**The Importance of Being Earnest:**
A Conversation with actors Sara Topham & David Furr

On January 8th, 2011, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company’s lecture series, actors Sara Topham and David Furr spoke about Oscar Wilde and “The Importance of Being Earnest” with education dramaturg, Ted Sod. An edited transcript follows:

TED SOD: Can you tell us a little bit about the physicality of your characters, Jack and Gwendolen?

DAVID FURR: I looked at a lot of pictures. The costumers had a lot of pictures from the period; clothing advertisements. Those I looked at for hand arrangements. Then you look at yourself in 2011 and say, “That’s not appropriate or that is."

TED SOD: There are those wonderful photographs of Oscar Wilde looking idle. Even though he worked very hard, he liked looking idle. And you, Sara, amaze me with the way you dance up and down those stairs. How did the choice to have her be so nimble come about? Is it something you discovered on the stairs or did you want her to be that way?

SARA TOPHAM: I owe a debt of gratitude toward my parents who drove me from thousands of ballet classes throughout my entire childhood growing up. I don’t find that difficult. At one point in my life I was more comfortable in point shoes than bare feet. The exit in the second act came from Stratford. It was a transplant. I think two years ago, if I can remember back that far, it just happened in rehearsal one day. It felt right for her because she is so mercurial. She can go from being in the throws of great romance to incredible practicality. I think that is what is delightful about her. She’s a bit mad. In the beginning, Brian and I talked a lot about Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell and he would say, “Darling, think about in this moment that the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.” Even in the dialogue, Gwendolen says, “I am bound to state,” which Lady Bracknell often says. Also, “I beg your pardon,” is one they share. I think Brian and I traded things. I took some things from him and every now and again in Stratford I would see him doing a hand thing. I would think, “You cheeky monkey, you stole that from me.” He would absorb some of my more feminine stuff because he was working on that. Physical life all grows out of the words and out of the play.

TED SOD: Can we talk a little bit about working with Brian? How does someone direct themself? Did he have the understudy do scenes and watch?

DAVID FURR & SARA TOPHAM: Yes.

TED SOD: When would he put himself in for you to experience?

DAVID FURR: He would put himself in if he worked it several times with Sandra who is his understudy. I’ve worked with her outside of this and she is exquisite.

TED SOD: She’s covering Prism as well, correct?

DAVID FURR: Yes. So at least here, he would direct a scene and give notes. For certain runs he would don a rehearsal skirt or if we’d run a scene several times he would come up. Sara
will have to tell you more about the original process at Stratford because he probably did most of the heavy lifting on finding Lady Bracknell there.

SARA TOPHAM: This is the seventh thing I’ve done with Brian; six of them he has been in and directed. I will never forget doing *King Lear*. He was playing King Lear and directing the play because he thought just playing King Lear wasn’t mad enough. I was playing Cordelia and at our first run through in the rehearsal hall, Brian’s lying on the floor dead and the stage manager, Michael Hart, comes over and says, “Brian, what would you like to happen now?” I remember thinking that no human being should have to play King Lear all the way through for the first time and then answer that question. But he did it. He is quite fantastic in that way. It does have challenges; for him and for us. He is often taking notes off of a videotape of a show and sometimes it is a videotape of a Wednesday, you do two or three more shows and get notes on a Saturday. The notes are for four shows ago and that can be tricky. I think for him, not ever getting to sit out front with you guys and see it is difficult. He has an extraordinary assistant named Robert Beard who was a stage manager in New York for years and they have known each other for 40 years. He is a great pair of eyes and ears. Even at Stratford when we did this there, Brian maybe rehearsed perhaps 15% or 20% more than here in New York but he did let the understudy do a lot of the rehearsing.

DAVID FURR: And then stole everything.

SARA TOPHAM: And then stole everything. Not really but he loves directing so much. He gets caught up in the directing and then goes, “God, I got to put a skirt on and rehearse.” I know very few people who could do it with the kind of grace that he brings to it. It’s really not an easy thing to do.

DAVID FURR: What I thought was interesting was that in this case my director was also my scene partner. It was really great and easy except for the fact that Lady Bracknell, for most of the play, is incredibly disdainful and disapproving of my character Jack. So here’s the director giving Jack a look of disgust and you can either interpret that as Lady Bracknell or interpret that as Brian thinking, “Is he really going to do that? Is that how he is going to play that?”

SARA TOPHAM: I spent the whole of the first scene in *King Lear* during rehearsals thinking, “Oh my God! He hates me, he hates acting with me and he’s so mad at me right now!” Well, of course he is. He’s King Lear. It’s a weird thing.

DAVID FURR: I’d come off stage and think, “He seemed awfully grave and disappointed,” and he’d say, “Now that went really well.”

TED SOD: Talk to us about first cousins getting married during the Victorian period.

DAVID FURR: I asked about that. I said, “Is Oscar Wilde doing something there or is it something he’s hoping you don’t notice?” I think Bob and Brian said he wasn’t being cute or anything like that. Of course nowadays you think, “Wait – let me do the math.”

SARA TOPHAM: High school students have a really interesting response to that. They think, “Hold up. Doesn’t that make them cousins?”

TED SOD: As I understand it, it was called consanguinity and they encouraged it because it kept the money in the family. The first cousins were kept separated so that there wouldn’t be any onus on it. They weren’t brought up together. Wilde is actually playing into that brilliantly by having you not know who each other is. Then in the 20th century it fell out of
practice because of medical reasons, etc. But it was both an economic factor and status quo.

SARA TOPHAM: I think it’s also that “blue blood” thing.

TED SOD: I want to talk about is Wilde from your perspective. He wrote five plays to my counting. This one gets done quite often and the others occasionally: An Ideal Husband, Lady Windermere’s Fan, Salome and A Woman of No Importance.
Is this the first Wilde you’ve both been in?

SARA TOPHAM: No. Two years before we did Earnest, I played Mabel Chiltern in An Ideal Husband which was great preparation for playing Gwendolen. I think Mabel is somewhere in between Cecily and Gwendolen. I think she’s terrific; such fun.

TED SOD: Our audience may know that Wilde’s life more or less fell apart while this play was running in 1895. There was a libel suit which he was encouraged to press against the Marquess of Queensbury because he was infatuated with his son, Lord Alfred Douglas. That turned into a trial against Wilde where he was convicted of gross indecency at the time and murdered, I think. He was sent to prison for two years hard labor. He came out of prison destitute and his family was taken away from him since his wife wouldn’t allow him to see his children. If you are interested, there is a biography written by Richard Ellmann which won the Pulitzer Prize and a film entitled Wilde made in the late 90s that uses some of the info in that book. What do you two make of Wilde? Many of us see him as a genius. Do you think that word is used too easily in this case?

SARA TOPHAM: Oh no.

DAVID FURR: No, I don’t think so. I get the impression, and Brian could certainly tell you more from the one-man show that he does about Wilde, that his mind was able to come up with these things just sitting around. So I don’t think genius is too strong a word. He was well-known before he wrote anything. He was known for being a wit. Before he wrote much, he gave lectures. That necessarily doesn’t pay the bills but it was perfect for him.

TED SOD: Close to the end of his education at Oxford, he came to America and travelled to the Wild West to lecture on interior decoration. He was parodied in some magazines; but I think it was at that point that he made the statement that “America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between.”

SARA TOPHAM: I think that’s also the trip where he said the famous line, “I have nothing to declare except my genius.” Along with that biography you mentioned, his letters, which are the bulk of Brian’s one-man show, are extraordinary. He writes from prison about the treatment of children and was hugely impactful in prison reform in England. If you have an afternoon on a rainy October Sunday and nothing else to do, I highly recommend you read De Profundis which is the core thing he wrote from jail. For me, what makes him a genius is that he could write that and also this play. There’s something about his profound speaking of the truth in both the mediums which I find amazing. You’re certainly right that this play probably gets done maybe 75% more often than any of his other plays he wrote, but it is at least that much better. There are great things in the other plays but none of them structurally hold together the way this one does. We may owe that to George Alexander who was the first producer and played Jack.

TED SOD: There was a fourth act. I think it’s about debts?
SARA TOPHAM: Yes. I’ve seen the fourth act and I don’t recommend it.

DAVID FURR: Yes. There’s a solicitor that comes to arrest Ernest because of his debts in London that Jack has driven up. He comes to the house in the country to take in Ernest but the person who is parading as Ernest here is Algy. Then Jack is like, “Well, good luck.” Finally he writes a check to save him but it is this whole tangent basically.

TED SOD: It is now the audience’s turn to ask questions.

AUDIENCE QUESTION #1: First of all, the play is excellent. I really enjoyed it a great deal. What do you do between the time that you are called to audition and the time you get a role in a play? Do you wait? Do you take on another assignment?

DAVID FURR: That’s a really interesting and potentially difficult question to answer. I was scheduled to go to L.A. for a month. I auditioned for Earnest in July and didn’t start rehearsals until November. Between July and November, I had been offered and accepted this job I really wanted to do. My manager in L.A. wanted to start to submit me for television shows and things that started taping in November or December. You have to think about what you really want to do. You might make more money doing a television show. I personally really wanted to do this show so I told my agent that this was a big deal to me. You have to prioritize.

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SARA TOPHAM: That’s why I think you have to have good people around you. I have a wonderful agent who gives me great advice. For us, it was very weird because we closed in Stratford in the fall of 2009 and in January 2010 the paper read, “Earnest going to Broadway and all the Canadian cast is going.” Everybody was like, “We’re going to Broadway!” and then Brian had to call us and say, “That’s not quite how it’s going to work.” I found out in August that I was going to come in November. Some of the other people had actually turned down work for the winter. You have to make the best choice you can.

TED SOD: You have to have nerves of steel too. As many of you know, this profession is incredibly difficult. These wonderful actors have to stay in shape. They can’t be idle when they’re not working. They have to continue with classes and voice work; everything it takes to be ready to do a play of this difficulty.

AUDIENCE QUESTION #2: Does the age and composition of the audience have an effect on your performance? Also, when you are putting yourselves into a character, do you dream of what your character is doing?

SARA TOPHAM: Theatre dreams for me are usually the bad kind. For example, I’m in my costume and I know my lines but for some reason can’t get to the stage. Every time I open a door I’m in a train station or a shopping mall. If I get to the stage, I’m doing a different play than the one I think I’m supposed to be doing. I get those kinds of dreams. To answer your question about the audience, I worked in Canada with an amazing man named William Hutt. He was in the first season ever at Stratford Festival in 1953 with Alec Guinness and Irene Worth.

TED SOD: And he played Lady Bracknell.

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had a visit with in a long time and you are so happy to see them.” I always try to pick the latter because it’s less scary. I think for me psychologically, if I put the responsibility of having a good time in your hands, it doesn’t seem fair to me. I’m getting paid so I feel like it’s my own responsibility to have a good time. When you do that, when you are the creator of your own joy, what happens is that often audiences will go, “I’d like a piece of that. Thank you.”

**TED SOD:** What do you think Dave?

**DAVID FURR:** I think there is a difference between the older and younger audiences. We’ll have audiences that are filled with older people that are quite responsive. For us, it’s more of what kind of energy we are getting from the audience and whether it can feed us or lift us to have an even better time. If it is not as much energy from the audience then we’ll enjoy each other on stage and enjoy what were doing for its own sake.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION #3:** As many times as I’ve read the play, I’ve never quite understood what Gwendolen meant when she said to Jack, “I intend to develop in many directions.” What’s your take on that?

**SARA TOPHAM:** Well, I’m not sure I should say it out loud in front of him. Sometimes you have to have a secret. I think for me it’s different things almost everyday. It depends on what comes at me when I first come out. When he first speaks to me, sometimes it triggers a thought and I just go with whatever that is. Essentially, I think what she means is, “If you think I’m fabulous now, just you wait.” Honestly and truly, it’s different every single day as to what particular direction she’s leaning to in that moment. It comes out of the vibrations.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION #4:** In general, what is the reaction of the actors onstage when a well known personality appears and the audience applauds?

**TED SOD:** Entrance applause is a very interesting thing. It usually comes with a career that has gone on for decades. What do you both make of it?

**DAVID FURR:** It does have its challenges but I think the good thing is, not to jinx it, that in certain situations you can almost count on it. You build that into the character’s thinking. In this case, Brian comes on with applause and I can peek around to think, “Oh, Lady Bracknell is here.”

**SARA TOPHAM:** You have to give yourself something to think to keep the play alive.

**DAVID FURR:** It’s as if there’s a huge pause in the play. As a character, you fill the pause with more thinking. Lady Bracknell leaves and I have to have a couple of moments of complete and utter distress before Algy plays the *Wedding March*. You fill that with whatever is actually happening. I think the bigger challenge is if entrance applause is not there.

**SARA TOPHAM:** If it’s erratic it is challenging.

**DAVID FURR:** I’ve been in shows when there was applause and all of the sudden there’s nothing. It’s harder for that actor and there’s a moment of, “Right and moving on.”

**SARA TOPHAM:** In my opinion, I think it would be bad form to milk that applause ham-fistedly and I think in this production we don’t have milking going on. It would be almost impossible for Brian to stop that entrance round. When we did *King Lear*, he very deliberately entered not from the stage but from the back of the house.
to try and eliminate that possibility. Sometimes he succeeded.

**DAVID FURR:** I was covering in a show and there were four characters. The two older actors would get entrance applause and the two younger were actors we haven’t much seen yet. All four of the actors ending up getting Tony nominations. The day the Tony nominations came out, the door opens, there’s the young couple and all of the sudden there’s this applause. The next day there was not.

**TED SOD:** Sometimes the audience will give applause to the scenery. I think it’s a fascinating question from the actor’s perspective but from the audience’s perspective, I think it is a way for them to acknowledge how wonderful the actors are and to thank them for being back on stage.

It’s a valentine really; the way the audience sends a valentine.

**SARA TOPHAM:** And we’re lucky in this play because this play is structurally less damaged by entrance and exit applause. We have the footlights and there’s a meta-theatrical thing about it. In *King Lear*, Brian didn’t want applause like that because he felt it would damage the structure of the play. I can’t speak to what it would be like in a Tennessee Williams play but I can’t help feeling *The Glass Menagerie* would be damaged by an entrance round but maybe I’m wrong. Maybe it works; I don’t know.