Written by Mike Schulz
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Augustana College's production of Oscar Wilde's classic comedy of manners The Importance of Being Earnest is perfectly acceptable entertainment, rarely inspired but always watchable. Yet it has the enormous good fortune to feature one performance that shoots way past the acceptable and enters the realm of the extraordinary – David Cocks' portrayal of the delectably devious John Worthing is the sort of riotously funny and brilliantly executed stunt that makes you more than eager for his next appearance; he's so elemental to the show's success that it's nearly distracting when he's not on stage. And here's the kicker: This is freshman Cocks' first appearance on the Potter Hall stage. The mind boggles at what may be in store for audiences over the next four years.

In fact, I'm not sure it's possible to describe just how good I think Cocks is in this role; if this performance was given by a professional actor twice his age, the acting feat might have been slightly less surprising, but no less revelatory. As half of Wilde's pair of warring "Ernests," Cocks' every utterance suggests supreme self-satisfaction and haughty disdain, and he's the possessor of one of the finest British dialects I've ever heard on a stage; his line readings are so flawlessly calibrated that he scores dozens of laughs through inflection alone. (At Friday's opening-night performance, the wit with which Cocks delivered as deceptively simple a throwaway as "Good *heavens*" was enough to stop the show.) Fools aren't meant to be suffered gladly, but Cocks is so assured that you suffer his Worthing not only gladly but *giddily*; this is nearly transcendent comedic work.

Cocks is so staggeringly fine that he makes you feel a little badly for Jeff LaRocque, who plays Worthing's foil, Algernon Moncrieff. LaRocque – who was wonderfully touching in last season's *Laramie Project* – gives his role a good stab, but although he gets many of his laughs, there's not enough variety within the line readings themselves. After a while, Moncrieff's readiness with a snappy

comeback – accompanied by a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin – becomes rather exhausting; you fully understand it when Worthing, upon hearing one of Moncrieff's signature witticisms, mutters, "I am sick to death of cleverness." LaRocque's interpretation is an appropriate character choice, but I wish that the actor had found ways to subtly vary his act; his arched-eyebrow bitchiness is so relentlessly smug it would make Dorothy Parker herself choke on her martini.

One performer does come close to matching Cocks, and thankfully, it's Cori Veverka, whose Lady Bracknell – one of the theatre's most witheringly funny comic creations – is devastatingly deadpan. Talk about vocal range: Veverka, doing some sensationally funny tough-old-broad shtick, continually pops her pitch both higher and lower than you expect, and she occasionally steamwheels through reams of dialogue with such force that you laugh at both the punchlines *and* her breathless delivery of them. When she and Cocks get a rhythm going, Augustana's *Earnest* is as wild, and as *Wilde*, as you could possibly want.

Unfortunately, in this production, comic explosions like these are rare; the show itself is pleasant, but little more. Director Scott Magelssen guides the timing of Wilde's *bon mots* with aplomb, but the staging itself is a little problematic – the way the *Earnest* set has been designed in Potter Hall's three-quarter-thrust playing area, downstage characters often have to converse with characters standing upstage, which looks awkward for the performers and causes a few laugh lines to be lost. (In one sequence, Lady Bracknell is seated center-stage, which is as it should be, but is forced to direct too many of her retorts with her head cocked toward those behind her, which *isn't* – Bracknell shouldn't move so much as a hair for *anybody*.) And although the cast seems, for the most part, confident under Magelssen's helmage – Brian Bengtson, as the Reverend Chasuble, is a particularly hearty caricature – he might have guided Danielle Suits, as Miss Prism, toward less of a falsetto in her character voice; this splendidly dotty governess winds up sounding vaguely like *Saturday Night Live*'s Mr. Bill.

Aside from Cocks and Veverka, the best reason to see Augustana's fall production is the script itself, the dialogue for which produces belly laughs even when the line readings themselves are merely adequate. And, as usual, Patty Koenigsaecker's costumes are lovingly designed; in Act III, Lady Brackwell sports a deep-purple gown so vibrant that it practically becomes another *character. The Importance of Being Earnest* looks fine and, more often than not, sounds fine, yet it only surpasses fine when Cori Veverka and, especially, David Cocks are tearing into their roles. That's plenty reason to pay Potter Hall a visit, though – performances this good in *roles*

this good are a whole evening's entertainment all by themselves.

Tickets are $10 for general admission and $8 for students, and are available by calling the Augustana Ticket Office at (309) 794-7306