

Oscar Season

Oscar Wilde's unforgettable plays, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *A Woman of No Importance*, are going to be screened at the NCPA over the next three months.
By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

A scene from *A Woman of No Importance*



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Scenes from *Lady
Windermere's Fan*



Flamboyant and eager to shock, Oscar Wilde was perhaps the finest version of his most famous characters: the witty, impeccably dressed lords who took established Victorian morals, flipped them and presented them as breezy epigrams to bored society ladies, astute ex-lovers and frustrated fathers. Instead of espousing self-restraint, Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) says, "I can resist everything except temptation." Instead of commending the institution of marriage, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) slams it: "Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed." For these characters, as for Wilde, excess was good, niceties were passé and wit was supreme.

These two plays, along with *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), are in production even today, more than a hundred years after they were first staged. Wilde's lasting power was not in great writing. In fact, his plots were often derivative and most of his characters were flat. Yet these are the works that brought him commercial acclaim. The witticisms that made the audience chortle were uniquely Wildean.

Against the grain

In life and on the page, Wilde was always pushing boundaries. Allusions to homosexual desire and decadent French literature in his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), made the editor nervous enough to delete a major chunk before publication. This didn't help because reviewers were still aghast, calling the novel "dull and nasty" and claiming it "ought to be chucked on the fire". Today, it is considered to be a masterpiece that neatly weaves together supernatural, philosophical and gothic sensibilities.

While he was alive, though, Wilde found success only in his plays. Much of their focus was on the London season: that famed time of the year when balls and dinners and extensive socialising took place. Many of the protagonists were women with a past – the girl who got pregnant out of wedlock, the mysterious woman who was keeping husbands away from their wives, the woman who was willing to blackmail to get her way. Unlike his contemporaries, though, he made these characters unabashed, and,

along with some great lines, gave them power over their own fate. Mrs. Erlynne, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, says, "I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels. That is stupid of you, Arthur; in real life we don't do such things." Entertaining as Wilde was, he was also a dexterous first-wave feminist.

The outlier

Society is almost always unkind to those who are either different or arrogant. In 19th-century London, Wilde was an unbearable mixture of both. Henry James once called him an "unclean beast". Wilde was an Oxford man and part of the bourgeois that he mocked so relentlessly. At the same time he was also the glamorous, irreverent, youth-obsessed outlier in a stern, serious, maturity-obsessed England. His constant need to be controversial may have had its roots in his childhood.

Born in 1854 in Ireland and poetically named Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, he had an unusual set of parents. His father, Sir William Wilde, a leading surgeon and author of books on archaeology and Irish folklore, was both respected and controversial. Like Wilde, he, too, was involved in a sexual scandal that went to court in Ireland. His mother, Lady Jane Wilde, was an outspoken feminist, who, under the nom de plume 'Speranza', wrote nationalistic poetry and hosted salons attended by notable writers, artists and musicians of the time. They both encouraged independent thinking, and Wilde absorbed their

indomitability as well as he could. From this life of privilege, he went on to study at Oxford where he earned a double first in the classics.

After Oxford, he spent a year touring America, giving lectures on art and beauty. On his return, he married Constance Lloyd and promptly produced two sons in two years. But things took a turn in 1886, when, at the age of 32, he was successfully seduced by 17-year-old Robert Ross. Widely believed to have been his first serious foray into homosexuality, their affair fizzled out but their friendship remained a source of lifelong support for Wilde. When Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas or 'Bosie', their reckless relationship would lead Wilde down a path that began



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A scene from
An Ideal Husband



with decadence and male prostitutes and ended with Wilde's ruin.

The Tempest

"For Oscar Wilde, a posing somdomite" – these six words, the ridiculous spelling mistake included, were written on a note left for Wilde at his club by the Marquess of Queensbury, John Douglas. He also happened to be the enraged father of Bosie and hated Wilde for corrupting his son. Leaving such a note was, by itself, a silly thing to do, for what could this act possibly achieve? But Wilde's fateful reaction, against the advice of so many of his friends, was to sue for libel. The legal proceedings initiated by him were unsubstantiated by the court. He was then countersued on the complaints of his lover's father and then prosecuted by the Crown. This resulted in a multi-trial nightmare that left Wilde bankrupt, vilified and with a criminal conviction of "gross indecency with other male persons" for which he was sentenced to two years of hard labour.

Hard labour in 1895 meant things that Wilde could not have imagined. This poet, aesthete, fashionista, this scholar of the classics, this writer of elegant society comedies was tied to a 19th-century treadmill for up to six hours a day. The Victorian version of the treadmill, very different from ours, made prisoners climb stairs attached to a giant wheel, as though they

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were less human, more hamster. Add to this some solitary confinement and loss of loved ones, and what you get is a horrific tragedy. Wilde's mother passed away while he was in prison. His wife fled the country with their two sons and changed their last name to Holland to escape hatred and persecution. She did visit him in prison, but Wilde never saw his children again.

Prison broke Wilde. It killed his spirit and destroyed his art. In prison, he wrote *De Profundis*, an anguished, complicated letter to Bosie. Once out of prison, he moved to France, hoping to revive his career. He wrote of abysmal prison conditions in letters to newspapers. He also published *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* anonymously, calling himself C.3.3, his number at the prison in Reading. But he never wrote another play or novel again. "Something is killed in me," he told his friend Ross. "I feel no desire to write." In two years, he was dead, breathing his last in a rundown hotel in Paris. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Darlington says, "We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." For Wilde, life became a cruel reversion of his own words. ■

Lady Windermere's Fan will be screened on 8th June and An Ideal Husband will be screened on 12th July at the Godrej Dance Theatre.