

# Life in LAMORINDA

## Choreographing "The Importance of Being Earnest"

By Sophie Braccini



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

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."

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

Photo courtesy Town Hall Theater 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.



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Susannah Martin talks to the cast during rehearsal

Photo Sophie Braccini

## MOFD, FAIR Meet To Discuss Fire Service

By Lucy Amaral

Although it was obvious that the two sides were not going to easily agree on what to do about the fire district's financials, the Moraga Orinda Fire District (MOFD) and a citizen's group, Fire and Infrastructure Renewal (FAIR), met on February 3rd at a MOFD Board work session to start the conversation.

Nearly 100 people packed the Fellowship Hall of the Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church to hear representatives of FAIR offer their ideas to dissolve MOFD, then contract with the Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ConFire) and American Medical Response (AMR) to provide fire and emergency services to the City of Orinda. According to FAIR, this new arrangement would save Orinda millions in tax dollars, which could be redirected back to the city to be used for infrastructure improvements.

The MOFD Board had submitted 30 questions to the citizens group for their review. Most of the questions dealt with how FAIR arrived at the lowered costs. During the meeting, all but two questions had been pre-answered. The two questions, according to FAIR member, Steve Cohn, were of key concern to FAIR as they felt one was a "trick" question challenging FAIR's assurance that service levels would not degrade, and the other question contested FAIR's statement that local control would increase under FAIR's proposal. Those questions

were clarified and debated but seemingly not answered to any side's satisfaction.

Many of the projections offered by FAIR were, by their own admission, estimates, and during the presentation, MOFD board members requested contacts and additional data to use for verification. There were moments of contention on both sides of the aisle, however for the most part, civility maintained its place.

MOFD focused a portion of their questions on the contract options for American Medical Response, a medical transport company that would provide ambulance service to Orinda if MOFD were to be dissolved. Currently, MOFD has two ambulances, one stationed in Moraga and one stationed in Orinda. The Board's concern included response time, staffing and asked about the possibility of having transport housed in Orinda. FAIR's response was that any such details would need to be worked out in a contract between Orinda and AMR.

The Board then asked Manuel Navarro, vice president of EMS development for AMR to speak. Navarro said that currently, MOFD has authority over its emergency medical services. He added that if the City of Orinda breaks away and contract with ConFire, the AMR must contract through ConFire, not the city, therefore leaving it up to ConFire to determine any service levels.

During the public comment section of the evening a new citizen's group, OrindaCARES (Citizens Against Reducing Emergency Services), announced its formation in support of MOFD. Speakers supporting MOFD outnumbered those wishing to dissolve the district by more than 4 to 1, including pro-MOFD comments from Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe and Orinda School Board President Riki Sorenson. Those speaking in favor of dissolving MOFD focused on the examination of how current funding is used and how that might be changed.

Board President, Frank Sperling, said the meeting was productive. "It's a first step in the MOFD Board of Director's quest to fully understand the details of this group's proposal," he said.

The Board requested Director John Wyro begin the vetting process and validating FAIR's information. Wyro said he will report his progress at the Board meeting scheduled for Wednesday, February 17.


Cohn said he hopes now that Moraga, Orinda and MOFD will look into FAIR's proposal further and that this meeting was a necessary step.

"We think we were asked good questions and we believe we answered them well," said Cohn. "We believe we have done our homework and that our responses reflected that."

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