

# Tower Theatre Co. hilarious in ‘Importance of Being Earnest’

## Wednesday

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We’ve got to find a way to keep them. Maybe there’s some clause in Brexit: if they leave England, they can’t go back. Talking about London’s Tower Theatre Company, which is visiting the Gorton Theatre this week with its production of Oscar Wilde’s “The Importance of Being Earnest.” Smart, crisply performed and thoroughly prepared comedy is hard to come by in the states. Thank goodness they brought some. The troupe is hosted by the Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe, which makes a reciprocal visit next fall to London. This staging of Wilde’s preposterous parlor farce was a winner on almost every level.

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

## If you go...

WHAT: Tower Theatre Company, “The Importance of Being Earnest”

WHERE: Gorton Theater, 267 East Main St., Gloucester

WHEN: through April 22

TICKETS: \$15, \$10 students, \$5 under 19. Reserve at 978-309-9669 or [cast2008@prodigy.net](mailto:cast2008@prodigy.net)

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The troupe is hosted by the Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe, which makes a reciprocal visit next fall to London. This staging of Wilde's preposterous parlor farce was a winner on almost every level.

There's really not much to "Importance"; it's a flimsy excuse to let Wilde talk to the world, flaunting his cleverness, but not digging very deeply into anything at all. Sure, it might be a satire of marriage — but at this point, who hasn't satirized that institution? It might be a deeply closeted celebration of homosexuality, but that has also come a long way since Wilde's late-Victorian era.

What it certainly is, thanks to Wilde's genius for skewering people, ideas, institutions and manners, is non-stop brilliance when it comes to the English language.

"To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up." "I never change, except in my affections." "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read." Not quoting Wilde is an impossibility, after hearing nearly three hours of it delivered with style and precision.

The plot, such as it is, revolves around two friends, Algernon (Murray Deans) and Jack (Bernard Brennan), neither of whom are named Earnest, trying in various ways to become engaged to Gwendolen (Helen McGill) and Cecily (Imogen de Ste. Croix), respectively. Being named Earnest becomes desirable, a vehicle for respectability, and that, believe it or not, drives the story.

Lady Bracknell (Helen McCormack), mother of Gwendolen, rules with Victorian firmness, and is every bit as intolerant and risible as one can imagine. McCormack gets to deliver one of the famous lines in theater ("A handbag?"), and does that and everything else to up-tight perfection.

A governess, Miss Prism (Karen Walker), a priest (Ian Recordon), and two unflappably arch servants (Richard Kirby, Nigel Oram) fill out the admirable cast.

The pairings make for the most fun: alternately, the self-absorbed men, and then the confidently clueless women, at the center of the "love" stories. Lines were snapped off with off-handed assurance. The various ways to serve tea as a vehicle for humor, satire and revenge stand as the

centerpiece of the comedy, especially in act two.

There were some issues, but minor ones. Deans could have modulated his tone, and his volume, so as to not be so uniformly forceful. Ste. Croix often delivered so softly and briskly as to be inaudible. Director's Martin Mulgrew's blocking — granted, a huge challenge in a work that is simply talk, and hardly any action — could have been invigorated with some additional movement.

But the physical comedy in the faces and mannerisms of the players — especially Brennan and McGill — made the troupe seem like they had sprung right out of Wilde's idiosyncratic imagination.

“The Importance of Being Earnest” runs through Saturday evening. It would be worth the trip to London, but thanks to the Tower Theatre, and Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe, you don't have to bother.

*Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](#); email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com)*

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