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'Feasting with Panthers'

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The Happy Prince

a film written and directed by Rupert Everett

Oscar: A Life

by Matthew Sturgis

Head of Zeus, 890 pp., £25.00

How to perform a man who himself did nothing else? “From the beginning Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands,” W.H. Auden wrote in a perceptive, if strikingly critical, essay in 1963.¹ Oscar Wilde famously told Gide that he had put his talent into his work and his genius into his life, and although his work is still enjoyed—there was recently a year-long season of his plays at the Vaudeville Theatre in London—he divides opinion as a writer, with John Banville in these pages recently putting a higher estimate on him than Auden had.²



Wilhelm Moser/Sony Pictures Classics

Rupert Everett as Oscar Wilde in *The Happy Prince*

But “Oscar” continues to inspire any number of books, plays, and movies. One filmography lists twenty-seven items. There are many filmed versions of his work, among them six of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (with casts including Anthony Perkins and Malcolm McDowell), four of *The Canterville Ghost* (with casts including John Gielgud and Patrick Stewart, and a 1944 version directed by Jules Dassin with Charles Laughton), and four of *Salomé* (one directed by

Ken Russell and one by Al Pacino). And there are filmed versions of the comedies, although they never quite work on screen: the 1952 *Importance of Being Earnest* directed by Anthony Asquith, despite Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell, Dorothy Tutin as Cecily, and Margaret Rutherford as Miss Prism, is stagey and slow-paced. An even more improbable Wildean than Pacino was Otto Preminger, who directed a 1949 movie version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* as *The Fan*.

Then there are the biopics. Two came out in 1960: *Oscar Wilde* with Robert Morley as Wilde and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* with Peter Finch. Critical opinion at the time thought the Finch version the better, and viewing them again it's hard to disagree. The former is clumsy and sometimes a little leaden and, although there's something rather touching about Morley, he is plainly miscast. So in a different way is Finch, who is too handsome, slim, and dashing: Wilde was never very prepossessing in appearance, as opposed to presence and conversation, and by forty he was, as photographs and the sketches by Toulouse-Lautrec and Max Beerbohm show, bloated by food and drink.

In 1960 London also saw *The Importance of Being Oscar*, a one-man stage show by Micheál Mac Liammóir. Since mixed identities, "guising," double lives, and "Bunburying" were so much a part of Wilde's work—and life—this may have been an apt interpreter. "Mac Liammóir" was actually a Londoner of modest origins named Alfred Willmore, with no Irish connections or ancestry at all. He'd been a child actor before the Great War, appearing in *Peter Pan* with his exact contemporary Noël Coward, but then moved to Dublin and entirely reinvented himself as an Irishman, claiming to come of a Cork family, adopting a Celtic name, and learning to speak Gaelic fluently, which was more than most of the Irish could do. Although I didn't see *The Importance of Being Oscar*, I relished an LP of it, with Mac Liammóir's overripe but enjoyable intonation of everything from his own narrative to Lord Henry Wotton and Lady Bracknell.

That show and those movies came three years after the 1957 Wolfenden Report, which had recommended the repeal of the notorious 1885 Labouchere Amendment, the law under which Wilde had been imprisoned. Sodomy had been a felony since the Middle Ages, but the amendment created a further offense of "gross indecency" between men, of any age, in public or in private. Not many people were "out" sixty and more years ago, but three witnesses, the eye surgeon Patrick Trevor-Roper, the art historian Carl Winter, and the journalist Peter Wildeblood, courageously gave

evidence to the Wolfenden committee about their lives as homosexual men. Wildeblood had already been involved in a famous scandal, been imprisoned, and written a powerful book about it, *Against the Law*.

Those two 1960 movies trod quite delicately around the subject, and it was significant that Morley and Finch were both heterosexual. Although the films were based on books about Wilde and his trials, they could not then have reproduced verbally, let alone portrayed visually, the evidence heard in court. But they may have played a modest part in the rather slow process by which the Wolfenden recommendations became law with the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized sexual relations between consenting adult men. And standards changed dramatically over the next generation: by the time of the 1997 movie *Wilde*, with Stephen Fry as an improbably beatific Oscar and Jude Law as Lord Alfred Douglas, there were graphic scenes of “Bosie” screwing rent boys that would have been impossible not long before.

In two films of Wilde plays, the 1999 *An Ideal Husband* and the 2002 *Importance of Being Earnest*, one of the actors is Rupert Everett. His career had begun with Julian Mitchell’s 1981 play *Another Country*, set in a pre-war English public school and loosely inspired by Guy Burgess, the Etonian Soviet agent. The two schoolboys at the center of the story were played, very impressively, by Everett and Kenneth Branagh. Branagh’s part was taken over later by Colin Firth, who also appeared alongside Everett in the 1984 film version. Since then, Everett had one brief moment of Hollywood glory with Julia Roberts in *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, but there were disastrous movies with Bob Dylan (along with a notably unsuccessful attempt by Everett to turn himself into a singer) and Madonna. He may not have helped himself, either by coming out (or so he thinks: “The fact is that you could not be, and still cannot be, a twenty-five-year-old homosexual trying to make it in the British film business or the American film business”) or by publishing a memoir, the disloyal, bitchy, well-written, and highly enjoyable *Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins*, with many an aside about the shortcomings of such Hollywood eminences as “Done Fadeaway.”

Meantime Firth had risen to stellar heights, winning a clutch of awards, five alone, including an Oscar, for the tongue-tied George VI in *The King’s Speech*. For years Everett had dreamed of making a Wilde movie, but he could only get it financed with a bankable star, and he approached his on-and-off friend Firth, who at last agreed.

Firth plays Reggie Turner, one of Wilde's intimates and one of the few friends who stood by him after his disgrace. It's quite a small part, and he doesn't much resemble the "dear little Jew," as Wilde called Turner. Title and plot come from Wilde's children's story *The Happy Prince*, which has a particular resonance for me. When I was a small boy I had a "talking book" of the story, shellac discs in an album with illustrations. It brought tears to my eyes when I was six, and still can a long lifetime later.

Other Wilde biopics have told, over and again, the epic, awful story of his downfall at the very height of his fame in early 1895, when his one great masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, opened on Valentine's Day: his helpless infatuation with Douglas; Douglas's blood quarrel with his father, "the screaming scarlet marquess" Lord Queensberry; Queensberry's hounding Wilde and provoking him to take an incredibly foolish legal action; Douglas egging him on all the time; and the trap into which Wilde walked after enough evidence had been collected about his clandestine illicit life to destroy him.

There were three trials. The first was a prosecution brought by Wilde against Queensberry under the esoteric branch of English law called criminal libel, as *Oscar*, Matthew Sturgis's new biography, reminds us. Edward Carson is always cast as a villain for his devastating cross-examination that ruined Wilde, and even in the pages of *The New York Review* I've read that Carson prosecuted Wilde. He did not. As Wilde later wrote to Douglas from Reading Gaol, "I am here for having tried to put your father in prison." Carson was retained as Queensberry's defense counsel, and when he methodically routed Wilde in the witness box, he was doing what an advocate is supposed to do for his client. The collapse of the case against Queensberry was followed by Wilde's arrest and two trials, the first ending with a hung jury and the second with conviction and imprisonment.

Instead of those too familiar events, *The Happy Prince* begins with Wilde in exile, although the narrative is distinctly nonlinear, jumping from a destitute Wilde in Paris cadging money from an Englishwoman to his arrival in France after his release, greeted by Robert Ross (Edwin Thomas) and Turner. Several scenes are invented. Wilde is chased through the streets by a baying mob of English youths, when in reality he was merely, though humiliatingly enough, ejected from hotels at the demand of English tourists. In another unlikely scene he sings for his supper, or the price of his drinks, in a rowdy café (Béatrice Dalle as the *patronne*), with Everett playing a thoroughly dishevelled and decayed Wilde. The original

conceit has him telling the story of *The Happy Prince* to boys in a Parisian hovel, then flashing back to his home in London, where he would tell the same story to his young sons.

Watching tripe like *Downton Abbey* is only made endurable by totting up the solecisms and anachronisms, even if this amusement soon palls. Everett's screenplay has enough of those, from Ross telling Wilde that he's a "professional masochist" to Douglas telling him that his father was a "groper." This alludes to Sir William Wilde's reputation in Dublin for molesting women, the subject of another famous libel action.² And yet that word would not have been used in the 1890s. Nor would Wilde have said, when Douglas complains that he has to pay an Italian boy for sex, "the only one who ever fucked you for fun was me." One sometimes has the impression of later admirers projecting their own experience and language back onto Wilde.

We get a very different view from Sturgis's book. Although sometimes a little flat considering the high drama it describes, it's thorough and informative. He decries rather too loudly the deficiencies of Richard Ellmann's 1987 life, which has been shown to contain numerous errors, although Sturgis leans heavily on his predecessor at many points, to the extent that some passages in the two books are remarkably similar. But he does provide new detail and provoke new thoughts.

Throughout Wilde's story the reader or viewer often wants to shout like a child at a pantomime: Don't do it Oscar! Don't fall for the frightful Bosie, don't get embroiled in a squalid vendetta inside a horrible family, don't rise to Queensberry's bait, don't bring the disastrous action, and, when it collapses, for heaven's sake go abroad. That was what his poor wife Constance wanted, and what his friends Frank Harris and George Bernard Shaw urged him to do; that was what many people, including Carson, hoped he would be given the opportunity to do. After the Queensberry case had incriminated Wilde himself, the warrant for his arrest was delayed to give him time to catch a train to the Channel ports and escape to France, but he sat fatalistically at the Cadogan Hotel awaiting arrest. Ever the performer, or the self-dramatist, he told Douglas, "I decided it was nobler and more beautiful to stay. I did not want to be called a coward or a deserter."

And of course, when he's released and leaves (too late) for exile, we want to shout: Don't go back to Bosie! Constance and his few

remaining loyal friends prayed he wouldn't do so; but, after the seaside sojourn with Ross and Turner, the next episode in *The Happy Prince* is all too true to life. Wilde takes the train to Rouen, where he's reunited with Douglas, that "vicious, gold-digging, snobbish, anti-Semitic, untalented little horror for whom no good word can be said," in Auden's no-nonsense description. They then make their way to Naples, and a bacchanal. By contrast with the earlier movies, which treated Douglas in a fairly neutral way, plays like David Hare's *The Judas Kiss* and movies like *Wilde*, and now Everett's, have taken to portraying him as possibly even more horrible than he actually was. Here played by Colin Morgan, Douglas behaves vilely at every moment, insulting Wilde as a silly snob (true enough), missing no opportunity to humiliate him, and then, at the end, making a hysterical scene at his graveside, where he tells Ross that Oscar never loved him "as he did me."



Oscar Wilde; drawing by David Levine

While Wilde wrote Ross somewhat grandiosely that "my going back to Bosie was psychologically inevitable," he added with what may have been a kind of insight, "Of course I shall often be unhappy, but I still love him: the mere fact that he wrecked my life makes me love him." In the four years they were together before the disaster, Douglas may be reckoned Wilde's muse, along with the stimulation Wilde received from "feasting with panthers," their *folie à deux* in the gay underworld; it was in those few short years that Wilde wrote all his best work. But their time in exile brought no renewal, just the wasting away of what was left of Wilde's life and talent.

Part of *The Happy Prince* takes place in Naples (though not filmed there: Everett has given a droll account of how, for financial reasons, it was mostly shot in Germany and Belgium). Douglas picks up a pretty young waiter, and then there's a semi-orgy with a gang of youths. The waiter's mother arrives screaming with rage that she knows something horribly immoral is taking place, because there are surely women lurking somewhere. When assured that there are no women anywhere on the premises, she breaks into sobs of relief and blesses them all. This seems amusing enough, but here we encounter something more troubling.

At his first trial as a defendant, Wilde gave an impassioned spontaneous speech, which brought tears and cheers, about “the ‘Love that dare not speak its name,’ ...such a great affection...as there was between David and Jonathan...as pure as it is perfect.” That was far from defending the physical love of men with men. Wilde had brought the fatal action not to affirm but to deny that he was a “Somdomite,” as Queensberry quaintly put it, before he perjured himself at length. And although Wilde has long been acclaimed as a gay martyr and hero, he needs to be treated with care.

Between the first night of *The Importance* and the first day in court on April 3, Wilde and Douglas escaped from the English winter to Algiers and, as Sturgis says, “light, lassitude and sexual licence.” Douglas pursued “a beautiful ‘sugar-lipped’ fourteen-year-old,” and Wilde wrote to Ross, “There is great beauty here. The Kabyle boys are quite lovely.” Even the beggars were attractive, “so the problem of poverty is easily solved.” The word to note is “poverty.” Like many another before or since, straight or gay, Wilde and Douglas were sexual tourists, and, while we look back in horror at the historical persecution of gay men, we should be cautious about adopting a new double standard, and judging more leniently a writer who bought the bodies of penniless young boys in late-nineteenth-century Algiers or Naples than we would a businessman who buys the bodies of penniless young girls in early-twenty-first-century Bangkok or Manila.

Woven or adapted into Everett’s screenplay are some of Wilde’s own lines from his letters in exile: “Like dear St Francis of Assisi I am wedded to Poverty: but in my case the marriage is not a success,” or “How evil it is to buy Love, and how evil to sell it! And yet what purple hours one can snatch.” Everett has him saying a version of this to a lad who is getting dressed as Wilde pays him off. Again, in April 1899, he wrote, “I am going to try and find a place near Genoa where I can live for ten francs a day (boy *compris*).” The word to note is “boy.”

One of the witnesses against Wilde said that he had “committed the act of sodomy with me.” Sodomy had been a capital offense for which, barbarous as it now seems, men were still hanged in public in London less than twenty years before Wilde was born.⁴ But other witnesses included a seventeen-year-old servant in the house in Oxford where Douglas had rooms, who said that Wilde had kissed him and “placed his penis between my legs and satisfied himself.” Another was sixteen when Wilde met him in Worthing and

masturbated him and “used his mouth” on him. And a chambermaid at the Savoy Hotel said that she had found Wilde in a bedroom with a boy of about fourteen.

Not long before his death, Wilde somewhat unconvincingly told a reporter from the *Daily Chronicle*, “Much of my moral obliquity is due to the fact that my father would not allow me to become a Catholic. There is an artistic side to the church, and the fragrance of its teaching would have curbed my degeneracies.” He was in fact received into the Roman Catholic Church on his deathbed, as shown in the movie.

Today that church is shaken to its foundations by appalling scandals of priestly child abuse, with a recent dramatic outcome in the defrocking of an American cardinal. Rupert Everett should know. He was brought up as a Catholic and educated at Ampleforth, the Benedictine monastery and boarding school in Yorkshire. A recent report cataloged a hair-raising story of abuse of boys there over forty years. Several clerical and lay teachers have been convicted, and two monks have gone to prison.

Since Wilde’s day, we have grown mercifully far more tolerant of most sexual variety—but not pedophilia. One London reviewer of Sturgis’s book said that “if these and all the others had been young women rather than young men, Wilde would today be seen not as an icon, but as a predator.” But shouldn’t we see him as a predator anyway? We may be dismayed by Wilde’s sufferings in prison, but a hundred years later he would likely have received a longer sentence. Some years ago a well-known figure in the London pop music business was convicted of offenses with boys of fourteen and fifteen, and sentenced to seven years.

Just as Wilde remained a gay hero, the Labouchere amendment remained a byword for injustice. And yet the law to which it was appended, the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, was in its main purpose wholly commendable. It was largely the work of one man, the muckraking journalist W.T. Stead. He had researched and published a melodramatic series of articles on the “Maiden tribute of modern Babylon,” exposing the extent of child prostitution in London, and the act was intended to suppress that evil. Wouldn’t most of us admire that, and the aim of protecting young girls—or boys—then or now?

Great artists, the late musicologist Hans Keller once said, have always been less and done more than the public wishes to believe. Wilde in

some ways may be an exception, since he did treat his life as a dramatic performance. And yet however gaudy and extraordinary that life was, we honor him more by remembering not the man but his work, and above all what Auden called his “one imperishable masterpiece,” felicitously adding that *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in Wilde’s own subtitle “a trivial comedy for serious people,” was “the only purely verbal opera in English.”

- 1 “An Improbable Life,” *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1963; reprinted in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Volume V: Prose: 1963–1968*, edited by Edward Mendelson (Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 19–36. ↵
- 2 “[The Impossibility of Being Oscar](#),” *The New York Review*, March 8, 2018. ↵
- 3 See Colm Tóibín, *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce* (Scribner 2018), [reviewed in these pages](#) by Clair Wills, December 20, 2018. ↵
- 4 See A.D. Harvey, “Prosecutions for Sodomy in England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century,” *The Historical Journal*, December 1978. ↵

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