

Setting the Scene: Tony Walton Turns Director

By Gerard Raymond

Sidetracked: That's how Tony Walton, one of this town's most sought-after set and costume designers, describes what happened to him some 40 years ago. "What I started out to do was to direct," he says. Instead, over these past four decades, Walton has collected three Tony awards, five Drama Desk awards, and five Oscar nominations, not to mention scores of other accolades for his work as a designer. But now he's fulfilled his original ambition. He made his New York directing debut with the Irish Repertory Theater production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

We met during rehearsals of *Earnest* with the intention of talking about his current job, directing (and designing) the Oscar Wilde play. But somehow we too kept getting sidetracked. It was hard not to, really. The genial, 62-year-old British designer is a witty raconteur and he knows practically everybody in the business on both sides of the Atlantic. He's worked with directors such as Coward, Olivier, Nichols, Fosse, and Zaks; he's designed some of the most celebrated Broadway productions in recent memory—*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (both the original and the current revival), *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Chicago*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Real Thing*, and *Anything Goes* among others. And the movies *All That Jazz*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *The Wiz*.

Although he once thought he would follow in his surgeon father's footsteps, by his mid-teens Walton was already smitten by the theater. In school he had tried his hand at everything from directing to acting, but his first professional job was actor and assistant designer with the Wimbledon Repertory. As far as acting was concerned, he soon discovered that he became terminally shy when he set foot on the professional stage. At the same time he enrolled at

the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. But what seemed to clinch it for him as a designer was his exposure to the Broadway theater of the early 1950s. Whenever he got leave during his compulsory military training with the Royal Air Force in Canada, he visited New York. The work of the current designers like Boris Aronson, Jo Mielzner, and Oliver Smith was unlike anything he had seen previously in London. "I guess I carried some that excitement back with me," says Walton.

Walton returned to New York in 1956 to visit his childhood sweetheart Julie Andrews, who, of course, was playing Eliza Doolittle on Broadway. (They wed in 1959; the marriage lasted nine years.) He spent his first years in New York doing caricatures for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Playbill*. Walton suddenly chuckles remembering a "weird experience" connected with his design for the special program cover (printed in gold, as was the custom) for the opening night of the original 1956 production of Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*. "You know the way you try to exaggerate the most exaggeratable characteristic? Well I elongated Florence Eldrige [the mother]'s already slightly long nose. I didn't know that she had been trying to conceal that her origins were Jewish for professional reasons. She felt that I was in some way drawing attention to this by dealing with her nose and so she wouldn't go on stage until every program was removed from the theater, and that delayed the opening night."

But let's get back to his directing *Earnest*. Over the years there had been talk of Walton directing various productions (there was even the possibility of his making a movie), but nothing panned out. Walton now recalls an incident which nearly quenched his directorial ambitions altogether. Sometime in

the '70s he attended a dinner party given by director John Schlesinger, who was directing the movie *Marathon Man* at the time. Among the guests were the stars of the movie, Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman, Olivier's wife Joan Plowright, and Bette Midler.

"Olivier [for whom Walton had worked at the National Theater in London] fixed me with those eyes and said, 'I understand you are being approached to direct, are you considering it?' I said yes. Then he said 'A cobbler should stick to his last, and you are one of the best bloody cobblers we've got.'" This was rich coming from a man who did almost everything in the theater, but it was enough to shake Walton's confidence. "I think it made a big impression on me, though I had blocked it out somehow."

Cut to an interview with critic John Simon for *New York Magazine* in 1993. Prodded by Simon, Walton said that he'd really like to direct *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "I have a dim memory that John Simon said maybe this will do some good if I put it in," Walton recalls.

Well, be careful what you wish for in print—because it may come true. Sometime last year while he was designing *Company* for the Roundabout Theater, Walton received a call from Charlotte Moore, Artistic Director of Irish Rep. "She said 'I've had this clipping on my cork board for the last two years and I'm calling your bluff.' I said, 'Charlotte, this is the greatest comedy ever written in the English language. I can't start out doing that!' And she said, 'Well, I'm going to keep on your case.'"

A factor which propelled Walton toward accepting Moore's challenge was seeing director Mike Nichols' amazing performance last spring in Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner* at the National Theater in

London. "I thought, my God, in the thick of this gigantic success he'd just had with *The Birdcage*, what an unbelievably gutsy thing to do. I barely slept that night. And I thought I shouldn't be so chicken-hearted."

And as a warm-up, Walton had the opportunity to co-direct (with Lori Steinberg) two short Noel Coward plays at Sag Harbor's Bay Street Theater, which is run by Emma Walton (his daughter) and Sybil Christopher. "It was a wonderful baptism, and it wasn't as daunting or as scary as I thought it would be."

So why *The Importance of Being Earnest*? Walton got hooked on the play when he illustrated an edition of *Earnest* and *Lady Windemere's Fan* for the Limited Editions Club in 1973. "It's such a willfully playful and flirtatious piece of work," he says. "Bernard Shaw said that Wilde is our only real playwright because he plays with words, he plays with the actors, he plays with the audience, he plays with the theater. I thought it would be lovely to find the most attractive and the most gifted and buoyant group of actors that I could cast." (Walton's cast includes Melissa Errico as Gwendolen, Nancy Marchand as Lady Bracknell, Eric Stoltz as Algernon and Daniel Gerroll as Jack.)

"It's so strange now, anything that is devised strictly as entertainment is so terribly looked down on," says Walton. But *Earnest* (which the playwright subtitled "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People"), he adds, was also Wilde's way of "taunting and ridiculing the Victorian standards that were prevalent in London at the time as mischievously as possible." Walton says he finds it "tempting" to bring Wilde's homosexuality "more powerfully into the picture" following a trend of recent interpretations of the play, but for him, it was the masks rather than the revelation that made this as playful as it was. "The excitement of covering up somehow gave the play, what seems to me, the unexpected heat."

His status as an A-list Broadway designer notwithstanding, Walton is remarkably modest, and he talks generously of his friends and collaborators in the business. Not surprisingly a key to his reading of the play is Wilde's "extraordinary generosity," something

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that has been remarked on in several recent books on the playwright. "Almost always, witty people have this devastating killer streak, but that wasn't part of Wilde's make-up. This is something that leaks through the play all the time. There isn't a mean-spirited moment in it, despite the fact that it's devastatingly witty, and that's quite an achievement."

The talk about Wilde's good-natured spirit triggers another Walton anecdote: "Forgive me, this is really sidetracking, but that was, oddly enough, my impression of Noel Coward as well." Walton's first job in New York was designing the sets and costumes for Coward's *Conversation Piece* in 1957. "During the dress rehearsal, he was sitting there all knotted up like a pretzel because the elderly actress who was playing the Duchess of something—she had acted with Kean and had bright orange hair—well, she was so nervous because Coward was there, she couldn't remember a line. At the end of the run-through, as he normally did, he gave his notes to the cast, who were lined up on stage. He would go down the line and was usually very succinct with very helpful hints. Everyone was terrified when he stepped in front of this ancient Duchess. He said, 'Darling, I don't know what to say to you. It makes me so happy to see you back on the boards again that I can't think of anything else to say,' and he moved on to the next person. I mean it must also have been partly his actor's savvy of knowing what was needed at the moment, but it was so totally unexpected and subtle, and such a generous thing to do when you could see the agony he was in watching her."

The fact that he has finally launched his directing career doesn't mean Walton will give up designing. He's currently at work on the new Kander and Ebb musical, *Steel Pier*, scheduled for Broadway in the spring. Prior to that he will do the designs for the Primary Stages production of *Not Waving*, the first play by Genevieve LeRoy (Walton's wife since 1991). Does he have any other directing projects he'd like to commit to print? He laughs. "I have, but I don't think I'd better even venture into it. I don't want to count my chickens...."

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