

NAXOS
AudioBooks

CLASSIC
DRAMA



Oscar Wilde
**Lady
Windermere's
Fan**

Performed by
**Juliet Stevenson
Samuel West
Emma Fielding
Michael Sheen
Sarah Badel
and full cast**

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1	Act 1	25:04
2	Act 2	28:03
3	Act 3	21:25
4	Act 4	24:40

Total time: 1:39:12

Lady Windermere's Fan

Cast

Lord Windermere	Samuel West
Lord Darlington	Michael Sheen
Lord Augustus Lorton	Derek Waring
Mr Dumby	Peter Yapp
Mr Cecil Graham	Nicholas Boulton
Mr Hopper	Benjamin Soames
Parker	Rod Beacham
Lady Windermere	Emma Fielding
The Duchess of Berwick	Sarah Badel
Lady Plymdale/Lady Agatha Carlisle	Elaine Claxton
Lady Jedburgh/Rosalie	Delia Paton
Mrs Erylne	Juliet Stevenson

Oscar Wilde

Lady Windermere's Fan

Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. His father was a distinguished surgeon and his mother a poet. After attending Trinity College in Dublin, Wilde won a scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford in 1874, where he took first class honours and was awarded the Newdigate Prize for poetry.

At Oxford Wilde, under the influence of the critics Walter Pater and John Ruskin and the painter James McNeill Whistler, espoused the ideals of the 'aesthetic' movement, which asserted the importance of art in society and its power to influence the progress of civilization.

Wilde's wit, his extravagant modes of dress, his attitude of contempt for traditional sports and energetic pursuits, caused him to be seen as an effeminate poseur by his more reactionary fellow students, and resulted in his receiving a ducking in the Cherwell and his rooms being wrecked.

Having moved to London, Wilde's handsome looks and brilliant conversation soon established his position in society. His long hair, velvet coat and flowing tie became the recognised image of the poetic

aesthete, and were parodied in Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience* (1881). The following year Wilde took advantage of the opera's success by embarking on a lecture tour of the United States, during which time he wrote a play, *Vera*, later produced in New York.

The same year Wilde published a selection of poems, and these were followed by *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891), *The House of Pomegranates* (1891), and a play, *The Duchess of Padua* which was produced in New York in 1891. His *Salome* (1893) was refused a license for the London stage, and was produced in Paris by Sarah Bernhardt.

In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, by whom he had two sons, Cyril in 1885 and Vyvian in 1886. In addition to his literary output, Wilde supplemented his living by journalism, contributing to various popular periodicals.

In 1891 Wilde embarked on a succession of plays which were to earn him popular acclaim and an assured place in the history of English dramatic writing; *Lady*

Windermere's Fan (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

During this period a homosexual relationship, which was to have disastrous consequences, developed between Wilde and the young Lord Alfred Douglas. Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensberry, learning the nature of his son's friendship with Wilde, publicly insulted him, and Wilde, mistakenly as it turned out, decided to sue Queensberry for libel. During the course of one trial at which the jury failed to agree and resulted in a consequent retrial, Wilde's homosexual activities were revealed and he was condemned to two years' imprisonment with hard labour. While in prison Wilde wrote a long accusatory letter to Douglas, later published as *De Profundis*, and a powerful narrative poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. After his release Wilde moved to Paris where he lived under a pseudonym and died in poverty on 30 November, 1900.

In order to appreciate the attitudes which underlie the narrative of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, it may be helpful to consider the prevailing public morality of the era in which it was written, and the author's own ambivalent position.

The rigid social and religious rules of the

time obliged all sexual activity outside marriage to be carried on in secret, an attitude which resulted in the well-known hypocrisy of the Victorian age. Sexual activity between members of the same sex was never openly admitted; homosexuality was a criminal offence and Wilde, in company with other practising homosexuals, was obliged to hide that aspect of his life.

In the case of men, extramarital affairs might be overlooked providing they were conducted discreetly and did not interfere with the semblance of an orderly social existence. But equality between the sexes, though widely discussed, was far from being established. The rules of sexual conduct for women were considerably stricter than those for men, and women who broke them suffered severe consequences in terms of society's retribution.

In an age when women of the upper classes were not expected to earn their living, and where society did not provide any means for them to do so, there were few avenues open for a woman without a husband or a fortune. In cases where a beautiful woman's determination to live well outweighed her fear of society's opprobrium, she was free to choose a more comfortable way of life in which her looks

and ability to please were financially rewarded by wealthy admirers. But such women were obliged to live a *demi-mondaine* existence outside the magic circle of 'decent' society; they might be popular in the company of men, but they would never be received by their wives. It is into this category that Mrs Erlynne falls.

The theme of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is 'goodness'; the difference between society's perception of what it means to be 'good', and true ethical goodness; between the public stance of morality, and the private kindness of a generous nature. Mrs Erlynne, having left her husband and child for a lover who deserted her, is seen by society as a 'bad' woman and has been punished for contravening its laws. She is no longer accepted in respectable houses, and is obliged to travel abroad, kept by a succession of wealthy lovers. Her heart has hardened to the extent that she is prepared to blackmail Lord Windermere into paying her an allowance, and forcing him to become the means of her reinstatement in fashionable society.

Lady Windermere is a 'good' woman, in the sense of being a faithful wife, a loving mother, and a respectable member of society, but as the result of her youth, her rigid upbringing and her limited experience of life, she lacks the true qualities of

goodness – understanding, sympathy and compassion.

Through rediscovering her maternal feelings, Mrs Erlynne shows herself capable of the selfless sacrifice of true love. Lady Windermere understands that she has misjudged Mrs Erlynne, and discovers within herself the frailty she has condemned in others. She learns that there are no 'bad' or 'good' people, but that the complexity of human nature embraces all such qualities. Thus Wilde sends a message to his audience that those who are forced to live outside the boundaries of 'respectable' society are not necessarily evil, and that those who consider themselves without stain would do well to look deeper, and accept the failings of others in a spirit of understanding and generosity.

In the light of what we know of the double life Wilde was leading at the time he was writing *Lady Windermere's Fan*, it is easy to see why such sentiments lie at the play's heart. But sadly, once Wilde's secret became public knowledge, it became clear that his message had fallen on deaf ears. The cruel impulses of human nature, those which envy beauty and talent and hate the outsider, the same that had motivated the behaviour of his Oxford contemporaries in the past, now caused a self-righteous establishment to heap on him a public

degradation greater than any which Mrs Eryllyne or her kind might have suffered.

Overnight Wilde, the epitome of elegant living, artistic sensitivity and witty insouciance, the darling of theatrical audiences and fashionable drawing rooms, became an outcast, a criminal whose appearance on a Clapham Junction station platform in prison clothes elicited jeers and catcalls from a contemptuous crowd. Wilde had climbed high, and he had a long way to fall. There is in his fate a sense of the *hubris* of Greek tragedy; as if the seeds of his undoing were there from the beginning, and his downfall was the result of his ambition and pride.

However, when on the 20 February 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan* opened at the St James's Theatre to rapturous applause, these tragic events were still in the future. The play was an instant success and ran for over 150 performances. Now, a century later, it continues to be revived frequently. The reasons for its popularity are not difficult to identify. The play's witty dialogue contains many of Wilde's most quoted aphorisms, its stylish setting provides opportunities for elegant presentation, and it achieves moments of high emotion which are deeply moving.

It also includes a cast of memorable characters; Lord Darlington, whose witty and urbane exterior hides a recklessly

passionate nature and may well be the author's self-portrait; the redoubtable Duchess of Berwick, a rewarding figure in her own right, despite being due to reappear in the future as the even more formidable Lady Bracknell; and Mrs Eryllyne, who brings a deeper resonance to what might otherwise have been a superficially entertaining piece, and gives the play another, more serious dimension.

In this Naxos AudioBook version we are fortunate to have been able to assemble a cast worthy of Wilde's creative genius. I hope the listener will forgive my pre-empting his appreciative response if I quote the author's speech to the audience on the first night of the play, 'I think that you have enjoyed the performance as much as I have, and I am pleased to believe that you like the piece almost as much as I do myself.'

Notes by Neville Jason



Samuel West (Lord Windermere) has been widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film, *Howard's End*. His other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on UK TV in *Persuasion*, *Heavy Weather* and *The Vacillations of Poppy Carew*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia*, Algonon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Prince Hal in *Henry IV Parts I and II*. He has also recorded *Peter Pan*, *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age* and *Great Speeches in History* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Michael Sheen (Lord Darlington) trained at RADA and has since emerged as one of Britain's most exciting actors. He appeared at Manchester's Royal Exchange in *Look Back In Anger* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in London's West End in Ninagawa's *Peer Gynt*, the world première of Pinter's *Moonlight* and the Royal National Theatre's *Ends of the Earth*. He also directed and starred in *The Dresser* and has appeared in the films *Mary Reilly* and *Othello*. He also reads Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Derek Waring (Lord Augustus Lorton) has worked extensively on stage across the UK and the world, including numerous appearances on London's West End. He also appeared with the RSC in the *Wars of the Roses* trilogy. His TV credits include *Z Cars*, *After Henry* and *Never the Twain* and he has appeared in the films *Ivanhoe* and *Indian Summer*.



Peter Yapp (Mr Dumby) has appeared in plays and theatres across Britain and in the West End including *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* at the Piccadilly, and *The Black Prince* at the Aldwych, and spent a year with the BBC Radio Drama Company. His TV credits include *House of Elliot*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Poirot*.



Nicholas Boulton (Mr Cecil Graham) trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama where he won the Carleton Hobbs Award. His theatre credits include *An Ideal Husband*, *After the Rain* and *Arcadia* for Trevor Nunn. He has appeared on TV in *Two Golden Balls*, *Under the Moon* and *Kavanagh QC* and was a member of the BBC Radio Repertory Company.



Benjamin Soames (Mr Hopper) trained at LAMDA. Since then he has appeared in the TV series *Sharpe* and *Absolutely Fabulous* as well as the TV films *Heavy Weather* and *England, My England*. He has toured worldwide in the acclaimed Cheek By Jowl production of *Measure For Measure*. He has also recorded *Tales from the Norse Legends*, *Tales from the Greek Legends* and *The Tale of Troy* for Naxos AudioBooks.

Rod Beacham (Parker) trained at RADA and has worked in repertory, for the Royal National Theatre and in London's West End – his theatre credits include *A Streetcar Named Desire* and he was a founder member of The Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond. As a writer he has written numerous plays and works for TV.



Emma Fielding (Lady Windermere) trained at RSAMD. She has worked for the Royal National Theatre in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* and the RSC in *Twelfth Night* and John Ford's *The Broken Heart*, for which she won the Dame Peggy Ashcroft Award for Best Actress. She also appeared in the world première of Craig Raine's *1953*. Emma Fielding has appeared in numerous radio plays and also reads *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Sarah Badel (The Duchess of Berwick) trained at RADA. She has worked for the Bristol Old Vic and Royal National Theatre Companies, and other theatres across the UK and on Broadway. Her long association with the Chichester Festival has included various productions, most notably *Heartbreak House*. TV credits include *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Cadfael* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and she has appeared in the films *The Shooting Party* and *Not Without My Daughter*.



Elaine Claxton (Lady Plymdale/Lady Agatha Carlisle) has worked extensively in the theatre, including London's Royal National Theatre where she appeared in *The Children's Hour*, *The Machine Wreckers* and *Richard II*. She has twice been a member of the BBC Radio Drama Company during which time she participated in over 200 broadcasts.



Delia Paton (Lady Jedburgh/Rosalie) trained at RADA and after extensive stage experience she moved towards radio and television work. Her many television credits include the BBC series *Survivors*, *Backs to the Land*, *Seal Morning* and *Eastenders* and she has written and performed her own adaptation of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* as a one-woman show. She has also recorded *The Moonstone* and *The Railway Children* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Juliet Stevenson (Mrs Eryllyne) has worked extensively for the RSC, the Royal National Theatre, and other major theatre companies. She won an Olivier Award for her role in *Death and the Maiden* at the Royal Court, and a number of other awards for her work in the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Other film credits include *The Trial*, *Drowning by Numbers* and *Emma*. Among her prominent TV appearances is *The Politician's Wife*. She also reads Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and Austen's *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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Oscar Wilde

Lady Windermere's Fan

Performed by

Juliet Stevenson • Samuel West
Emma Fielding • Michael Sheen
Sarah Badel and full cast

Oscar Wilde's first play confronts the hypocrisy of public 'morality' compared with genuine, private kindness.

When it opened in 1892, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was an instant success and now, a century later, it continues to be revived frequently. The reasons for its popularity are not difficult to identify: the play's witty dialogue contains many of Wilde's most quoted aphorisms, its stylish setting provides opportunities for elegant presentation, and its cast of memorable characters play out a story which is genuinely moving.

This new audiobook production brings together a cast worthy of Wilde's creative genius.

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