TDPS interpretation of Wilde’s ‘An Ideal Husband’ criticizes political corruption

Encrusted with diamonds and rubies, a stolen snake brooch lays on a sitting room chair, forgotten by a character in Oscar Wilde’s play, “An Ideal Husband.” It represents the lurid depository of wealth that lies underneath the ever widening buttocks of the fat cats and bigwigs of London society. Just like their riches, this brooch too, is discovered to be stolen. “The God of this century is wealth,” says a character in the play. Wilde certainly had a resolute grip on his time. Much of what he wrote in 1895 still reverberates today.

There is a plain political agenda behind this play, but not within it. Performed at the Durham Studio Theater by students of the Theater, Dance and Performance Studies program, it was chosen with the current civic climate in mind. It asks about the role of the public and private in the life of an individual. “It is always worthwhile asking a question, though it is not always worthwhile answering one,” says the nonsensically sensible character, Lord Goring.

Peter Glazer, chair of the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies, posed a question: “What does it mean to be a public institution?”, relevant especially in the age of privatization.

“This is a play about the 1%,” said Glazer. It is a play of parties thrown by politicians — these are, of course, political parties. The play is littered with the lace, satin and velvet of handmade dresses, crafted by many, worn by few. It is set in the craftily constructed sitting rooms and drawing rooms of the elite, alongside candles, teacups and bells that ring for servants.

It bleeds witty truths. At one point, a character says, “Wonderful woman, Lady Markby, isn’t she? Talks more and says less than anybody I ever met. She is made to be a public speaker.” Such aphorisms are apt today, the waves of frustration rise and people showcase the empty rhetoric of the politicians on their protest signs.

The play echoes with the ridiculous witticisms of rich wives. At the start of the play, Mrs. Marchmont, a lady of London society, states at a party, “I come here to be educated.” In response, her friend says, “I hate being educated.” “So do I,” replies Mrs. Marchmont, “It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes doesn’t it?” Wilde’s play is imbued with such puffed-up frivolities. It comes across in the most minuscule of details. “Who got to perch on the furniture? Those who broke the rules,” director Christine Nicholson said.
Nicholson and the cast of students rehearsed for five and a half weeks for "An Ideal Husband," puzzling over important, telling details. The laughter of the ladies is so perfectly shrill that it mocks itself. The servants' disdain for the upper class is present in the looks, sighs and the rolling of their eyes. Gwen Kingston, who plays Mrs. Cheevly, is a subtle villain, as distant as she is impassioned.

Midway through the play, Mason, the butler, walks up to the mantle of a fireplace and slides her finger along it, checking for dirt. With the swift flick of her hand, she brushes away any stray specks. She works for Sir Robert Chiltern, a public figure, a rising star in the House of Commons, and Mason must not allow the slightest bit of dirt to sit there in disobedience, to encamp upon his mantle, to occupy his home. It was clear for Oscar Wilde and it remains clear today: Dirt of any sort is neither pleasing nor proper near a public figure.