APART from the fact that both have punning titles, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Last Orders* also have a good deal of alimentary activity in common. In Oliver Parker’s new version of *Earnest*, much is made of nibbling cucumber sandwiches (all gone when most needed), sipping tea, munching muffins and—taking advantage of the cinema’s flexibility in representing place—dining at the Savoy. Fred Schepisi’s *Last Orders* starts in a Bromley pub and makes its way across Kent to Margate with several stops for liquid refreshment and a solid pub lunch, as well as offering numerous recollections of past imbibings.

That is the end of my deferring to the theme of this issue. There are other more significant reasons for considering these two films together. Though both are creatively and culturally British in virtually every important way, both are also
co-productions, dependent for their very existence on financial input from other countries: *Earnest* is a UK-US collaboration, and *Last Orders* a UK-German affair. Very few British films, if they hope to reach international audiences, are these days entirely British in their backing and there are implications in this for the finished product. Both are adaptations of works famous in other media and their makers have taken very different attitudes to the task of rendering on film what they see as the essence of their precursor texts. Between them they represent the two most persistently recurring strands in British film history: the literary and the realist, with an underpinning of peculiarly British comedy styles.

*Last Orders* has been heaped with praise but, generally, reviewers have been much more guarded about *Earnest*. This may have something to do with the classic status of Wilde's play, as though, because it's a classic, there must be lots of other more significant things going on beneath its glittering surface, and one must therefore be more cautious about welcoming it. Certainly, Graham Swift's *Last Orders* won a Booker Prize but it hasn't yet had time to acquire such intimidating status. There are things wrong with Parker's *Earnest* but, to his credit, he hasn't lost sight of the fact that the play is essentially a triumph of artifice, at levels of both plot and dialogue, the former some of the most divertingly idiotic ever devised, the latter some of the most brilliantly sustained to woo succeeding generations of actors and those willing captives, their audiences.

*Earnest* is sometimes talked of in terms of its social criticism, and no doubt Wilde had reason to be critical of his society, whose hypocrisies (probably not all that much different from our own) he addressed more explicitly in *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but it is too solemn to think of it primarily in those terms. Where will that leave us with 'A handbag!' It is at least as much a critique of literary conventions, especially of the mode of Victorian melodramatic fiction ('The good end happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means,' pontificates Anna Massey's definitive Miss Prism), and also of the keeping of voluminous and mendacious diaries. Now, as well as these subtexts to the irresistibly playful surface, there are very serious accounts of its gay encodings. All this can make one wonder how the play ever got to be so popular before we were all so conscientiously well-informed.

This is director-screenwriter Parker's second brush with Wilde. With a predilection for filming classic texts, he made his feature debut with an intelligent, straightforward rather than exciting *Othello* (1996); then, in 1999, he did a stylish version of *An Ideal Husband*, making perceptively clear Wilde's relevance to contemporary political life. In these UK-US co-productions, he bolstered

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American market chances by casting Hollywood stars: Lawrence Fishburne played Othello and Julianne Moore swished her way dangerously through An Ideal Husband as devious Mrs Cheveley, which recalled how, fifty years earlier, Paulette Goddard had played the same role in Alexander Korda’s film version of the play. However, there was more at stake than US distribution: whatever shrewdly commercial thinking lay behind these casting decisions, the American stars aptly accentuated the ‘otherness’ of these characters. In Earnest, Parker has cast the very clever young Reese Witherspoon (from Election, Cruel Intentions, etc.) as Wilde’s shyly and slyly disingenuous Cecily. Here, it must be said, the commercial decision seems less justified in terms of how the film works; though the actress is acceptable as the English rose, she simply has to ‘act’ English to no special dramatic end other than skilful impersonation. And Rupert Everett, as a louche Algernon, is a name well known in the USA, as is the ubiquitous Judi Dench, as Lady Bracknell. For British films to succeed financially, they need to shore themselves up with such market considerations.

Parker’s Earnest will almost certainly give offence to Wilde purists: there is a somewhat frantic opening out of the play to take in Algy’s pursuit by his creditors through the London streets, the Savoy dining sequence, a glimpse of Lady Bracknell’s past in a London music hall, several carriage rides and an arrival by hot-air balloon at Jack Worthing’s Shropshire estate. The film doesn’t observeunities of time and place, and there is no reason why it should; the cinema can move about easily in both, though a film is not necessarily ‘cinematic’ just because it does. This is not a film that sets out to preserve a sense of theatre, as was the case with Anthony Asquith’s 1952 version, which began and ended with the traditional red curtains opening and closing. Purists are strongly advised to give Parker’s version a miss and to hire the Asquith video—or simply to wait for its next inevitable appearance on late-night ABC TV.

In his determination to avoid staginess, Parker innovates with variable success, variable in the sense that the inserts are sometimes at odds with the prevailing tone of his film. Tattooing was not unknown in the Victorian demi-monde, but to allow Gwendolen and Jack to expose for the purpose parts of their anatomy normally hidden in the polite society of their time (or, indeed, of ours) strains our sense of verisimilitude. To have Cecily imagine Algy arriving as a pre-Raphaelite version of a medieval knight (she herself suggests the same aesthetic school) is not a bad idea used once—it enacts the fantasy of Cecily’s yearnings—but it loses its impact after several such sightings. The sight of the dunners pursuing Algy makes a nice point about how such elegant lifestyles could be
mained through the simple expedient of running up debts; but Parker is too literal-minded in illustrating Miss Prism's account of how she confused book and baby—'in a moment of abstraction for which I can never forgive myself'—with inserted close-ups of the two.

Right. Not everything works, not everything conduces to the overall harmony of the enterprise: Asquith, at the cost of a certain chill and airlessness, certainly achieved a more artistically coherent result and enshrined the work of a legendary cast in gorgeously realised mise-en-scène. Yet it is still possible to have a very good time at this later version. Parker maintains the wit of the original and some of his invention works very well, like the moment when Jack is besieged by reporters and photographers as he goes to be grilled by Lady Bracknell. Or, working from Lady Bracknell's remark, 'When I married Lord Bracknell, I had no fortune of any kind,' there is a brief, modestly amusing flashback to how she may have earned her living (an in-joke is that she is played as a young woman by Dench's daughter, Finty Williams). The period decor is as sumptuous as in Asquith's film and more varied, and includes Syon House, West London, standing in for Jack's country seat, and a nice moment of one door opened after another by unseen hands as Jack makes his portentous way to his meeting with Lady Bracknell, metonymically suggesting the opulence of her establishment and the awesome-ness of the occasion.

But as it is the dialogue that matters most to the play, which may just be the Wittiest in the language, the film's great achievement is to have assembled a cast that can do it justice. Verbal dexterity, often stage-honed, has always been a strength of British cinema, even when particular films have sometimes declined into 'photographs of people talking,' as Karel Reisz once said; here, the capacity to utter, mutter or splutter some of the best-known comedy lines and make them sound new, to provoke laughter at what will for many be very familiar jokes, is pretty remarkable. Judi Dench finds her own way of dealing with 'A handbag!' without trying to emulate Edith Evans, who made of it a six-syllable word, and brings a subterranean warmth to the role of the great gorgon. Anna Massey and Tom Wilkinson, who seem younger than the usual Prism and Chasuble, are letter-perfect in their dealings with the solemn nonsense they are given to intone, and, as a sign of the film's generosity in casting, even Algyl's butler, Lane, is played ( immaculately) by Edward Fox. Of the four young people, I have mentioned Everett and Witherspoon; it only remains to add that Frances O'Connor is a sexy, worldly Gwendolen, very much her mother's daughter, and that Colin Firth, all ramrod repression giving way to manic elation, may be the best Jack Worthing I've ever seen.
This kind of depth of casting has always been a characteristic of British filmmaking, often drawing on the theatre and sometimes retaining traces of its origins. No such reservation could be held about the superlative ensemble that brings Australian Fred Schepisi’s *Last Orders* to such witty, tender, meditative life. If Parker takes what are often called ‘liberties’ with Wilde, Graham Swift, the author of the novel on which *Last Orders* is based, has every reason to be pleased with the result. Adaptation, a key element of British cinema, doesn’t necessarily produce literary cinema; it certainly doesn’t here, and ‘a literary cinema’, which the UK was often ‘accused’ of producing, isn’t necessarily a matter of adaptation, but of undue reliance on the verbal, of an expository approach to narrative, rather than of trusting the visual to carry a major share of the meaning.

The peerless acting ensemble Schepisi has brought together to carry out the *Last Orders* of one of them offers selections from what is essentially a microcosmic directory of British cinema acting. Three icons of the 1960s—laddish Michael Caine (*Alfie*); surly opponent of the status quo Tom Courtenay (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *Billy Liar*); and swinging David Hemmings (*Blow-Up*)—are joined by stocky, aggressive Bob Hoskins (famous twenty years later in *The Long Good Friday*) and nineties hard man Ray Winstone (*Sexy Beast*, *Nil by Mouth*), and, the jewel in the crown, the great Helen Mirren, spanning three decades and getting better all the time. Courtenay and Mirren have had stage successes but the acting on display here encapsulates a cinematic tradition, one that glories in the small effect, the raised eyebrow, the ghost of pain in the set of the mouth, the suppressed impatience. An example: in one of the film’s many memory sequences, Vic (Courtenay) once saw Jack’s wife Amy (Mirren) and Ray (Hoskins) sitting on a garden bench when everything about their body language suggested a kind of unexpected intimacy. He turns away, contemplative and surprised, but his minimalist expression and movement bespeak a generosity and tact that do not need words. (It recalled for me a beautiful moment in John Ford’s *The Searchers*, when Ward Bond, thoughtful and reticent, tucks away in his mind, never to be revealed, the sudden insight that Dorothy Jordan is in love with her husband’s brother, played by John Wayne.)

Schepisi’s adaptation is almost a transliteration of Swift’s novel, which, in its turn, is unusually—almost cinematically—fluid in terms of time and place. Not since Peter Bogdanovich’s *Daisy Miller* (1974) can I recall a film so committed in matters large and small to rendering the narrative moves and narrational procedures of its antecedent text. It’s not just that Schepisi has maintained the framework of the journey from Bromley across the Kentish countryside, via the
hop fields and Rochester and Canterbury to Margate, but that he has retained too the web of memories that gradually uncover the relationships that have brought us into this present. The late butcher Jack Dodds (Caine) has left, as his 'last orders', the wish to have his ashes scattered from Margate pier by his three oldest friends—Ray, the disappointed fruit-and-veg barrowman, Lenny (Hemmings) and undertaker Vic (in charge of the urn)—and his foster son, car salesman Vince (Winstone). As they make the journey, starting at the Bromley pub where there have often been a different kind of last orders, travelling in Vince's Merc, the past is gradually unravelled through the same kind of memory play as Swift employed. The tensions between Vince and Jack; the dilemma of Ray, half in love with Jack's wife; the suppressed envy of Lenny, whose daughter Sally has been made pregnant by Vince; and the curious sense of self-containment that typifies Vic but is not all there is to him; the unspoken gulf between Amy and Jack caused by the birth of their intellectually disabled daughter June: these and more are richly, sometimes painfully evoked by the men in the car.

By the time they reach Margate, it's as though we know all there is to know about these private lives, shaped as they have been by the great public event of the Second World War, action from which is briefly glimpsed in several of the flashbacks, and the flashbacks-within-flashbacks, through which the narrative strands are revealed. There is perhaps a deceptive sense of the picaresque about the film, with the journey happening in the film's present and punctuated by visits to a naval war memorial, where Vic's inner life is hinted at, to the hop field where the young Jack and Amy (played, like all the incarnations of the earlier selves of the main characters, by brilliantly chosen and/or made-up younger actors) first made love, and unforgettable to Canterbury Cathedral (nothing to do with 'heritage' film-making, everything to do with a gnawing sense of mortality and eternity). But picaresque is not the point: the journey is the occasion for the summoning up of what has brought these four men here today—and what has kept Amy away. It is her day for visiting her now fifty-year-old daughter, who has never once given any sign of recognising her: Amy has loved Jack; she has been hurt by his refusal to acknowledge June but has gone on loving him and June; and she has her priorities to consider, even on this day of last orders. Recurring markers of time and place include Amy's journeys on a red London bus to the 'home' where June has spent her life, and on this day it is seen in poignant counterpoint to the other, longer journey taken by the men.

Like much of the most critically respected British cinema, this is a film in the realist mode: realist in its observation of the surfaces of people and places and
times and in what it suggests about the life below the surface. But it is not by any stretch either ‘documentary’ or linear realism; it is realism brushed with poetry. There is, for example, poetry in the idea and the evocation of prewar Margate where Amy and Jack spent their honeymoon: it is bathed in a kind of light found nowhere else in the film, and this may well be a light that owes more to memory than to reality. Certainly the rainswept pier where the four men finally fetch up to execute the last orders offers something much more like the kind of realism to which British cinema has habituated us. Even it, though, as the camera pulls up to reveal a blurring of sea and sky in an image of timeless space/timeless time, has dealings with a truth beyond the quotidian. And speaking of space and time, Schepisi very precisely evokes both without the need for obvious captions, his trust in the power of the mise-en-scène to establish both recalling fellow Australian Bruce Beresford’s similar achievement in Driving Miss Daisy. As with the novel, Last Orders is a film about memory, what it contains and selects, about kinds of masculinity and male friendship, and the place of women and children in these, and it manages to be both affirmative and heart-breaking at the same time.

By its very casting, Last Orders seems to conjure up the heyday of British film realism (with echoes of Ealing comedy in the matter of the urn); in fact, all the heydays of British cinema have been characterised by their dealings with realism but always there has been more to the achievement than that. Again as in those earlier heydays, the affiliation with the literary culture, whether with Shakespeare, Dickens or Wilde, or with the Grahams Greene or Swift, continues to be a source of varied strength and confinement. Of the two films under consideration here, Earnest has a high old time with a classic comedy, and if one is not too po-faced about ‘tampering’ with the revered earlier text there is a good deal to enjoy in this new, somewhat rackety version. Last Orders, never losing sight of its distinguished precursor, is on many counts a great film. In the fitful, often ailing history of the national cinema that produced them both, they—and other recent, diverse films such as Sexy Beast, Gosford Park, Iris, About a Boy and The Navigators—suggest that the English patient is currently alive and well.