

# The New York Times

Critic's Notebook

## Theater Heads North, and in Every Direction at Once

A psychological drama from Japan and a classic English comedy are among the high-contrast offerings in the Berkshires and Hudson Valley.



From left, Mitchell Winter, Claire Saunders, Rebecca Brooksher and Shawn Fagan in Berkshire Theater Group's "The Importance of Being Earnest," presented in an intimate indoor theater.



By [Jesse Green](#)

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Theater is confusing this summer. As the return to live, in-person performance accelerates, many productions conceived under earlier limitations are emerging in a world that looks different than expected.

Last week I saw two shows that exemplify the extremes of this mixy moment. One, “[The Dark Master](#),” a psychological drama from Japan, was supposed to be part of a live North American tour but emerged as something remarkably different, remote yet in person, with virtual-reality goggles. The other, a revival of Oscar Wilde’s “[The Importance of Being Earnest](#),” was supposed to take place in a socially distanced, open-sided tent but wound up tightly packed into an indoor theater, with everyone breathing the same air, albeit through masks.

That the two productions moved in opposite directions — one toward stricter precautions, one toward laxer — may be more than an accident of timing; it seems to be an example of content calling out to form. “The Dark Master” is as dour and antisocial as “Earnest” is giddy and garrulous, but both productions are intense experiences in part because the shifting terrain of coronavirus precautions has made them more themselves.

I have trouble imagining how “The Dark Master,” which I saw at [PS21, in Chatham, N.Y.](#), and which continues this week at [Japan Society](#) in Manhattan, could ever have been performed live. Adapted and directed by Kuro Tanino from an indie manga, it stars Kiyobumi Kaneko as the owner and chef of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Tokyo. Over the course of the play, he forcibly turns the business over to a customer, demonstrating his best recipes and worst scowls.



Kiyofumi Kaneko in “The Dark Master,” an adaptation of a manga. A live audience views the production through virtual-reality goggles.

I say that Kaneko stars, but that’s not quite accurate. As rendered through the virtual-reality goggles, “The Dark Master” now stars you. Each audience member — there’s room for 10 pods of one or two people — in effect plays the customer dragooned into service; without actually moving at all, you become implicated in the action: cooking, eating, sleeping. Kaneko (who, like the other actors, dubbed his lines in English) doesn’t exist in real space in the show, yet he leans into you so closely that you

may feel the urge, as I did, to push your chair away. At the same time the smells of the sizzling garlic and steak are urging you closer.

Virtual reality is as yet a plaything in the theater, not really mature as an expressive device, and yet its use in “The Dark Master” emphasizes the isolation and interiority of the story and also of life during the pandemic. Kaneko may get in your face — and later, you may be troubled to find a prostitute you hire doing even more — but I found myself just as fascinated by my own weird hands, which of course were not really mine, as I could tell by their manicure. Food aiming for my mouth seemed to hit my sternum instead; I won’t even speak of the bathroom.

Though I was not always sure who I was or what was happening, that seemed to be part of the point. Alienation and paranoia, exhausted themes of avant-garde theater, came roaring back to relevance in “The Dark Master,” in part because of Kaneko’s engagement in the material but in part because of mine. (Or yours.) The removal of all external sensation — you wear not only goggles but also headphones — has the effect of unmooring you from the pilings of your own personality.

That effect is enhanced by the theater, [a beautiful, reconfigurable indoor-outdoor space](#) that appears to have landed like an exotic bird in the midst of a 100-acre former apple orchard in this tiny Hudson Valley town. It’s not the first place you would expect to encounter cutting-edge performance, yet PS21 offers little else. In “The Dark Master,” the contrast between the fragrant fields of astilbe and the pungent prison of your own perceptions makes both feel a bit more precious.

The Unicorn Theater, where I saw a preview of the [Berkshire Theater Group](#)’s production of “Earnest,” could not be more different: a traditional auditorium with 122 seats near the tony Main Street gift shops and galleries of Stockbridge, Mass. If the play’s characters, Londoners with grand country homes, were contemporary Americans instead of Victorians, this is where they might summer. Wilde’s comedy, directed by the playwright David Auburn, thus seems like an evening’s entertainment in a local home, if its owners were people of exceptional wit.



As Lady Bracknell, Harriet Harris makes a convincing dragon in the Oscar Wilde play.

Wilde's wit is tricky, though; it sits on bedrock of great moral heft, yet if played with any weightiness, it droops. The four lovers are enmeshed in webs of superfluosity — Gwendolyn and Cecily mostly concerned with marrying a man named Earnest; Algernon and Jack obsessed with muffins and cucumber sandwiches — but they must believe these things to be of utmost importance. And Lady Bracknell, whose faith in her own values is absolute, must dispense justice as if it were meringue.

At the early preview I attended, Auburn's well-cast company was approaching the right balance. As Bracknell, [the great Harriet Harris](#) was still applying the finishing coat of comedy to her detailed, nuanced performance, but already made a convincing dragon. Conversely, the lovers (Rebecca Brooksher, Claire Saunders, Shawn Fagan and Mitchell Winter) were as yet too focused on the comedy to achieve it fully, missing opportunities



to let the repercussions of their actions sink in. When sweethearts of 1895 kissed for the first time, surely it was no joke; it was a revelation.

My sense that this cast will soon completely inhabit Wilde's wit is partly based on the way the show is already hitting its marks by Act III and partly on its completely successful design. The simple, elegant set by Bill Clarke, all black-and-white Art Nouveau swirls and sheer curtains, suggests the fineness of taste that the writing requires. Swinging far the other way, the outrageous costumes by Hunter Kaczorowski — Gwendolyn wears a three-foot hat to the country, and Algernon sports rhinestone-buckled pumps — give proper due to hilarity.

The elation that comes from the intensity of such choices, whether in design or acting (or, as in "The Dark Master," in conceptualization), is what we go to live theater for. To the extent the pandemic has denied us that elation, we can't be rid of it too soon.

But this intermediate period has its own elations. Returning to difficult material after a diet that has too often consisted of comfort food, and returning to theaters where people crowd together and feel — not just hear — one another laugh, is its own source of emotion. When the Berkshire Theater Group's artistic director, Kate Maguire, appeared before "Earnest" to make the usual preshow announcements about emergency exits, she first broke into tears. She wasn't the only one.

### **The Dark Master**

Performances June 23-28 at Japan Society, Manhattan; [japansociety.org](http://japansociety.org)

### **The Importance of Being Earnest**

Through July 10 at the Unicorn Theater in Stockbridge, Mass.;

[berkshiretheatregroup.org](http://berkshiretheatregroup.org)

***A correction was made on June 23, 2021:*** An earlier version of this article, using information provided by the theater, misspelled the name of an actor. He is Kiyobumi Kaneko, not Kiyofumi Kaneko.

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When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [nytnews@nytimes.com](mailto:nytnews@nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)

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