp.html>