



WALK ON THE 'WILDE' SIDE: (left to right) Sara Topham, David Furr, & Brian Bedford in sublime revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Roundabout's *Earnest* revival of witty Oscar Wilde classic

The Importance Of Being Earnest

Written by Oscar Wilde

Directed by Brian Bedford

Through March 6, 2011

American Airlines Theatre

227 West 42nd Street

(212-719-1300), www.RoundaboutTheatre.org



By David NouNou

Question: Besides being brilliant British actresses, what do Margaret Rutherford, Edith Evans, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith have in common? Answer: they have all played Lady Augusta Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, either in films or on the stage. Well, now you can add the name of Brian Bedford to that illustrious group of ladies. What, you may ask? Brian Bedford, the brilliant British actor who, early in his career, played Charles Boyer's son in *Lord Pengo*—superb opposite Tammy Grimes in *Private Lives*, excellent in his Tony Award-winning performance in *The School For Wives*, and in Moliere's *Tartuffe*, among countless other roles New York audiences had the good fortune in seeing him in? Emphatically, yes. The very same Brian Bedford.

I cannot honestly recall ever not seeing Mr. Bedford giving a good performance starting early in his career. With his second Broadway show in *Lord Pengo*, with Charles Boyer and Agnes Moorehead, he had not attained his stardom yet, but in truth the reason for that show was Mr. Boyer and Ms. Moorehead. His stardom ascended in the 1970s revival of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* and 1971 in his Tony Award-winning role in *The School For Wives*, and luckily for the American stage, he never left our shores for long. He is one of the few British actors who has consistently returned to the New York stage and broadened his repertoire of characters. His Lady Bracknell is no exception. It is not a gimmick or a new spin on an old, moth-filled play about the moirés of the rich in England and their behavior. Oscar Wilde cleverly poked fun at the idle rich and their foibles with a *souçon* of mistaken identity. The subject matter here is negligible: Two couples falling in love on the same day and wanting to getting married with mistaken identity and complications arising. The notion of mistaken identity has been recycled since the

dawn of man, and I suppose so has a man donning a dress for comic relief. Even American playwrights took a crack at it in *Charley's Aunt*, and Lord knows we have had enough of Dame Edna in a dress. However, that is not the point here.

I know most of my readers are young, and the name Florence Bates, a character actress of the 30s, 40s and 50s would mean virtually nothing today. However, Google her picture and, if you are a movie fanatic, you will recognize her from such movies as *Heaven Can Wait*, the 1943 version, *I Remember Mama*, and *On The Town*, just to name a few—who stole virtually every and any scene she was in. Now, readers, picture Brian Bedford looking like Florence Bates stealing Lady Bracknell and making it totally his own. I had to keep forcing myself to remember that I was thrilled to be seeing Maggie Smith playing Lady Bracknell in 1993 on the London stage. Hard as I try, I cannot remember anyone else in the part other than Brian Bedford. He has dissected the part with every gesture, nuance, pursing of the lips, and intonations and has come up with his own interpretation. No camp and again no gimmicks involved; just getting under the skin of this character and making it his own: Artistry at its best. The one sad note of the evening is that he doesn't appear in Act II, and his absence is greatly missed.

With delicious confections in sets and costumes courtesy of Desmond Heeley, it is always good to see Dana Ivey (as Miss Prism) and Paxton Whitehead (as Reverend Canon Chasuble) and fast-paced direction by Mr. Bedford. The Roundabout has beautifully mounted *Earnest*. Having established the fact that Mr. Bedford is the quintessential Lady Bracknell, now a warning to future leading ladies who may have set their goals on playing the part: Be afraid; be very afraid, for you have very big shoes to fill—and a tough act to follow.

Published January 19, 2011

Reviewed at press performance on January 18, 2011

Copyright © January 19, 2011, StageZine.com