



The Importance of Being Earnest

CENTERSTAGE

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD ANDERSON

Irene Lewis, DIRECTION: I like fresh visual takes on familiar plays, and I love Riccardo Hernández's designs. I told Riccardo I wanted a unit set for the three upcoming shows I was doing in this space (*Let There be Love* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* were coming up next), but he convinced me to go with three varied sets, and this is the first of them. When the audience comes in, all they see is EARNEST spelled out in oversized letters—they have no idea how this abstraction is going to play out. I love the big letters, because I can use them architecturally. The actors can also sit on some of the letters, or lean on them. Candice Donnelly, our costume designer, came up with the idea that each of the play's three acts should feature a primary color, so the furniture changes as the play goes on from black-and-white to green to red, all set against bright, fuchsia-colored walls. For the interludes (I split the play in the middle, rather than have two

intermissions) I used dance, and the changing of the letter positions and the furniture were worked into the dancing. I dislike camp, so I was thrilled when Larry O'Dwyer agreed to not only play Lady Bracknell, but to do her as a real person, not a cartoon. Working with Mr. Wilde and with my extremely talented, sexually attractive, under-30 cast made the whole process delicious. I've found that our Baltimore audiences love language plays—not only Wilde but Stoppard, Albee, O'Neill. I have no idea why this is, but I'm glad.

Riccardo Hernández, SCENIC DESIGN: Irene is very thorough in her process, with an amazing eye for theatricality. Daring and fearless. So early on we took a good look at images from the Edwardian era—winter houses (Sefton Park Palm House), glass houses, graphics of the time—and talked about what we wanted to do visually as well

as intellectually. Because glass and steel are the building blocks of the period, we began to think more architecturally. At one point I suggested the set could be a giant opera glass that perched on the stage! Then, on one of my sketches I wrote the word EARNEST, and that struck a chord with all of us. Wilde was all about language, semantics, text. So we decided to run away from realism and take a leap into the unknown. The letters, enlarged to about 10 feet high, became the architecture of the stage, creating the room itself, and also pivoting to make different formations. White was the color of choice, relating to white lace, white gloves of the period—and, taking a cue from Andy Warhol, the exposed brick background became a hot-pink/fuchsia color. So the design process began realistically but took this sharp turn into abstraction.



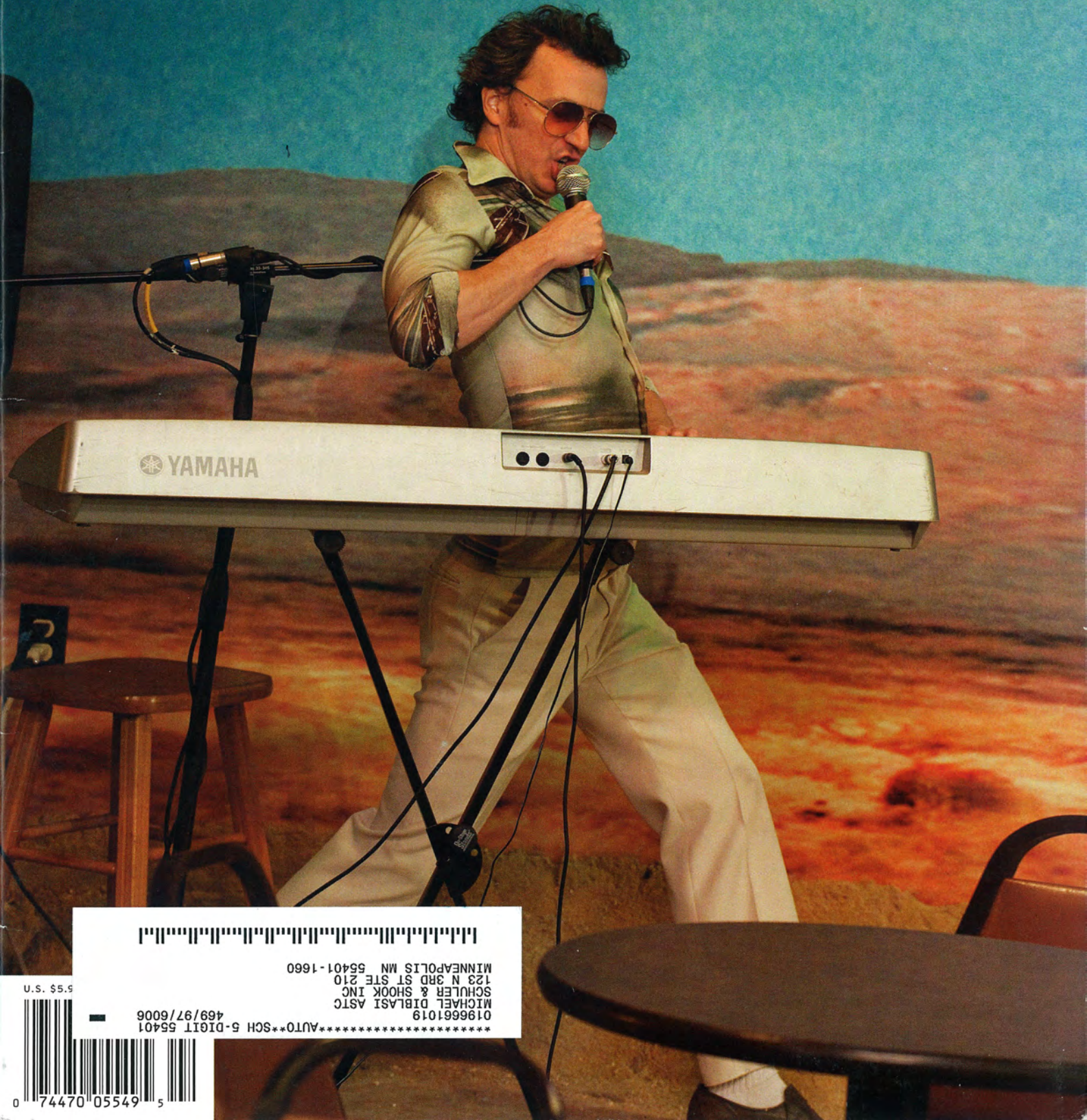
Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was presented Oct. 7–Nov. 8, 2009, at CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore under Irene Lewis's direction. The production featured scenic design by Riccardo Hernández, lighting design by Paul Whitaker, costume design by Candice Donnelly and sound design by Mark Bennett. Lori M. Doyle was stage manager. In photo from left, Gretchen Hall, Ben Huber, John Rothman, Carmen Roman, Laurence O'Dwyer, Nicole Lowrance and Luke Robertson.

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