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Choreographing "The Importance of Being Earnest"

By Sophie Braccini



(L-R) Christopher Kristant (Algernon), Casi Maggio (Cecily), Sally Clawson (Gwendolen), Ryan O'Donnell (Jack) Photo courtesy Town Hall Theater

play, Wilde called it a 'trifle,' but there are harder truths underneath," says Martin, "In the play, the characters discover who they really are. They search for their real identity beyond the social conventions, and finally find it."

Martin found strong elements of modernism in the behavior of the young ladies of the play who, according to her, lead the men and break expectations. "The 20's was a time in England when women got the right to vote (if they were over 30 and married), where the dresses and hair got shorter and traditional roles shifted," says the Director, "Gwendolen and Cecily's personalities and the actions they take in the play completely fit that bill. In fact, Wilde was so ahead of his time that I was very surprised to learn that he died in 1900."

During rehearsal, Martin uses physical improvisation techniques that allow the actors to explore the deeper feelings of the characters. One scene depicts the first meeting of the two young ladies of the play, and how they shortly discover that they are both engaged to Earnest (only to find out later that it is not the same person). Martin asked the two actresses to play "hats off," miming and improvising the shifting emotions in a quasi-dance, the rising of their aggressiveness, and their fight. Later, the two women play the same scene "with the lid on," now back to the contained gestures proper for their society and time, but still carrying and expressing the emotions that were displayed in the "danced" version.

"I give the actors a very detailed list of what I want to see in every beat (a small section of the text that Martin identifies for its coherent set of emotions), then I ask them to choreograph it, in their vocal or physical performances. I give them the structure, they choose how to express it, and we crack the nut of the play together." That's the way Martin and her cast respect the classics, by leaving no stone or pebble unturned.

"She brings such an incredibly theatrical eye to everything she works on, and is able to bring a story to life through her visionary and ensemble-driven approach to her actors," comments Worsley.

At the same time she directs the adult cast, Martin asks the shadow cast to be present. These teen actors, who work as backstage crew, will have two presentations of their own, on March 14th at 7:00 p.m. and the 21st at 2:00 p.m. "The high school students are wonderful to have around," says Martin, "Adult actors can do things the younger ones can't, but the teens sometimes have a higher willingness to try and take risks, they are not afraid to fail; the adult actors can learn from their fearlessness."

The Importance of Being Earnest runs Feb. 25th - March 27. It is rated "PG" and is about two hours long. For tickets contact the Town Hall Theatre Box Office at (925) 283-1557, or purchase online at

www.TownHallTheatre.com.

Town Hall Theater will present Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," from February 25th through March 27th. "We chose this play in part because it's such a well-known and well-loved piece of theater," said Artistic Director Clive Worsley, "Many people consider it one of the greatest comedies ever written. There is something timeless and always resonant in this delightful story. And I could think of no one better suited to direct this play than the wonderful Susannah Martin."

Susannah Martin, a young Bay Area director, is known for not being afraid to shake up the classics. For example, in her recent production of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's "The Threepenny Opera," for the Shotgun Players in Berkeley, she set the Victorian era story in punk era America. She was not quite so radical with "The Importance of Being Earnest." Although she moved the action from the Victorian era, as it was written and set, it was only by a few years; Martin's production takes place in 1925. "The play contains elements of modernism in the characters and their behavior," said Martin during rehearsals, "Wilde was ahead of his time, moving the action forward in time reveals it."

Situating the play after the First World War allows the director to show other aspects that she sees in the play. "This is a very light play, Wilde called it a 'trifle,' but there are harder truths underneath," says Martin, "In the play, the characters discover who they really are. They search for their real identity beyond the social conventions, and finally find it."



Susannah Martin talks to the cast during rehearsal Photo Sophie Braccini

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