17-25 June 1983

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

The cast in costume outside Hampton Court House, pictured by Mart Stonelake.

HAMPTON COURT

An immaculate Earnest

There can be few nicer ways for theatregoers to spend a warm summer's evening than at Hampton Court Theatre, which has the loveliest setting imaginable.

Last week, Hampton Court audiences were treated to an immaculate revival of **The Importance of Being Earnest,** directed by Jimmie Chinn, and my only criticism is more in the way of an observation — and a fanciful one at that. How pleasant it would have been to have staged Act 2 in the open air, using the elegant exterior as a backdrop. Indeed the whole play would lend itself rather well to an open-air production.

Mr. Chinn's talents as director (and actor) have been extolled in these columns on many previous occasions and, at the risk of becoming a bore, I am about to do so again. For the Chinn credit is not only a guarantee of quality, but also bears witness to the commitment and dedication of companies like Teddington Theatre Club which, at their best, can rival any professional company.

It wasn't just a question of a perfectly balanced cast under the influence of an inspiring director. Here we had outstandingly stylish (yet simple) sets (designed by Allen Cobbold) and an entirely new wardrobe designed by Iris Inglis and Sue Taylor. Even the bludgeoning vulgarity of Lady Bracknell's first costume, with an ice cream sundae for a hat, was a witty counterpoint to her overbearing snobbery.

There is certainly little likelihood of seeing a better amateur Lady Bracknell than Cynthia Scott-Brown's formidable old crow, who maintained a look of glacial disdain throughout the play. Lady Bracknells should be judged not on their ability to deliver the famous lines, but on their behaviour and reactions when others are speaking. In this respect, Cynthia Scott-Brown was faultless.

Mr. Chinn obviously made a point of encouraging all his actors to articulate every syllable and there were times when this was slightly overdone, though usually to comic effect. Jenny Laughlin's Gwendolen sounded at first like a pupil of Professor Higgins, and Joan Scarrott as Miss Prism dotted every i. But that's perfectly consistent with the character, and her performance complemented Jack Smerdon's rangy Chasuble to hilarious effect at the performance I saw.

Becky Jones, youngest of a talented acting family, wittily caught the adolescent fluctuations of Cecily, bored stiff one minute and exultant the next. Her scenes with Gwendolen were a joy to watch.

Last but not least, the long-lost brothers, Algernon and John, were played to the manner born by John Roth and Steve Fitzpatrick, the latter rolling every Wilde aphorism off the tongue with tremendous elan.

If you've ever wondered what's meant by a rave notice, you've just read one.

— NS.

AMATEUR