

The KAOS Importance of being Ernest **The Everyman Theatre - 11th March 2003**

Drama, as defined in The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory is, 'in general any work meant to be performed on a stage by actors' (Cudden, 1977). As drama teachers our job is to extend that definition to include the big themes of life. Of course, Wilde's original writing was certainly concerned with the big themes of life: marriage, manners, society and (im)propriety, and the KAOS Theatre Company, with their interpretation, have updated the play for a modern audience.

If Wilde's original script was a satirical comedy exposing the follies and vices of society, the Kaos version might be said to be a reworking of that satire into a burlesque type of performance. The term 'burlesque' derives from the Italian *burlesco*, meaning 'ridicule' or 'joke'. Its aim is to send up a literary work, not so much through parody, but by adding elements such as songs, dances, routines, a legshow and use of a chorus line. All of these elements seem to be present in this production (Cudden, 1977).

The reaction of the trainees to this production seems representative of the differing reviews to date, you either love it or hate it. One reviewer comments:

'Enormously fun and refreshingly inventive KAOS Theatre Company has rekindled my passion for this play. Corsets and monocles be gone, leopard print trousers are so much more Wilde.' (TIME OUT Critic's Choice)

On the other hand, another critic has this to say:

'.....I am still wondering why Kaos felt it necessary to add so much slapstick. Modern dress is fine, although not necessary, but the silliness of the characters does not need signposting. Cecily does not need a silly, squeaky voice and the brain of a six year old; Jack does not need to adopt silly poses in London to show the difference between his character in town and in the country; and we can see the repressed sexuality of Miss Prism without the need for her to press Dr Chausuble's face into her crotch!' (The Creative and the Critic)

However, Wilde might well have approved of the added operatic arias in the form of Lakme's '*Flower Duet*', or the addition of Mozart and Handel. He may well have wished he had thought of it first.

Although the KAOS version seems chaotic, it has adhered to the societal restraints of the original play, without which, as another reviewer commented, 'Wilde's characters probably would have gone at it with all the restraint of a mid-week soap.' (bothsidesnow.co.uk).

If as teachers we had taken our pupils to see this production, we might like to consider a review of the following dramatic techniques and forms present in the KAOS production.

In any discussion with pupils, we must consider that we are not trying to impress our view upon our pupils, but are aiming to facilitate pupils' own appreciation and response and not our own particular bias. These are some of the views expressed by the trainees about the performance:

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- Whatever personal view held about this production, it is important to bear in mind the sheer physicality of the performance and the demands placed on the actors. This was strenuous theatre for the actors who required physical strength and stamina to meet the demands of the impressive choreography of the work. Stage space was used to full effect and from all directions too, including upwards, as actors stacked up one upon another. The entry and exit of actors from the 'wardrobe' centre stage was yet another way of making unusual use of the space. These points could all be developed and explored in lessons with pupils.
- If the physicalising of the sexual jokes in the KAOS production seemed an affront, so too might Wilde's audience have been shocked. No doubt there is enough material here to devise a whole scheme of work on the representation of media images for pupils.
- The set and costumes were minimal in design and very striking with bold contrasts of colours themed mainly around red, black and white. The overall effect was one of cohesion and this could spark a discussion with pupils about set and costume design, as well as creating the opportunity for pupils to design their own sets or costumes.
- The role changes of the characters could be another topic for discussion. Possible drama activities might focus on role differentiation through activities to switch roles.
- The use of chorus/singing created a soundscape that added mood to the drama, often contrapuntal in its effect. Again, these ideas could be developed into drama lessons on sound collage, using all kinds of sounds besides the human voice.

So whether this production may be considered 'A seething satire of modern Britain tapped full of tea and hypocrisy' (The Glasgow Herald), or 'clowning' which 'changes Wilde's needle into a sledgehammer', (britishtheatreguide.info/articles), it is drama that incorporates a range of drama techniques and carefully considered dramatic effects that could challenge pupils' response to a range of complex symbols, signals and human relationships.

Bibliography

Cudden, J.A.	<i>Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory</i> (1977)	London: Penguin Books
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