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il castello di elsinore

saggi / Da Marin Sanudo a Silvio Berlusconi: una *élite* municipalistica ed edonistica (non sempre colta), *di Roberto Alonge* / The Importance of Being Shorter: The Staging of Oscar Wilde's Most Famous Comedy, *di Paola Della Valle* / Il teatro delle passioni. Appunti su *Zio Vania* di Luchino Visconti, *di Federica Mazzocchi* / «Questo non deve essere mostrato». Situazioni di marginalità nella società odierna attraverso la trilogia teatrale *Morire di classe* di Lars Norén, *di Elisa Pecere* **materiali** / L'altro Čechov nelle memorie di Marija Knebel' **polemiche** / Ventimila segni per l'attore emancipato, *di Antonio Attisani* / Gli arnesi del mestiere. L'etica della sofferenza e *vanitas vanitatum*, *di Roberto Alonge*

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to ampio della popolazione. Tutti i prodotti *di qualità* del paese-Italia sono ımente il risultato del lavoro di *minoranze*, a cominciare dal marchio Ferrari. *ellenza* è l'*eccezione*. Potremmo dire – con il gusto della provocazione – che to vale, paradossalmente, *nel bene e nel male*, per la Ferrari ma anche per le ıte Rosse. Il sequestro Moro (dal massacro di cinque uomini di scorta che laniracolosamente indenne il politico, all'intera gestione dell'*affaire* nei 55 giorprigionia) è tale dimostrazione di *geometrica potenza* da avere indotto (a torsospetto di una regia di servizi segreti stranieri. Come dire che tanta *efficien*›n può appartenere all'Italia sgangherata di sempre.

la volevo anche dire che è impressionante – leggendo Sanudo – lo scarto fra luttà dell'occhio e il misuratissimo appagamento del cervello. Il teatro non è *drammaturgico* (che, come tale, non strappa nessuna considerazione al diaribensì sempre e solo *visione*, godimento dello sguardo (per l'apparato scenoco, i costumi, la gestica, le danze ecc.). Né si tratta solo del buon Marino Sa›. Il coltissimo Baldassar Castiglione *recensisce* in una sua lettera famosa la priappresentazione della *Calandria*, ma parla per pagine e pagine della trasforone subìta dalla sala del palazzo ducale per ospitare lo spettacolo, della sceafia, dei quattro *intermezzi* (ripieni di musiche canti danze mimi sfilate di car:.) e nulla dice del testo. Certo, è la sensibilità cortigiana che privilegia, *natu*r, il *côté* estetizzante, la dimensione edonistica, ma la corte del Seicento franerede legittima della cultura classicista del Rinascimento italiano, sa dispiegaaccanto alle delizie dei sensi, e al giusto apprezzamento delle *veline* dell'epoanche una robusta riflessione intellettuale sui nodi che l'intelligenza scomoda ıuoi Corneille, dei suoi Molière, dei suoi Racine propongono alla ribalta. Nulsimile, invece, nel Palazzo del Principe del nostro primo Cinquecento: né di te alla drammaturgia di Ruzante né dinanzi agli isolati ma assoluti capolavori *Mandragola* di Machiavelli o della *Lena* di Ariosto. In terra italiana, allora e 'ottica delle *veline* resta prevalente, dominante ed esaustiva.

The Importance of Being Shorter: The Staging of Oscar Wilde's Most Famous Comedy

Paola Della Valle

Oscar Wilde wrote the first draft of *The Importance of Being Earnest* during August and September 1894, while he was on holiday with his family in the town of Worthing (hence the surname of its protagonist, Jack/Ernest Worthing)[1]. Wilde was under economic pressure at the time, as his letters show. In July 1894 he had begun to tempt George Alexander, the actor-manager of the St James's Theatre, with the promise of a play, «an amusing thing» with a «slight plot» and «lots of fun and wit», which he would soon write in exchange for an advance of money. Receiving no answer and thinking that Alexander might consider the work too farcical, Wilde sent him a preliminary scheme for another play, a «modern comedy-drama» which would certainly be more suitable to the public and the repertoire of the St James's[2]. As Alan Bird suggests, it is likely that the «amusing thing» was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, while the more serious play was the never written *Mr and Mrs Daventry*[3]. Despite Alexander's cool reception, once *The Importance of Being Earnest* was completed Wilde submitted the first copy to him at the end of October, after having sent the manuscript for typing to Mrs Marshall's typewriting agency. Its provisional cover title was *Lady Lancing*[4].

George Alexander had gone into management in 1889. Two years later he took the St James's Theatre, building up its reputation for stylish and accomplished productions of well-written plays. He ran the St James's until his death in 1915 and be-

1. In act I, Jack explains to Lady Bracknell that he is a foundling. He was adopted by Mr Thomas Cardew, who found him at Victoria Station, London. Mr Cardew had a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket, so he later decided to give Jack this surname. Worthing is a seaside resort in Sussex.

2. See A. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Vision, London 1977, pp. 160-3. Bird refers to R. Hart-Davis (ed.), *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, London 1962.

3. See *Introduction*, in O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, edited by R. Jackson, E. Benn, London 1980, p. XXVI: «The new serious play was never written by Wilde, although Frank Harris later worked up a drama, *Mr and Mrs Daventry*, along the lines indicated in the proposals».

4. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 163.

:ll-known for his skilful and subtle acting as well as his meticulous stage di-
, as Russell Jackson reports:

iographer, the playwright and novelist A. E. Mason, described Alexander's work
:e of his own plays. The manager went through the script line by line and move by
, interrogating him rigorously on every sentence, and planning moves with a toy
re stage. Then a ground cloth was marked with the lines of walls and exits and for
weeks there were daily rehearsals, beginning each day punctually at eleven and
ing at two, until for the last four days there were morning and afternoon sessions,
nating in two dress-rehearsals. The management's attention to detail in staging
›erformance was thorough[5].

nights at the St James's were like «brilliant parties», pervaded with the at-
re of fashionable occasions. But they were never so exclusive as to be with-
gallery audience, who kept their privilege of expressing immediate and vo-
ement on what was put on the stage, as was the case for the disastrous pre-
Henry James's *Guy Domville* on 5 January 1895.
ander had already produced Wilde's first Society comedy[6], *Lady Winder-*
'an, in 1892. The relations between the actor-manager and the playwright
n unhappy due in particular to the many changes to the text suggested by
ler during rehearsals[7]. It is no accident that Wilde had both his next two
comedies produced at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, by two other man-
erbert Beerbohm (*A Woman of No Importance*, premiered on 19 April 1893)
vis Waller (*An Ideal Husband*, premiered on 3 January 1895). But Wilde's
sent financial difficulties were probably the reason behind his attempt to
other play with Alexander.
his initial hesitation, two facts convinced Alexander to put *The Impor-*
Being Earnest on stage: on 3 January 1895 Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* had
ı triumphant run at the Haymarket Theatre and two days later Henry
Guy Domville had proved an instant failure at the St James's. Alexander,
l found a taker for Wilde's farcical comedy in actor-manager Charles Wyn-
ucceeded in having the play back. The comedy was released by Wyndham
condition that he had the option on Wilde's next play. Alexander agreed
condition that the subject of this reservation should not be *Mr and Mrs*
y.
Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People or, as
lescribed it, a play written by a butterfly for butterflies[8], opened on the

ackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, in P. Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to*
'de, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 161-2.
iety drama was a theatrical genre in vogue in the late 19th century. In this context "Society",
›ital "s", refers to the values and fashions of the ruling élite, as distinct from the community
) at large.
d, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 94.
p. 164.

night of 14 February 1895. London was enduring a long spell of cold weather and several theatres advertised their steam-heating among the attractions of their programme. The first night of Wilde's comedy had already been put off from 12 February because several of the women in the cast had bad colds[9]. With Alexander as John Worthing, Allan Aynesworth as Algernon Moncrieff, Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax, and Rose Leclercq as Lady Bracknell, it was a resounding triumph from the very beginning to the end. Years later Allan Aynesworth told Wilde's biographer Hesketh Pearson:

> In my fifty-three years of acting, I never remember a greater triumph than the first night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The audience rose in their seats and cheered and cheered again. In general the critics were equally enthusiastic and the whole of London, social, literary, frivolous and serious, agreed that there was not a more amusing evening to be spent anywhere than at the St James's Theatre[10].

Wilde now had two plays running successfully at different theatres, money pouring in and a brilliant future as a playwright. Nobody could imagine that his career would collapse a few months later in the witness box of the Queensberry libel trial.

As originally drafted by Wilde in August-September 1894, the play was in four acts. Exercise books containing a fair copy in Wilde's autograph have survived and are divided between the Arents Tobacco Collection at New York Publish Library (Acts I and II) and the British Library (Acts III and IV)[11]. But the comedy premiered on 14 February 1895, and later published in 1899, was reduced to three acts. Of the four stages of revision between the manuscript and the reduction, the typescripts now in the Arents and Frohman Collections are the only evidence editors can rely on[12]. The text submitted for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain's office in January 1895, under the title of *Lady Lancing*, was the first official three-act version of the play. Lady Bracknell was called Lady Lancing on the cover, but Lady Brancaster inside. Algernon's surname was Montford, not Moncrieff[13]. Interestingly, the subtitle was *A Serious Comedy for Trivial People* instead of the one later used for publication: *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The play was subject to more changes in the course of rehearsal, as shown by the typescript owned by Alexander (today

9. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, in Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 161.
10. H. Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, London 1946, p. 257. Quoted from Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 164.
11. The manuscript drafts of the four acts have been transcribed in volume I of S. A. Dickson (ed.), *The Importance of Being Earnest... In Four Acts as Originally Written by Oscar Wilde*, New York Public Library: publication number 6 of the Arents Tobacco Collection, 2 vols., New York 1956.
12. Acts I (dated November 1894), II and IV (dated September 1894), with Wilde's manuscript notes and alterations, are in the Arents Collection, New York Public Library. A four-act typescript from 31 October 1894 is in the Frohman Collection, New York Public Library.
13. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 170.

ırvard Theatre Collection) and marked by him with numerous alterations, s and detailed stage directions, which show evidence of his careful pro- methods. Although this is not the prompt-book of the first production – : none of the calls and cues that the stage director would have needed – it ıly the best available evidence of the performed text and its interpretation. *mportance of Being Earnest* was finally published in 1899, after Wilde had :ased from prison, and limited to one thousand copies. Publisher Leonard : sent him a typed copy of the text owned by George Alexander, which arked with further alterations and corrections, and served as copy for the In particular, Wilde removed most of the italicizations and detailed stage ıs. The omission of the latter was a common feature of plays published in ıineteenth century by authors wishing to avoid the clutter of technical di- customary in some acting editions. This is generally accepted now as the version[14].

horter version of the play was requested by Alexander. In those days, be- ıscendancy of the independent director, the ultimate authority lay with the [15]. Alexander insisted that the play should be reduced to three acts pre- : usual, by a short curtain-raiser. Acts II and III were therefore conflated to : present Act II and the third act of the three-act version was altered to onsistent with the changes earlier in the play. About 20% of the dialogue ›ved together with some minor characters. Wilde revised every sequence, eches and almost every sentence, which hardly indicates that flippant at- play-writing he wanted to promote about himself. As noted by Jackson,

> ne tuning is part of a process that Wilde was careful to conceal beneath the im- an artist who worked by inspiration and *sprezzatura*, composing almost in spite self. He was a master of what would now be called media opportunities[16].

est-known and most radical alteration made between the first draft and ıight was the omission of a long scene in Act II showing Algernon at the .ouse being served with a writ for 762 pounds 14 shillings and 2 pence on the Savoy Hotel, by a solicitor named Gribsby[17]. Obviously, it was Jack purposely run into debt playing the part of his wicked brother Ernest in ɔut Algernon could not object to the solicitor because of his newly as- entity as Ernest in the countryside.

cene was also part of a large sequence of references in the manuscript

a detailed history of the text and its sources see *Note on the Text*, in Wilde, *The Importance rnest*, cit., pp. XLII-XLV.
›*duction*, ivi, p. XIX.
son, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., p. 164.
sequence, corresponding to ff. 49-67 of the manuscript draft, begins with Merrimen's sec- in Act II of the standard version, precisely, at lines 360-1 (p. 57) of the Benn Edition. Fur- .ons from the text are from the edition: Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit.

draft to Algernon's financial difficulties, which seem to be alluded to and mocked by the paradoxical situation he has to face as Ernest. In fact, in the draft Algernon's debts are far more pressing than in later versions. In the opening scene of Act I he is besieged by creditors – a wine-merchant and a tailor – so much so that he exclaims: «Wish to goodness some ass would leave me a large fortune. Can't go on as I am going on now. It is ridiculous»[18]. It is likely that Wilde first thought of making the need for a fortune into a motivation for Algernon's pursuit of Jack's young ward. The topic of Algernon's debts is reinforced by Lady Brancaster's comment, shortly after her entrance in Act I: «Of course I never mention anything about them [your debts] to your uncle. Indeed, as you know, I never mention anything to him at all»[19]. This and many other references to Algernon's debts were removed at an early stage in revision. In the three-act version, the only reference to Algernon's debts is at the beginning of Act II when the butler Lane presents several letters on a salver which are supposed to be bills and he tears them up (p. 45). And the mercenary attitude of Algernon highlighted in the draft is later moved onto Lady Bracknell, whose view of Cecily's eligibility is definitely affected by her fortune.

Beside Mr Gribsby in the above-mentioned scene, another minor character who disappears is Moulton the gardener. At the beginning of Act II in the draft, Cecily asks him if he would like to take the German lesson in her place but he declines («I don't hold with them furrin tongues miss») and disappears behind the hedge. Three further lines appear in the draft only. In the standard version he is just referred to by Mrs Prism at the very beginning of Act II. Apart from Alexander's insistence on the reduction of the acts from four to three, these changes may also account for Wilde's will to avoid stock characterisation and remove slang or vogue-words from the play in order to limit cliché and farcical exaggeration, as suggested by Jackson[20]. Algernon's debts would recall the usual life-style of the man-about-town character. Moulton would appear as the threadbare comic rustic of traditional English drama and his language would clash with the refined linguistic universe of a "pure verbal opera", in W. H. Auden's words[21], in which all characters express themselves in well-formed complete sentences like their creator. If a minor character like the butler Lane has survived the cuts, it is because he escapes the stock type of the traditional scheming servant in his being unconventional, refined, witty and paradoxical – that is, "Wildean".

Alexander's pressure for a shorter play resulted in an increased dramatic unity and a quicker pace. Here are some examples of how the dialogue was made more effective by Wilde's cuts and revisions to conform to Alexander's request.

In Act I, soon after Lady Bracknell's exit, Jack unburdens himself to Algernon about the disappointing result of his formal proposal to Lady Bracknell and harshly criticises her. Here is Algernon's reply to Jack in the standard version:

18. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., note 11, p. 176.
19. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., note 295, p. 18.
20. *Introduction*, ivi, p. XXIX.
21. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., p. 171.

.GERNON. My dear boy. I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that ıkes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who ven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, and the smallest instinct about when die (lines 611-5, p. 33).

the manuscript draft Algernon's answer is much longer. He adds a few par-.rs of his family (Mary Farquhar, Gladys, and Lord Brancaster – uncle Geof- · who «isn't half a bad sort in his silly way, considering what a thoroughly typ- voman Aunt Augusta is»). He also offers another definition of Relations, ı seems less efficacious than the one in the standard version: «Relations nev- ıd one money, and won't give one credit, even for genius. They are a sort of .vated form of the public»[22].

Act II Chasuble explains what baptism by immersion is. The first quotation v is the current standard version – essential, concise and definitely better or- ed than the longer version in the manuscript, reported in the second quota-

HASUBLE. You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or in- :ed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the remony performed? (line 285, p. 54)

HASUBLE. Oh no. You need have no apprehension. That form of ritual, strangely ough, is now confirmed to certain religious bodies not in direct communion with us. ›rinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed, I think advisable. Our weather is so change- ·le there is great mortality amongst the Baptists. At what hour would you wish the ce- mony performed?

ıe following passage in italics uttered by Lady Brancaster in Act III, when Jack estioning Miss Prism about the handbag, shows Wilde's immense inventive- which however had to be sacrificed for the economy of the text. It appears in the draft and licensing office and was struck out later. The cut of Lady Bran- r's hilarious comment speeds up the rhythm of the scene:

ISS PRISM. [...] In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive my- lf, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag. CK. But where did you deposit the handbag?
ADY BRANCASTER. *I do not see how that can matter now. It was, I suppose, left at the of- :es of one of those publishers who do not return rejected contributions unless accompa- ed by stamps. With your usual carelessness, Prism, I suppose you never dreamed of put- ıg stamps with the baby. That unfortunate child is probably at the present moment ly- g in the waste-paper basket of some large commercial house.*
ISS PRISM. Do not ask me, Mr Worthing. (lines 359-64, pp. 98-9)

. See *Appendix* IV, in Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 119.

On top of Wilde's revisions, Alexander made alterations further improving the brilliant pace of the comedy and showing his meticulous staging. Some of them were later dropped by Wilde in his correction of the page-proofs for the Smithers edition. Alexander changed Jack's age from twenty-five (as in the draft) to thirty-five, since he himself was thirty-six when the play was first performed. In the draft, before the famous dialogue between Jack and Lady Brancaster on Jack's credentials in Act I, Jack pulls out a cigarette case from his pocket, opens it and takes a cigarette but Lady Brancaster's sharp glance makes him give up. This stage direction was never adopted in further versions, on the ground that it would be unmannerly for a man to smoke in the presence of a lady. At the end of Act I Alexander makes Algernon write Jack's countryside address on an envelope rather than on his shirt cuff. He also cuts some parts in order to make verbal exchanges more slender. For example, in the following speech by Gwendolen in Act III he omits all but the fourth sentence («Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory»):

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. (*Moving to* CECILY). Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it. (lines 34-8, p. 84)

The scene that probably most shows Alexander's precision is Jack's entrance in mourning clothes in Act II. While in the draft and the licensing copy the entrance is much simpler, Alexander's detailed stage directions make sure that the audience catches sight of Jack before he is seen by Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble, to reach the maximum of hilarity:

Enter JACK *slowly from the back of the garden R* [right]. *He goes C.* [centre]. *He is dressed entirely in black.* DR CHASUBLE *and* MISS PRISM *both turn, come down-stage, then toward C., see* JACK *for the first time*[23].

In the standard version it is much simpler:

Enter JACK *slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hat-band and black gloves* (p. 50).

Wilde, too, continued polishing the text, adding adornments during rehearsals and, later, the correction of the proof sheets for the Smithers' edition of 1899. As Jackson points out, some of the changes might seem trivial in themselves but had a serious consequence in a play so economical in its language and effects[24]. Seemingly searching for the perfect witty joke, Wilde considered several variations of the title of Dr Chasuble's sermon (Act II, line 249, p. 52), which was given for ben-

23. See Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 50, note 208.
24. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., p. 163.

charity described at one time or another as the «Society for the Prevention lty to Children» (a real organisation, and therefore not really suitable), the y for the Discontent among the Higher Orders» and, in the page proofs of edition, the «Society for the Discontent among the Lower Orders». He fi-ered this to «Discontent among the Upper Orders». Another joke later im-was Algernon's remark on modern culture in Act I. In the draft the joke as neat as in the 1899 edition:

aft

ERNON. One should read everything. That is the true basis of modern culture. More half of modern culture depends on the unreadable[25].

lard version

ERNON. Oh! It is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one ldn't read (lines 130-2, p. 11).

setting of the acts underwent a change too. In the manuscript draft, Acts d IV were all in the garden of the Manor House. In the three-act text sub-o the Lord Chamberlain's office Acts II and III were still in the garden. On-er versions was the action of Act III moved indoors, to the morning-room king the garden. Wilde's settings seem to be a clever variation of the old ence corruption/city and innocence/countryside, particularly evident at the ng of Act II, where Cecily is studying among the roses. As in Shakespeare's es, the characters undergo an evolutionary process while they are in the side, but the final resolution of the problems – the characters' symbolic their backs on their old life and facing their new, married life in a state of ness – and the happy ending are moved within the walls of the elegant House, more suitable to these upper class people. Setting the third act in-so balances the alternation in-out-in of the three acts and provides the clos-circle.

an Holland, Wilde's son, tried to reconstruct the four-act version in 1957, result was not convincing from a theatrical point of view. As Bird points though we lose a short act there is clear gain in dramatic unity; and today ore than in Wilde's time audiences do not care to sit through any play that r than three short acts»[26]. Bird also underlines a clumsiness in the balance ts in the first act and those of the next two, «which the four-act version ave further emphasised»[27].

r Wilde's arrest on 5 April 1895 the play ran until 8 May, his name having

e Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 11, notes 130-5.
rd, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 171.
i, p. 172.

been removed from the playbills and programmes. The play ran for a total of eighty-six performances but Alexander lost the sum of two hundred and eighty-nine pounds, eight shillings and four pence[28]. While Wilde was serving his sentence, he was declared bankrupt and all his effects were auctioned, including drafts and manuscripts of published and unpublished works. Alexander was able to buy the copyright of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for a small sum. In 1902 he revived the play at the St James's Theatre and, although it was well received by critics and public, it still did not make money. In 1909, on the second revival, it ran for eleven months and made a profit of over twenty-one thousand pounds, a very large sum of money at the time. On his death he bequeathed the copyright to Wilde's son Vyvyan, who was considerably enriched by it.

The Importance of Being Earnest marked the apex of Wilde's popularity, fame and career as a playwright. Its apparently flimsy structure has resisted the test of time, since it is still one of the most performed plays in English drama at present. The formula of its lasting success is the result of the collaboration between an extraordinary verbal genius and a theatrical star: Oscar Wilde and George Alexander.

28. Ivi, p. 166.