

Very Random Notes on "The Importance of Being Earnest"

By ATHENE SEYLER

Owing to the unfortunate indisposition of Mr. Herbert Farjeon, I have been asked to write something for the Magazine this month, and I am endeavouring to put down a few thoughts about our next-but-one production—*The Importance of Being Earnest*. As I write, we are actually performing *Measure for Measure*, with *The Tempest* in rehearsal and a revival of *The Cherry Orchard* simmering, as it were, to be fitted in between these two productions. But in a stock company such as the one at the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells, we carry at least three plays about with us in our minds at the same time. They lie in our brains in layers like strawberry flan! At the base is, subconsciously, the play we are acting at night—the solid pastry of our nightly job which is taken for granted in the days' work. Over this lie our new parts in the play which we are rehearsing during the day—the strawberries, as it were being carefully selected and placed on the pastry. Finally, there is the cream on the top—the future production—~~which~~ we discuss and savour in our spare moments. So we are at this moment toying with the idea of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and savouring its flavour before getting down to it in real earnest. (No pun meant or, I hope, taken.)

It is a play that I am fully familiar with, having seen an early revival of it played by Sir George Alexander, and again one in 1923 with Leslie Faber as Jack—and finally Sir Nigel Playfair's "black and white" highly conventionalized production, at the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1930 with Mr. John Gielgud in the part of Jack. Mr. Nicolas Hannen and I, returning from a tour of South Africa, went into this production, he to follow Mr. Gielgud and I to take Miss Jean Cadell's place as Miss Prism. All these productions were very different in quality, and it is interesting to note how the play has become a masterpiece of almost historic interest in the thirty-eight years since its first production.

I remember an early revival of—was it 1909?—being a charming, very smart affair played fancifully, but in no way very different in presentation or technique from the drawing-room comedies of the time.

In 1923 it was played in the costume of that year, and suffered very greatly by being treated realistically when already the convention of play technique was altering—when the "asides" had been given up, and dialogue was becoming more like every day conversation.

The last revival in 1930 was treated quite stylistically and presented the play as a masterpiece, adding to its own satire the definite comment on its period by the producer himself. This production had a great success, bringing out as it did the "daintiness of wit," as Bernard Shaw says, its wealth of epigram and artificiality of treatment that is more akin to Restoration writing than to the real-life Drama of to-day.

Bernard Shaw suggested in his original criticism that the play was actually ten years old when first presented and says that the general effect of it is as dating from the 'seventies—but adds that he found other critics equally entitled to respect declaring that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a strained effort of Mr. Wilde's at ultra modernity, and that it could never have been written but for the opening up of entirely new paths in drama last year by *Arms and the Man*!—at which he confesses to a chuckle!

We ourselves feel that it is a good play to include in our season at the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells, if only by virtue of its beautiful writing; for the fastidious choice of the right word; and the happy delight of the wittily turned phrase which characterise it.

To quote Mr. Bernard Shaw once again—"Oscar Wilde" distils the very quintessence, and gets as a product plays which are so unapproachably playful that they are the delight of every playgoer with two-pennorth of brains."

Mr. Farjeon invented last month a fascinating fireside game by which one likened playwrights to suns—and though he says it should be preserved for the fireside, I must suggest a variation to be played in the intervals at the Vic and the Wells. What precious stones are the plays that form the necklace of the present season?

I see *Twelfth Night* as an Indian ruby, warm and glowing; *The Cherry Orchard* suggests the mystery of a pearl; *Measure for Measure* is a dark sapphire; *The Tempest* an aquamarine; *Macbeth* a dark opal—and surely *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a perfectly-cut diamond—or so we hope to set it for you!