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Review of: The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde and Travesties by Tom Stoppard staged by The Court Theatre in Chicago

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The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde; Charles Newell; Travesties by Tom Stoppard;
Charles Newell

Review by: Sara Freeman

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(the pronoun “I”). The effect is of a wounded language with holes where self-referentiality should be. The play ends with Marie-Laurence’s decision to stop living as an object, smashing her face into a mirror—removing the veil that is her skin—in order to find out what remains.

The final section, a biblical fashion show entitled “Catwalk, sept voix pour sept voiles” (Seven Voices for Seven Veils), emerged as the longest and most ambitious of the evening. Mixing contemporary elements with literary / historical figures, “Catwalk” frames Middle Eastern conflict as a battle between war and beauty, with hope represented by a fantastic seven-veiled dress. Binet’s staging of the seven veils provided the most striking image. The costume worn by the fourteen-year-old Palestinian model Salomé (played by Ève Duranceau) was created by the whole ensemble, each actor covered in white fabric. With only Duranceau’s face showing, the performers simulated an expansive dress simply by standing behind and moving with her. When Salomé fell from the catwalk, the dress seemed to break apart—the actors removing their veils and playing their respective roles as participant-spectators. Only then did we learn of the pressures faced by the beautiful young woman. When Salomé rose, she shocked her audiences—both on- and offstage—by pulling out a machine gun; as the lights faded, we heard gunfire, making Salomé’s last act one of destruction. With this final image, Parenteau-Lebeuf draws attention to the violence inherent even in the peace-making roles that women are forced to assume. The veils and the beauty are imposed: underneath lies a Salomé completely unknown to those closest to her—a young woman whose identity has been veiled and whose only mode of speech is the violence for which she is assumed to be the antidote.

In *Filles de guerres lasses*, Parenteau-Lebeuf creates a new set of heroines specific to her generation. With its emphasis on monologues, *Filles de guerres lasses* presents women in subject positions, telling their own stories about their own choices and consequences. In her poetic and polyvalent texts, Parenteau-Lebeuf takes on previous versions of Québécois feminism in order to explore what it means to her heroines to be both feminine and battle-weary. Through her heroines, Parenteau-Lebeuf reenvisioned femininity through veil imagery. In certain contexts, the act of veiling can become dangerous—whether self-imposed or imposed by others. Misunderstanding the power of the veil, what it reveals and conceals, may lead to violent consequences.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST.

By Oscar Wilde. Directed by Charles Newell. The Court Theatre, Chicago. 4 December 2004.

TRAVESTIES. By Tom Stoppard. Directed by Charles Newell. The Court Theatre, Chicago. 26 March 2005.

Pairing *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Travesties* tantalizes the literate theatergoer and theatre artist alike. Part of the pleasure of Stoppard’s travesty of Great War literary, artistic, and political history stems from the explosive absurdity of Wildean paradox and wit in the text. Then there’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* itself: to return to this sublime confection and its play of surface and depth, not to mention its exuberance, makes contemporary comedy seem not only dreary, but without philosophy. Last season Charles Newell, Artistic Director of Chicago’s classics-focused Court Theatre, paired a tenth-anniversary revival of his famously successful 1995 *Travesties* with a new staging of *Earnest*. Newell positioned the two productions to speak to each other, using the same cast for both shows, and staging parallel sequences in each show. The pairing revealed a great deal about the distinct forms of theatricality at work in the two plays, though as in many experiments, not all of its elements achieved equal success.

Newell’s casting of the productions’ main characters opened up new ways to see both plays. Lance Stuart Baker, for instance, does not conform to the usual image of a whippet-thin, silver-tongued, and suave Algernon. With his fleshy face, gravelly voice, and deep under-eye circles, Baker possesses an unsettling stage presence, bringing a youthful menace to Algernon that proved a fascinating and revealing choice. Baker’s Algernon slyly commented to the audience with every move, tossing out side-long glances, pausing slightly before delivering lines, and finding unusual and telling emphasis for words. His performance also showed Algernon deftly hanging on Cecily’s every word, amazed to find himself serious about his love for her. Baker’s attributes proved an even more natural fit for the role of Carr in *Travesties*. Algernon seemed a precursor to this character, a sense reiterated by Baker repeating blocking patterns or stage positions he had held in *Earnest*. With long monologues directly to the audience, Baker-as-Carr even more fully registered ironic commentary and his slyness suited the script’s portrayal of Carr’s self-aggrandizement.

In contrast to Baker’s youthful, dark interpretation, Cristen Paige as Cecily combined brightness with maturity. Though every bit as bright, blonde,

and tiny as an ingénue can be, Paige is older than Cecily would usually be cast. This had beneficial effects on *Earnest*—Paige's Cecily was daffy, willful, and befuddled, but never blank or incidental—and also worked well for *Travesties*. Stoppard's invented and misremembered Cecily in *Travesties* deepened in Paige's interpretation. Paige portrayed a woman playing by the same feminine rules that bound Wilde's character, but also a woman with pointed insight and a will to power. The choice provoked a reassessment of Wilde's Cecily, who in Paige's interpretation also had a will of steel. Whether at tea in the garden or in the library, in both shows Cecily seemed mistress over rituals of elaborate politeness that masked more complicated motives.

Though Newell's double casting produced some revelations, other aspects of the pairing seemed less thought out. The entire project of putting these two plays in conversation proved a hymn to consciousness of and pleasure in theatricality—the ability to be this and that, to be here and there, to be true and false in the same moment. But where *Earnest* reveled in the delight of theatricality, and incorporated references to melodramatic conventions like live underscoring and posed tableaux as a means of thinking about the theatricality of Wilde's time period, Newell's *Travesties* seemed strangely contained. *Travesties*, of course, is on its own a doubled script that contends with the paradoxes of theatricality as negotiated by the philosophies of modernist art and the practices of the historical avant garde. But Newell's production claimed no particular space for that set of inquiries. He presented Stoppard's set-pieces (a striptease for Cecily, a cut-up poem for Carr, a jig for Joyce) dutifully, but without discovering fresh theatrical metaphors for what's at stake in those moments.

In contrast, the production of *Earnest* bloomed anew because it embraced boldly theatrical choices, even when those choices occasionally veered too far over the top, resulting in strained performances from Mary Beth Fisher as Lady Bracknell and Maury Cooper as Lane. Costume designer Jacqueline Firkins and scenic designer Geoffrey M. Curley fashioned a boldly colored world of vermillion and scarlet, purple and royal blue, orange and pink, eschewing the garden-party pastels that shade contemporary ideas about the Victorian Era. As pointed out in a post-show discussion, the designers were inspired by the realization that the fading of Victorian images over time obscures the vivid colors embraced during the period. Thus, excess ruled the costumes: sleeves and hats were exaggerated, fabrics beyond sumptuous. The sets worked by metaphor and extreme contrast. In act 1, when Jack and Algernon are in town, the set consisted of a miniature cityscape of London landmarks cleverly constructed so as to

serve as divans and chairs. In act 2, the country, the set presented a marvelous topiary maze of green hedges set on a scarlet field. Act 3, the country house interior, emerged as carpeted and slip-covered in purple crushed velvet.

The *Earnest* sets had the great benefit of encouraging an inventive physicality in the performance. The movement in the show refused to be confined by the verisimilitude of standing and sitting and pouring tea in drawing rooms and gardens. Instead, Paige was forever climbing up on set pieces to increase her height, stature, and ability to command attention. Baker and Sean Allan Krill as Jack leapt and bounced across the hedges in their act 2 confrontation; Baker and Paige climbed the same hedges in a lively dance of courtship. In act 3, the quartet of lovers (completed by Heidi Kettenring as Gwendolen) unleashed childlike playfulness as they eavesdropped on each other, hiding behind the furniture and rolling across the floor to elude detection. The vocal world of the play reflected this freedom, too, with the actors rolling up and down through their ranges in a way that would make Edith Evans proud.

While *Travesties* by no means confined itself to purely realistic behavior, its production design nevertheless stemmed from a more conservative set of first principles than that of *Earnest*. Where the *Earnest* design worked through color, geometric forms, and exaggerated silhouettes, the *Travesties* design focused on light and shadow, providing spaces for hiding and listening, and tailored silhouettes. Newell organized the *mise-en-scène* like the great cuckoo clock that sounds in Carr's head. So in *Travesties* actors often mechanically repeated movement patterns, rewound and reset in proscribed patterns, or found the particular marks onstage for the delivery of parallel lines of dialogue from *Earnest*. In contrast to *Earnest's* playpen sets and the physicality they unleashed, the *Travesties* set featured a rich, paneled chamber evoking Oxford, Cambridge, and Trinity, with the letters of the alphabet iterated across the set in steady rows. The set was beautiful, but dark and close, and in turn the actors displayed a restrained physicality. This was a *Travesties* evoking the experience of a library rather than a bar overrun by Dadaists.

Somehow, in its pairing with *Earnest*, Newell's *Travesties* emerged as the less theatrical of the two shows, the more bound by text and history, the more didactic and ponderous. This was precisely the opposite conclusion from what I expected to result from the conversation between the two plays, and I think it stemmed from the way they were approached. In this pairing, the Court approached *Earnest* from the ground up, even when it went

too far, but *Travesties* did not answer that gambit; it was faithful and precise, above all to the idea of text, and to previous incarnations of the show and its quotations from *Earnest*.

The Court's experiment in pairing the two shows suggested that *Travesties* is an intertextual dazzler better served by the memory of Wilde than by true proximity, or at least close proximity to a comparatively bold interpretation of Wilde. For as much as Stoppard invokes Wilde, *Travesties* also is steeped in Joyce, Dada, Marx / Lenin, and the gaping psychological losses created by the First World War. Precisely the combination of these elements makes the travesty and the meaning of Stoppard's work. Seeing the shows close together revealed that to emphasize the Wildean intertext unbalances the multisourced principle upon which *Travesties* is constructed. Further, the Court's *Earnest* was staged as a play about youth and the breaking of convention within a world in which society's edifice holds strong enough to provide swift and satisfactory, if arbitrary, resolution. *Travesties*, on the other hand, emerged as a play about age and doubt, where amidst all the intellectual carnival we come to fear that society's edifice cannot support us much longer. The fear and weight of that realization sat less comfortably in a space where the fizz of *Earnest* had so recently prevailed. It felt as if the plays entered conversation with each other, but the conversation used different definitions for the same words. Despite the experiment's uneven results, I commend the Court Theatre for providing audiences and scholars the chance to think through the relationship of the two plays in performance, rather than just on the page.

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THE SANDSTORM: STORIES FROM THE FRONT. By Sean Huze. Directed by David Fofi. The Elephant Asylum Theater, Los Angeles. 29 April 2005.

First-time playwright Sean Huze wrote *The Sandstorm* while still in the Second Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion in the Marines, a force that served in major combat operations in Iraq from 2003 through 2004. Huze had been an actor in Los Angeles when he volunteered for the Marines in the wake of 9/11. Concerned with the manner in which the war was being represented in the media, and with the lack of soldiers' voices in the national discourse, he wrote this series of ten monologues

as a means of telling the stories of the actual "boots on the ground."

Huze's script seems to have served a critical need; while *The Sandstorm* has dramaturgical weaknesses, the production generated national media attention. *USA Today* cited the production in a story, and an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* encouraged audiences to attend. While lauded in the press, the Marines briefly considered bringing Huze up on charges of conduct unbecoming a Marine. Huze has received death threats and has been called a traitor. All of this controversy stems from a seventy-five-minute semiconventional play that ran for two months in a ninety-nine-seat theatre in Hollywood (with a subsequent run in Washington, D.C.). Huze thus figures as the most recent in a long line of playwrights, beginning with Aeschylus and *The Persians*, who fought in battle then returned to represent this experience dramatically. Set in the United States, *The Sandstorm* relates stories of soldiers who have returned from the war, while haunted by images from Iraq.

The Elephant Asylum effectively transformed its space into a site of meaning for these soldiers. Four window frames hung over the stage, one featuring a vandalized poster of Saddam Hussein—a constant reminder of the ostensible (and debunked) reasons for the war. Letters from soldiers to family, friends, and loved ones back in the States covered the back wall. The wall also served as a projection surface for slides taken by soldiers in Iraq—including smiling children and bombed-out buildings, wounded civilians and captured prisoners, endless desert and seemingly normal cities.

Opening with the company marching in formation and identifying themselves by name, rank, and affiliation (nine Marines and one Navy medic), the play then introduces a central character, the Voiceless Marine (Marco Villalvazo), a pale man with an obvious head wound. This character represents all who have died in the war, a constant reminder of those who can no longer tell their own stories. He listens to the other ten, reacts and responds to their solo narratives, yet remains in the background, silent and unable to connect with the living onstage. It is a heavy-handed but effective device, and some of the strongest moments in the production derive from this figure.

The stories themselves vary from individual to individual, from one soldier in charge of the "life-line" of mail distribution, to a soldier who sits eating a canned MRE (meal ready to eat), refusing to put a dying Iraqi out of his misery in revenge for the death of one of his friends. In the final monologue, the author himself notes, "There was bad. I don't want to remember it. I don't want to talk