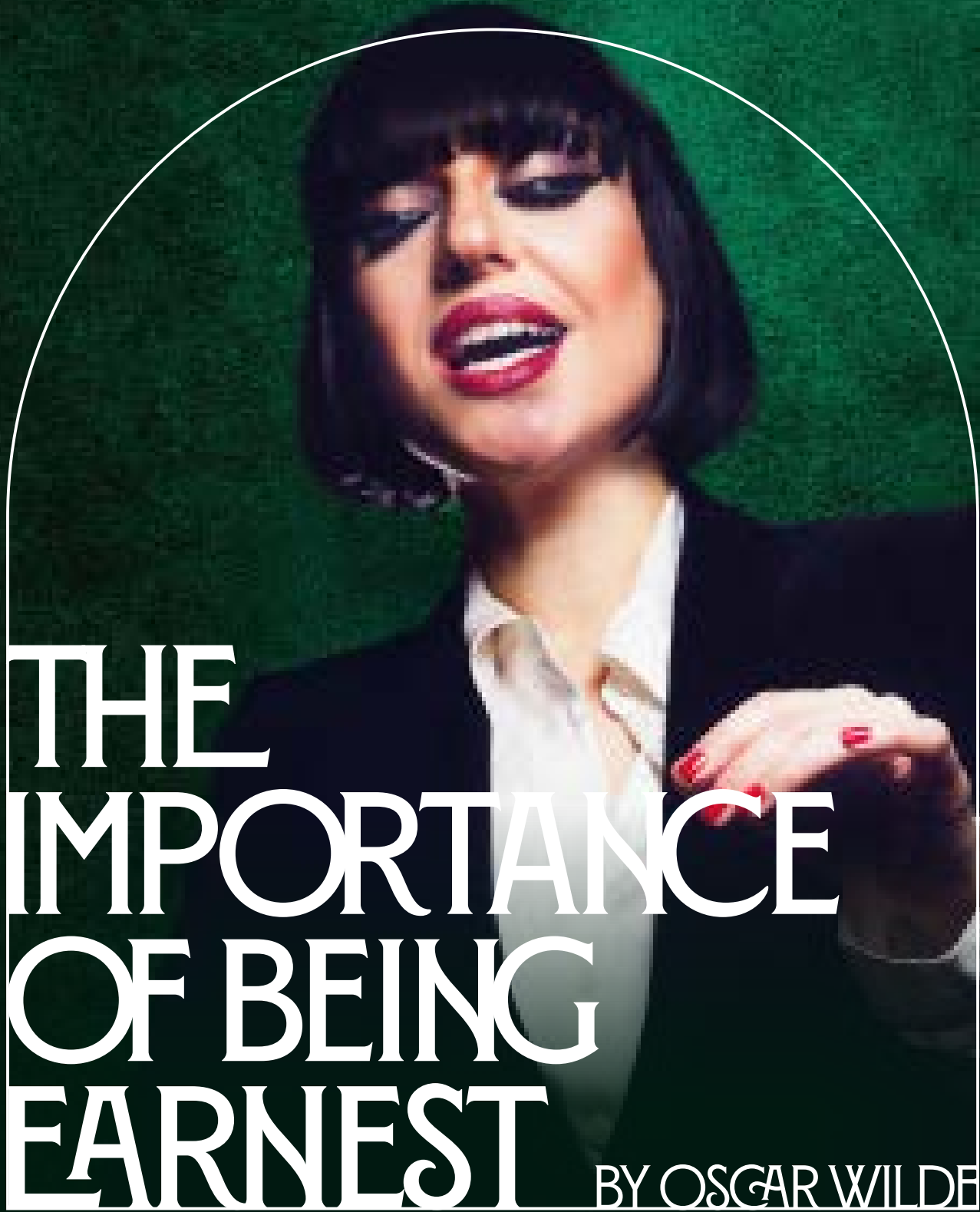




STATE THEATRE
COMPANY SOUTH AUSTRALIA



**THE
IMPORTANCE
OF BEING
EARNEST**

BY OSCAR WILDE

STUDY GUIDE

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE

SYNOPSIS

In the glittering heart of London's West End, the sophisticated and mischievous Algernon Moncrieff prepares to welcome his formidable aunt, Lady Bracknell, and her elegant daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax. Their arrival is unexpectedly interrupted by Algernon's close friend, Earnest Worthing—who is soon revealed to be concealing a deliciously scandalous secret. In truth, "Earnest" is none other than Jack Worthing, a gentleman leading a carefully constructed double life. To escape the tedium of his country responsibilities, Jack has invented a reckless younger brother whose exploits provide the perfect excuse for secret visits to the city—and the captivating Gwendolen.

But when Jack arrives with the intention of proposing, romance is swiftly halted by Lady Bracknell's stern disapproval. Still, Gwendolen remains enchanted, for she has always imagined herself marrying a man named Earnest. Seizing the opportunity for his own romantic adventure, Algernon travels to Jack's country estate, assuming the identity of the fictional Earnest in order to woo Jack's charming ward, Cecily. To his delight, Cecily too confesses a lifelong desire to marry a man of that very name.

As mistaken identities multiply and engagements spiral into chaos, the question remains: what will happen when both women discover that neither of their suitors is, in fact, Earnest.

The play satirizes Victorian society, marriage, and the obsession with appearances and social status.

DUNSTAN PLAYHOUSE
8 – 30 March 2026

SCHOOL PERFORMANCES
14 May 11am
25 May 11am
27 May 11am

RUNNING TIME
Approximately 120 minutes
no interval

Ages 14+, Year 9 – 12

Contains adult themes.

Please see the 'What to Expect' notes for more detail on content.

Resource created by Fiona Lukac for State Educate ©.

Support for State Educate comes from the State Theatre Company South Australia .

EXPLORE

Look out for these icons to learn more.



Activity



Reading



Video

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Nathan O'Keefe and Caroline Mignone in rehearsals
Photo: Matt Byrne

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Jack Worthing Teddy Dunn
Algernon Moncrieff Anna Lindner
Gwendolen Fairfax Connor Pullinger
Cecily Cardew Pia Gillings
Lady Bracknell Glenda Linscott
Miss Prism Nathan O'Keefe
Reverend Canon Chasuble Caroline Mignone
Merriman/Lane Carla Lippis

Writer Oscar Wilde
Director Petra Kalive
Designer Kathryn Sproul
Lighting Designer Katie Sfetkidis
Composer Geoffrey Crowther/Carla Lippis
Assistant Director Maeve Mhairi MacGregor
Production Manager Gavin Norris
Stage Manager Bridget Samuel
Assistant Stage Manager Hannah McGuire

Set made by State Theatre Company South Australia Workshop.

Costumes made by State Theatre Company South Australia Wardrobe.

MEET THE WRITER OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was a novelist, playwright, poet, critic and celebrity in late 19th century London. He wrote nine plays, one novel and several poems, articles and reviews.

Oscar Wilde was born on 16 October 1854 in Ireland, and was one of three children. Raised in an eccentric yet highly educated household, Wilde was deeply influenced by both of his parents: his father a distinguished surgeon, and his mother a poet and intellectual. The family was not exceptionally wealthy, however Wilde became known as a socialite who was always impeccably dressed and highly conscious of appearance.

Wilde's mother, had a significant influence on him. Like Wilde, she was known for cultivating a carefully constructed public image, often masking details of her origins and age. This fascination with identity, performance, and pretence became a defining feature of Wilde's writing

To fully appreciate the wit and irony of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is important to understand Wilde's life and artistic intentions. Much of his writing explores the contrast between outward respectability and hidden truths. Wilde's characters often possess two sides: a socially acceptable public identity and a concealed private self. This theme appears throughout his works. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is outwardly handsome, youthful, and extravagant, while his portrait reveals the corruption of his inner self. Similarly, in *An Ideal Husband*, Sir Robert appears to be the perfect gentleman, yet his past is marked by political corruption and blackmail. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this is clearly seen in Jack, who strives to be accepted by

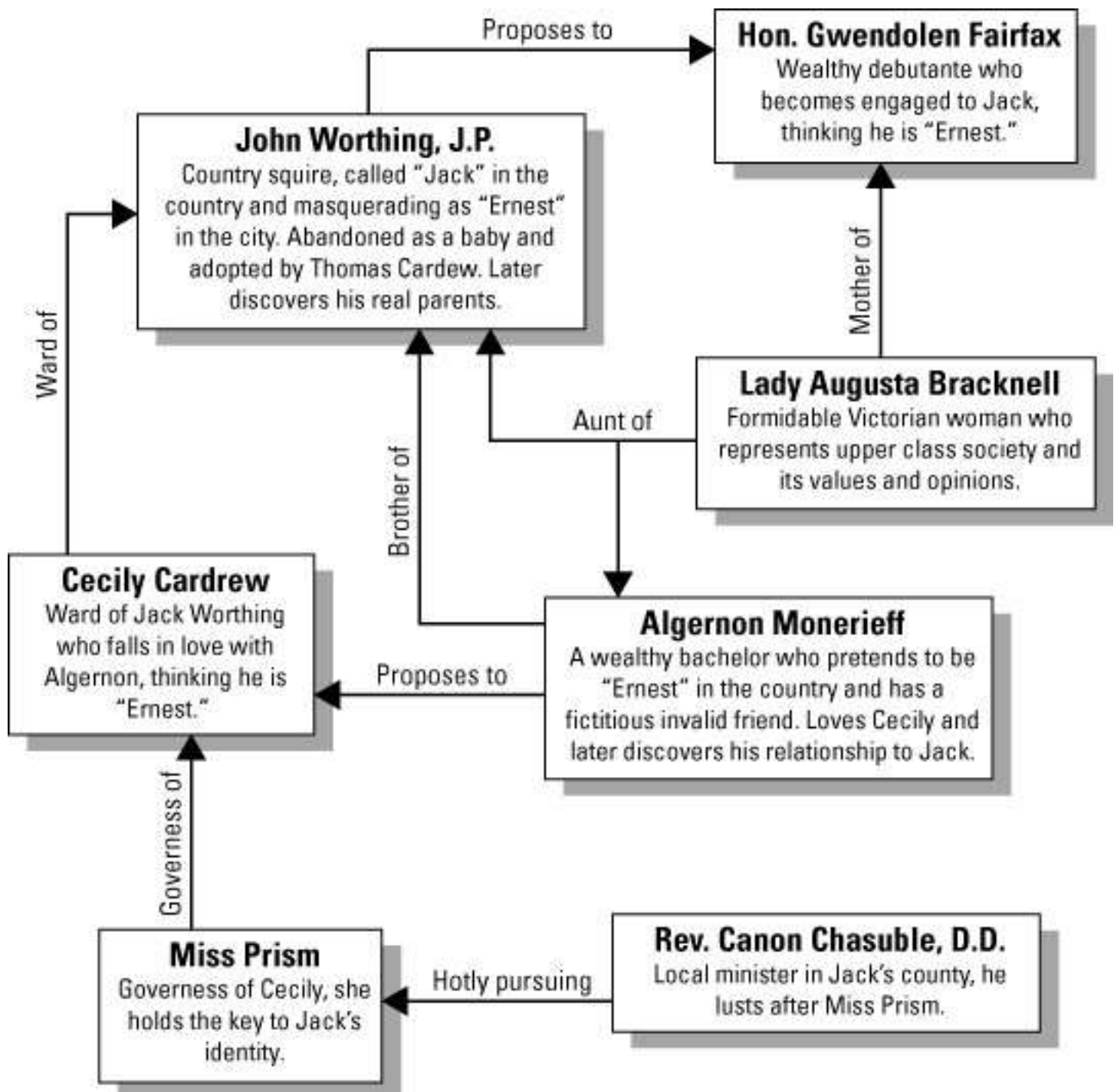
society while allowing his alter ego, Ernest, to lead a far less respectable life.

The Importance of Being Earnest is largely a verbal comedy in which language is often more important than action. Wilde uses witty dialogue, irony, and wordplay to expose the absurdities and hypocrisies of Victorian society. The play premiered in London in February 1895 and became Wilde's greatest theatrical success. The characters of Jack and Algernon are often believed to reflect aspects of Wilde himself, and the comedy serves as a sharp satire of the pretence and moral hypocrisy of the era.

Although Wilde was married and had children, it was his homosexual relationships—illegal at the time—that would ultimately shape the course of his life. When the Marquess of Queensberry publicly accused Wilde of homosexuality, Wilde sued him for libel. The case proved disastrous. Considerable evidence was presented in court, the libel suit was dismissed, and Wilde was subsequently tried and imprisoned for two years for “gross indecency,” beginning on 25 May 1895. After his release, Wilde's health, finances, and artistic focus had all deteriorated. He wrote very little in his final years and died on 30 November 1900.

This context helps explain why themes of deception, identity, and the contrast between appearance and reality are so central to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

RELATIONSHIPS



CONTEXT

Oscar Wilde writes *The Importance Of Being Earnest* as a critique against Victorian society and the ideals that people were supposed to live by.

To understand what he is saying we need to look at the Victorian era he is critiquing.

LATE VICTORIAN ENGLAND 1870'S - 1901

VICTORIAN MORALITY AND SOCIAL CLASS:

Under Queen Victoria's rule, society placed a great deal of emphasis on your social status, who your family was and your class. Social ideals dictated that the 'upper class' were superior in all ways and those ascribing to the upper class were to behave appropriately. One's family and upbringing was considered more important than personal character.

We can see this in Lady Bracknell focussing on Jack's property and family rather than on his dedication and love for her daughter. Her horror at 'the handbag' highlights how obsessed Victorian society was with where you came from. She herself is trapped in this society, it is the only way in which she can secure a future for her daughter.

The characters of Gwendolen and Cecily have been cleverly written by Wilde. In a time where the expectations were that women were demure, obedient and at the whim of men, Wilde has provided Gwendolen and Cecily with a great deal of power, flipping the norm of the time.

APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY:

Through his clever dialogue, paradoxes and farcical situations Wilde is able to challenge the rigidity of appearances and class and gender expectations.

Wilde presents characters which we can identify and will have an assumption regarding expected behaviours. Wilde uses this context to expose a key contradiction: society claims to value honesty and sincerity, yet it rewards performance and deception.

The clearest expression of appearance vs reality in the play is the idea of dual identities:

- Jack presents himself as responsible and respectable in the country, but becomes "Ernest" in the city to escape social constraints.
- Algernon invents "Bunbury" as a way to avoid obligations he finds tedious.

These false identities allow both men to maintain the appearance of propriety while secretly pursuing personal freedom. Rather than being punished, their deception is treated humorously, suggesting that such behaviour is normal within their social world.

MANERS AND ETIQUETTE

Wilde recognises that the prescribed rules surrounding manners and etiquette that existed in this time were in themselves dishonest, designed to separate the classes.

The idea of polite behaviour is heightened, rules around formal visits, about when to serve tea, what to serve and to whom.

There were strict expectations regarding afternoon tea - the cucumber sandwich particularly recommended for the summer.

The announcement of guests, and the leaving of calling cards, all etiquette that dictated how society was to behave.

MARRIAGE

Marriage rarely occurred as a result of love and affection. Oscar Wilde satirises the Victorian attitude toward marriage. It is portrayed as a social institution, requiring conditions around class, income and social standing to be met over genuine connection and affection.

Gwendolen and Cecily are far more interested in the superficial qualities - the name Ernest - than in the men themselves portraying 'earnest' qualities.

Overall, marriage in the play reflects the hypocrisy of Victorian society. It is outwardly treated as a serious moral institution, but in reality, it is governed by convenience, performance and social ambition rather than sincerity.

SCRIPT EXCERPT

LADY BRACKNELL. [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men, however, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. How old are you?

JACK. Twenty-nine.

LADYBRACKNELL. A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK. [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADYBRACKNELL. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. What is your income?

JACK. Between seven and eight thousand a year.

LADYBRACKNELL. [Makes a note in her book.] In land, or in investments?

JACK. In investments, chiefly.

LADYBRACKNELL. That is satisfactory. What between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one's death, land has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position and prevents one from keeping it up. That's all that can be said about land.

JACK. I have a country house with some land, of course, attached to it, about fifteen hundred acres, I believe/

LADYBRACKNELL. A country house! How many bedrooms? Well, that point can be cleared up afterwards. You have a town house, I hope? A girl with a simple, unspoiled nature, like Gwendolen, could hardly be expected to reside in the country.

JACK. Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year. I can get it back whenever I like, at six months' notice.

LADYBRACKNELL. What number in Belgrave Square?

JACK. 149.

LADYBRACKNELL. The unfashionable side. I thought there was something. However, that could easily be altered.

JACK. Do you mean the fashion, or the side?

LADYBRACKNELL. Both, if necessary, I presume. What are your politics?

DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM PETRA KALIVE

There is a delicious irony at the heart of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: a play that argues we must sometimes lie to tell the truth. Oscar Wilde, a queer artist writing in a society obsessed with rigid boxes, didn't just write a comedy of manners; he built a work designed to dismantle Victorian propriety. In this production, we aren't dusting off a museum piece or forcing modern politics onto a classic, we are digging for the dangerous, radical spark Wilde buried beneath the epigrams and cucumber sandwiches. We are returning the play to its roots as a sophisticated, anarchic pantomime—built on disguise, role-play, and the joyful artifice of performance.

Historically, theatre has let us watch gender being performed while strictly policing who holds the microphone of authority. In traditional pantomime, the "Dame" often played by a man, exposes the rules of society but rarely gets to change them. We laugh at the performance, reinforcing the hierarchy that makes the joke possible. Our production asks a simple, subversive question: What happens when the bodies who have historically been the punchline become the authors of the joke? By letting our casting obey the text rather than tradition, we invite women, queer performers, and marginalized voices to embody power and moral judgment. My hope is that we stop laughing at difference and start laughing at the absurd system that demands such differences exist in the first place.

This reveals that Wilde was, in essence, ahead of his time. His comedy isn't about preserving manners; it's about the absurdity of the binary. Victorian society demanded fixed gender, fixed morality, and fixed class. Wilde dismantled all three through "Bunburying." In our staging, identity is not an innate truth but a costume. Jack and Algernon don't just pretend to be "Ernest"; they reveal that everyone is pretending. The only character who lives honestly from the start is the servant, Lane, whose constraint is economic, not moral. In our production, Lane is given a voice through song, highlighting the tragedy of someone who knows who they are but is barred by class from living that truth. The music underscores the central tension: while the aristocrats play at being someone else, the working class is forced to remain someone they are not.

Visually, this philosophy lives in our set. We have traded the static realism of the drawing room for a revolving platform—a platter serving up the story. As the stage rotates, it reminds us that perspective is never static; it shifts and demands fresh interpretation. The materials echo the friction between tradition and innovation, while a palette of bright, saturated colours against a restrained backdrop mirrors the play's conflict: control versus freedom, structure versus disorder. The set is not a backdrop; it is a participant, a physical manifestation of the idea that our world is a construct that can be spun to reveal new angles.

In this production, we are not replacing heritage with modernity; we are revealing that Wilde's heritage was modernity. He understood that identity is a performance, morality is a costume, and the only way to live honestly is to embrace the artifice of existence. This is not a relic to be admired from a distance. It is a living rebellion, a celebration of wit as a weapon, and a reminder that in a world of rigid categories, the most revolutionary act is to simply be yourself—even if that means pretending to be someone else.

None of this would be possible without the tireless efforts of so many. My deepest gratitude goes to my incredible cast and creative team, whose work is evident and glorious in every moment on stage. But I must also thank the unseen forces who make it all happen: the workshop and production crews, and every single person at State Theatre Company. There is a chorus of brilliant and committed individuals sitting behind this production whom you will likely never meet, yet they are the foundation of everything we do. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.



AN INTERVIEW WITH PETRA KALIVE

Petra Kalive. Photo Matt Byrne



WATCH THIS



QUESTIONS ASKED INCLUDE:

The play is a comment on the class system of Victorian England — how do you hope the characters of Gwendolen and Cecily are presented, given Wilde has written them as very strong, witty and determined women?

Can you talk to the gender casting in the play and why this is important?

<https://youtu.be/mUqWsj0DTbE>

PETRA KALVE NOTES: THE STAGING OF THE PRODUCTION

Through clever dialogue, paradoxes, and farcical situations, Wilde critiques the superficiality of social conventions, the rigidity of class expectations, and the absurdity of placing too much weight on names and appearances.

Ultimately, the play celebrates wit, individuality, and the freedom to live honestly — ironically, by pretending to be someone else. It's a very elegantly written pantomime. And I use the word pantomime very deliberately.

So there are a few reasons why I think *Earnest* is a great play to be doing now.

Wilde is writing a comedy of performed identity, social disguise, ritualised audience expectation — there's a contract with the audience about what is "real".

Productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest* often flirt around the edges of transgression but the play stays within its traditional hierarchy. Historically, theatre has allowed audiences to watch gender being performed while restricting *who* gets to perform power. For example Pantomime lets men play women — but rarely lets women or queer bodies hold comic authority. And we can see this in Wilde, time and time again Lady Bracknell has been played by a man. So we laugh at and not with.

We are celebrating mistaken identity through:

- performance of gender
- exaggerated social archetypes
- wit as social rebellion

When Victorian society demanded

- fixed gender
- fixed morality
- fixed class identity

Wilde dismantles all three through *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Our casting and design speaks to the original provocation: that identity and the binary is something society insists is natural but is actually staged.

We stage the play as a social game the audience recognises they are part of. In traditional pantomime the dame exposes the rules but cannot change them, whereas in this production we wish to acknowledge that the whole society is the dame.

Authority itself becomes the costume.

We are not replacing heritage with modernity or wokeness.

We are revealing that Wilde's heritage was modernity — he was 'woke' before his time.

Rather than imposing contemporary politics onto a classic, the production uncovers the play's original radicalism — a comedy written by a queer artist about a society obsessed with categorisation.

By diversifying the bodies performing social power, the audience no longer laughs at difference — they laugh at the system that produces difference.



DRAMATIC NOTES/STYLES

COMEDY OF MANNERS

- Is specifically dedicated to commenting on social behaviour.

Comedy of manners fundamentally discusses the division of class and often characterises the wealthy in a satirical fashion. This type of comedy has been used for centuries by Latin authors and was made most-popular in the early 1800's. Prolific writers such as William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde were known for this witty style of writing.

"These comedies often targeted the sophisticated and complex code of conduct in the society which gave more importance to the appearance and outward behaviour rather than true moral characteristics"

- from *Comedy of Manners* by David L. Hirst

SATIRE

- is a style of comedy that gently pokes at or makes fun of an idea.

Satire uses irony and sarcasm, often to make a political comment. In the instance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde uses satire to comment on social hypocrisy and marital expectations. Satirical writing was particularly popular during the Victorian era.

FARCE

Similar to Satire, Farce is a style of comedy that uses irony and exaggeration. The difference is that Farce isn't making a political statement and instead intends to make people laugh for the sake of it.

"A farce is a work "which has for its sole object to excite laughter" especially one which uses exaggerated, absurd, and improbable situations"

- by Gareth Rees

FORESHADOWING

Foreshadowing is bringing in plot points, ideas, text or objects whose existence signals to the audience that they will come up again. There are several instances in the play where foreshadowing occurs that play an important role in developing the plot.

The fact that Jack was adopted as a baby, for instance, predates a recognition scene in which Jack's true identity is revealed and the plot is resolved by means of some incredible coincidence. Miss Prism's "three-volume novel" is another example: Her very mention of it ensures that it will be important later. An instance of foreshadowing that operates in the more usual way is Jack's assertion that Cecily and Gwendolen will be "calling each other sister" within half an hour of having met, followed by Algernon's that "women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first." This is literally what happens between Cecily and Gwendolen in Act 2.



WHAT NEXT?

These can be used for individual reflection or as class exercises.

Discuss how Wilde has used humour to comment on the social classes in England.

What is Wilde saying with the alternate identity of Ernest?

Why was satire such a popular form in the 1880's? What did it enable a playwright to do?

SCRIPT EXCERPT

ALGERNON. Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK. That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON. Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none.

ALGERNON. [The sound of an electric bell is heard.] Ah! that must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner. Now, if I get her out of the way for ten minutes, so that you can have an opportunity for proposing to Gwendolen, may I dine with you to-night at Willis's?

JACK. I suppose so, if you want to.

ALGERNON. Yes, but you must be serious about it. I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.



Anna Lindner in rehearsal. Photo Matt Byrne

THE CAST Q&A



The cast of *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Photo: Marnya Rothe

WATCH THIS

Nathan O’Keefe, Anna Lindner, Glenda Linscott, Connor Pullinger, Pia Gillings, Caroline Mignone and Carla Lippis answered questions about their roles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

CONNOR AND PIA



<https://youtu.be/IOe7IDHgTes>

TEDDY AND ANNA



<https://youtu.be/-Vn4Ptzwit4>

NATHAN AND CAROLINE



<https://youtu.be/Bgb4frw6QgA>

GLENDA AND CARLA



<https://youtu.be/goRJEw2UMFw>



Connor Pullinger in rehearsal: Photo by Matt Byrne

SCRIPT EXCERPT

JACK. Good morning! [Algernon, from the other room, strikes up the Wedding March. Jack looks perfectly furious, and goes to the door.] For goodness' sake don't play that ghastly tune, Algy. How idiotic you are!
[The music stops and Algernon enters cheerily.]

ALGERNON. You don't mean to say Gwendolen refused you? I know it is a way she has. She is always refusing people. I think it is most ill-natured of her.

JACK. Oh, Gwendolen is as right as a trivet. As far as she is concerned, we are engaged. Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon . . . I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one.. I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn't talk about your own aunt in that way before you.

ALGERNON. My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all.

JACK. . . . [A pause.] You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

ALGERNON. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his. Did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK. [In a very patronising manner.] My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

CHARACTERS/ROLES

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Algernon (Algy) is a charming and eccentric bachelor who indulges in the finest of things. Born into wealth, Algernon has lived a privileged life and prioritises materialism and muffins. He does, however, occasionally travel to the countryside to visit his invalid friend "bunbury" in an effort to escape his social obligations. Algernon is confident, clever if not a little arrogant. He keeps an eye on his little cousin Gwendolyn who is set on marrying his best friend Jack... who at the time is known as Ernest. Algernon's curiosity has a slight tendency to be unhelpful to Jack in order to fulfill his own needs.

JACK - JOHN (JACK) WORTHING, J.P. (A.K.A. ERNEST)

Jack also known as John, also known as Ernest, is a young, naive and romantic young man. He attempts to navigate the world of high-society as his alter-ego Ernest. Jack does so with success until Algernon blows his cover. He then has to decide if telling the truth is valuable to him. Jack is desperate to marry Gwendolyn for love and is faced with scepticism and prejudice. Whilst Jack continues to care for Gwendolyn, he battles to keep up with his obligations in the country. Jack wears his heart on his sleeve and attempts to remain optimistic. He is challenged by identity, class divide and guardian responsibility.

LANE AND MERRIMAN

Lane is Algernon's butler and serves as a portal between the audience and high society. Lane is smart and understands the wealthy despite being on 'the outside'. Merriman is Jack's butler in the country and, like Lane, acts as a gateway into the lives of the more privileged. Together, Lane and Merriman encourage us to consider the layers of privilege and class deeply rooted throughout history. Lane and Merriman are the only 'truthful' characters within the play.

GWENDOLYN FAIRFAX

Gwendolen is self-assured, opinionated and sophisticated. The daughter of wealthy parents and the cousin of Algernon. Her privileged life allows her to see no boundary and acquire anything she wants, almost. She desperately wishes to marry someone of the name of Ernest. This desire overrides all other aspects of a 'respectable marriage'. Despite the role of women at the time, Gwendolen is quite determined and driven in her wants. She is challenged by Lady Bracknell's desire to ensure the 'appropriate marriage'.

CECILY GARDEW

Cecily is Jack's ward in the country and unaware of her Uncle Jack's double life. She is just 18, sweet, imaginative and a romantic. Cecily has an affinity for her diary in which she has written almost everything about everyday of her life, including her engagement with 'Ernest'. She hopes to have it published. She can be a little vain and enjoys being acknowledged by others. Cecily is bored with her studies and is preoccupied with her love for Algernon as Ernest.

MISS PRISM

Miss Prism is Cecily's governess and is responsible for her well-being whilst Jack is in town. She has the most rigid perspective and approach to life. She spends her days attempting to educate Cecily in various subjects including German studies and molding her into a respectable young lady. Some days, she does so with little success. Despite these rigid rules Miss Prism herself takes a fancy to Reverend Canon Chasuble. Their connection is sweet, longing and nervous. Her reveal in the play highlights that she is just as fallible as all other characters.

REVEREND CANON CHASUBLE

Rev Chasuble is the local priest and is bound by religious values. He sits outside the upper class however due to his profession is very much considered respectable and honourable. It is his position that affords him access into society. He has found companionship in Miss Prism and seeks out ways to engage with her. Rev Chasauble is gentle and authentically himself, often providing comedic relief. There is a romantic tension between Rev Chasuble and Miss Prism that remains under the surface.

LADY BRACKNELL

Lady Bracknell is strong-willed, conservative and blunt. She fiercely upholds tradition and is controlled by societal standards. In many ways, she is quite judgemental of others in the name of elitism, but is also a victim of it herself. Whilst she can be perceived as intense, there is something enjoyable about her candour. Lady Bracknell acts as the all powerful chaperone for her daughter Gwendolen and closes the door on any unsuitable bachelors, including Jack as Ernest. She sees it as her duty to ensure Gwendolen is provided for adequately.

She is called Aunt Augusta by her nephew, Algernon.



WHAT NEXT?

Are the characters consistent in their actions and what they want?

What is the role of the women in the play? How important are mothers and why?

Compare the characters of Algernon and Jack. Think of the deceptions they make - why do you think this is? What do their characters want?

What kind of people are Miss Prism and Rev Chasuble? What is their function in the play?

Teddy Dunn and Anna Lindner
Photo: Marnya Rothe



SCRIPT EXCERPT

ALGERNON. I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. [Opens case and examines it.] However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK. Of course it's mine. You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

ALGERNON. Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK. I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON. Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know any one of that name.

JACK. Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON. Your aunt!

JACK. Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON. But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? [Reading.] 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK. My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. [Follows Algernon round the room.]

ALGERNON. Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK. It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON. You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. [Taking it from case.] 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.' I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else. [Puts the card in his pocket.]

JACK. Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

KATHRYN SPROUL
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

We are working to be transgressive but joyous, asserting possibility whilst acknowledging that the play is created within structures that inhibit the true selves of the characters.

Act 1, is set in the city, in Algernon's living room, it echoes the structures that inhibit society. The design is saturated with colour, it is a very elegant space which highlights the Victorian era and confines our characters. The design aims to reflect these themes of Victorian society while suggesting their relevance today, encouraging us to question them and ultimately embrace our true selves..

The set is built on and around a revolve. This allows us to move from the city to the country. From inside to outside, from restriction to the idea of more freedom. The world of the country showcases Cecily, the world of light, and possibility and freedom. There is a youthful energy in Act 2 through Cecily.



Set Model for The Importance of Being Earnest by Kathryn Sproul



Set model: Kathryn Sproul

DESIGN NOTES FROM PETRA KALIVE

The set design that Kathryn Sproul and I have been working on is a platter that we serve the story on.

A literal revolve that serves up each Act – which at once looks familiar – but on closer inspection feel more vivid and very playful. As the platform spins, it reminds us that perspective is never static; it shifts, it evolves, and it invites fresh interpretation. The materials we've chosen—echo the tension between tradition and innovation, between the familiar comforts of the past and the bold possibilities of the future. The colours, bright and saturated against a more restrained backdrop,

We explore the tension of the limited binary in this design, control vs freedom, organic vs man-made, structure and disorder, nature vs nurture. All playful and all with the hope that the design and interpretation of the work treats Wilde's masterpiece as a sophisticated pantomime about the performance of identity and explores the original subversion. And in that way I hope it continues not just to be a great classic, but a work on living rebellion.



WHAT NEXT?

Present your own design concept re-designing in a contemporary setting. What choices could you make to create the different locations?

How essential is the setting? Could the play have taken place anywhere else? Where and why?

Does the set incorporate the themes through its' design? Where and how?



Quetzal Bird



LADY BRACKN
ACT ONE, TWO & THREE
Glenda Linscott

STCSA 2026
© KATHY SIKOL





Rose Robin



CECILY
ACT TWO & THREE
Pia Gillings

STCSA 2026
© KATHYIN SPEAR



JACK
ACT ONE
Teddy Dunn
DICKA DALL
© KATHRYN SPROUL



Image: BIRDHOUSE BART

GWENDOLEN
ACT ONE, TWO & THREE
Conce. Poiryge.
DICKA DALL
© KATHRYN SPROUL

MISS PRISM
ACT TWO & THREE
Nathan O'Keefe
DICKA DALL
© KATHRYN SPROUL



Booby Bird



Booby Bird



LANE
ACT ONE
Carla Lippis

STCFA 2026
© KATHRYN SPROUL



MERRIMAN
ACT TWO & THREE
Carla Lippis

STCFA 2026
© KATHRYN SPROUL

SCRIPT EXCERPT

CECILY. [Smiling.] But I see dear Dr. Chasuble coming up through the garden.

MISS PRISM. [Rising and advancing.] Dr. Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.
[Enter Canon Chasuble.]

CHASUBLE. And how are we this morning? Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well?

CECILY. Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr. Chasuble.

MISS PRISM. Cecily, I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

CECILY. No, dear Miss Prism, I know that, but I felt instinctively that you had a headache. Indeed, I was thinking about that, and not about my German lesson, when the Rector came in.

CHASUBLE. I hope, Cecily, you are not inattentive.

CECILY. Oh, I am afraid I am.

CHASUBLE. That is strange. Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips. [Miss Prism glares.] I spoke metaphorically.—My metaphor was drawn from bees. Ahem! Mr. Worthing, I suppose, has not returned from town yet?

MISS PRISM. We do not expect him till Monday afternoon.

CHASUBLE. Ah yes, he usually likes to spend his Sunday in London. He is not one of those whose sole aim is enjoyment, as, by all accounts, that unfortunate young man his brother seems to be. But I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer.

MISS PRISM. Egeria? My name is Lætitia, Doctor.

CHASUBLE. [Bowing.] A classical allusion merely, drawn from the Pagan authors. I shall see you both no doubt at Evensong?

MISS PRISM. I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all, and a walk might do it good.

CHASUBLE. With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure. We might go as far as the schools and back.

MISS PRISM. That would be delightful. Cecily, you will read your Political Economy in my absence. The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational. Even these metallic problems have their melodramatic side.
[Goes down the garden with Dr. Chasuble.]

CECILY. [Picks up books and throws them back on table.] Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German!

THEMES & CONCEPTS

IN THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST BY OSGAR WILDE

EARNESTNESS

Definition of Earnest:

1. *serious in intention, purpose or effort, sincerely zealous. An earnest worker.*
2. *showing depth and sincerity of feeling*

Victorian society placed a high value on duty and respectability, with “earnestness”—the quality of being serious and morally upright—at the centre of its code of conduct. **The Importance of Being Earnest** is therefore more than a simple play on words. Wilde’s pun on “Ernest” and “earnest” reflects and satirises these social expectations, creating a paradox: a man who is “Ernest” in name but not truly earnest in character.

The concept of earnestness in the play carries layered meanings, pointing to both false sincerity and performed morality. Wilde is implying that in Victorian society “earnestness” often presents as dullness, rigidity, pomposity, complacency, and self-righteousness—qualities associated with the upper classes. It is precisely this suffocating expectation of propriety that drives both Algernon and Jack to invent alter egos, which allows them to escape the constraints of social respectability, even momentarily.

Gwendolen’s fixation on the name “Ernest” exposes the superficiality of these values. She is less concerned with genuine sincerity than with the appearance of it, prioritising the name over the character of the man. Even when Jack’s deception is revealed, she readily forgives him, and in a final twist of irony, he ultimately becomes both “Ernest” and, at least nominally, “earnest.”

WHAT NEXT?

Describe how Wilde presents his views on marriage throughout the play.

What attitudes of Lady Bracknell highlight the theme of ‘appearance’?

Explain the pun of the title. Who is being ‘Earnest’ in this play? Do Gwendolen and Cecily prefer having husbands named Ernest to having earnest husbands?

APPEARANCES

‘In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.’ appearance versus reality.

Victorian society placed great importance on appearance, placing value on style over substance. Wilde questions whether more serious moral concerns are overshadowed by preoccupations with image and social appearances. Algernon is very much concerned with maintaining appearances, he dresses with care, pursues pleasure, travels to the country - is devoted to pleasure over duty.

Gwendolen, who lives in the city, values appearance greatly as well. Her obsession with the name Ernest

“My ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.”

Her attraction is not based on character, but on her love of the name.

Style and manners are also commented on throughout the play. Cecily, for example, disapproves of Jack’s clothing, insisting he change his ‘horrid clothes.’ The scene between Gwendolen and Cecily provides an excellent example of the importance of manners as a facade. Beneath their polite exchange there is clear hostility, as both believe themselves engaged to the same man. When Gwendolen requests no sugar, Cecily adds four lumps, when she asks for bread and butter she is given a large slice of cake.

Lady Bracknell further reinforces these values through her focus on wealth, status, and physical presentation. She approves of Cecily primarily because of her inheritance, and even critiques her profile, suggesting that “style largely depends on the way the chin is worn.” This absurd attention to appearance highlights the superficial priorities of the upper class.

Finally, Jack’s reaction to the possibility that Miss Prism might be his mother reflects the stigma attached to social impropriety. His initial willingness to “forgive” her for being unmarried underscores the importance placed on respectability, and his relief when she is not his mother reveals how deeply these social expectations are internalised.

Overall, Wilde uses humour and exaggeration to expose a society in which appearances are carefully constructed and maintained, often at the expense of sincerity and truth.

SCRIPT EXCERPT

- GWENDOLEN. The fact that they did not follow us at once into the house, as any one else would have done, seems to me to show that they have some sense of shame left.
- CECILY. They have been eating muffins. That looks like repentance.
- GWENDOLEN. [After a pause.] They don't seem to notice us at all. Couldn't you cough?
- CECILY. But I haven't got a cough.
- GWENDOLEN. They're looking at us. What effrontery!
- CECILY. They're approaching. That's very forward of them.
- GWENDOLEN. Let us preserve a dignified silence.
- CECILY. Certainly. It's the only thing to do now. [Enter Jack followed by Algernon. They whistle some dreadful popular air from a British Opera.]
- GWENDOLEN. This dignified silence seems to produce an unpleasant effect.
- CECILY. A most distasteful one.
- GWENDOLEN. But we will not be the first to speak.
- CECILY. Certainly not.
- GWENDOLEN. Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.
- CECILY. Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian's brother?
- ALGERNON. In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.
- CECILY. [To Gwendolen.] That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?
- GWENDOLEN. Yes, dear, if you can believe him.
- CECILY. I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.
- GWENDOLEN. True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing. Mr. Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see me as often as possible?
- JACK. Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?
- GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. [Moving to Cecily.] Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. Do you think we should forgive them?

CECILY. Yes. I mean no.

GWENDOLEN. True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

CECILY. Could we not both speak at the same time?

GWENDOLEN. An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people. Will you take the time from me?

CECILY. Certainly. [Gwendolen beats time with uplifted finger.]

GWENDOLEN and CECILY Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

JACK and ALGERNON Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.



Top: Pia Gillings and Anna Lindner in rehearsal

Bottom: Rehearsal, Petra Kalive and cast

Photo: Matt Byrne

INTERESTING INFORMATION

OSGAR WILDE'S HOMOSEXUALITY

The debut of **The Importance of Being Earnest** on 14 February 1895 marked his greatest stage triumph. However, it also led to a nightmarish descent into disrepute and public scorn. The father of Alfred Douglas, the Marquess of Queensbury, outraged by his son's relationship with Wilde, went to the theatre on opening night. Denied entrance, he left a bouquet of vegetables and followed this with an insulting card. Wilde decided to sue the Marquess for libel, but when his own homosexuality came under scrutiny he was arrested and charged for committing indecent acts. (As homosexuality was illegal in England at the time). He was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour, the harshest sentence allowed. Prison broke his spirit and his health. His wife sought a legal separation, his friends deserted him and the press vilified his name. After his release in 1898 he settled in France where he died from cerebral meningitis.

AESTHETICS: BEAUTY IN EARNEST

Aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty, art, and taste, shaped Oscar Wilde's thinking during his time at Oxford and is central to **The Importance of Being Earnest**. Wilde expresses these ideas through characters like Algernon Moncrieff, who embodies the aesthete and the dandy—valuing beauty not only in dress but in lifestyle, from refined fashion to indulgent dining.

Wilde himself was the era's most famous dandy, and Algernon reflects this influence. Unlike other characters, Algernon is not presented as moral or immoral; he pursues pleasure, charm, and wit without ethical concern. His "Bunburyism" allows him to escape social duties and live purely for enjoyment and beauty.

In contrast, Jack Worthing represents the respectable Victorian gentleman. However, his invented alter ego, "Ernest," reveals the hypocrisy beneath rigid moral standards. Wilde suggests that strict morality is restrictive and even unhealthy, as Jack must fabricate a double life to cope with societal expectations.

Through Algernon's wit and observations, Wilde exposes the absurdity of Victorian values. Aesthetics, in the play, becomes more than an appreciation of beauty—it is a tool to critique a society obsessed with appearance and moral "earnestness," ultimately presenting it as fundamentally ridiculous.



Carla Lippis in rehearsal

Photo: Matt Byrne

ETIQUETTE

Proper etiquette was of utmost importance to the upper classes in Victorian England. Abiding by appropriate etiquette was an essential aspect of class membership and brought respect to yourself and your family name. Etiquette is a set of social customs to enforce politeness and upright social standing with each class having defined social etiquettes. There were also different expectations for men and women.

GENTLEMEN:

Always

- Wears gloves on the street, in church & at other formal occasions
- Stands up when a lady enters a room
- Offers a lady his seat if no others are available
- Assists a lady with her chair when she sits down or stands
- Retrieves dropped items for a lady
- Opens doors for a lady
- Helps a lady with her coat, cloak, shawl, etc.
- Offers to bring a lady refreshments
- Offers his arm to escort a lady
- Removes his hat when entering a building
- Lifts his hat to a lady when she greets him in public

Never

- Refers to another person by their first name in public
- Curses or discusses "impolite" subjects when ladies are present
- Leaves a lady unattended
- Uses tobacco when ladies are present
- Greets a lady in public unless she acknowledges him first
- Eats or drink while wearing gloves

LADIES

Always

- Graciously accept gentlemanly offers of assistance
- Wears gloves on the street, at church & other formal occasions, except when eating or drinking
- Shakes hands with another woman

Never

- Refers to another adult by his or her first name in public
- Grabs her skirts higher than is absolutely necessary to go up stairs
- Adjusts hair or make-up in public
- Sits with her legs crossed (except at the ankles if necessary for comfort or habit)
- Speaks in a loud, coarse voice
- Kisses or embraces in public
- Walks alone
- Accompanies a gentleman alone without her mother's permission
- Rides in a closed carriage with a man who is not her father, guardian, husband, family member or her betrothed.



FOOD & EATING

Food and eating appears throughout the play and almost always causes conflict. On one hand, jokes about food provide low level comedy, on another level food and gluttony could be seen as a substitute for sexual repression.

Act I contains the cucumber sandwiches. Algernon eats all the sandwiches specially made for Lady Bracknell's visit. Jack comments on Algernon's eating of the sandwiches and is offered bread and butter only. He devours these in a manner that suggests an appetite unfulfilled. Algernon says, "You need not eat as if you were going to eat it all." When Lady Bracknell appears and asks for her cucumber sandwiches Algernon covers his tracks by exclaiming that there were no cucumbers at the market for "ready money" - a reference to the fact that most upper classes rarely traded on actual cash.

In Act II Gwendolen and Cecily spat over 'tea.' In this undertone of jealousy and societal standing Gwendolen tells Cecily, sugar "is not fashionable anymore" and "cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays." Cecily responds by filling Gwendolen's tea with sugar and her plate with cake, which makes Gwendolen even angrier.

Jack: "How can you sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble? You seem to me to be perfectly heartless."

Algernon: "Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The butter would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them."

Jack: "I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances."

Algernon: "When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me. Indeed, when I am in really great trouble, as any one who knows me intimately will tell you, I refuse everything except food and drink. At the present moment I am eating muffins because I am unhappy. Besides, I am particularly fond of muffins."

Jack: "Well, there is no reason why you should eat them all in that greedy way."



SCRIPT EXCERPT

LADYBRACKNELL. [Sitting down again.] A moment, Mr. Worthing. A hundred and thirty thousand pounds! And in the Funds! Miss Cardew seems to me a most attractive young lady, now that I look at her. Few girls of the present day have any really solid qualities, any of the qualities that last, and improve with time. We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces. [To Cecily.] Come over here, dear. [Cecily goes across.] Pretty child! your dress is sadly simple, and your hair seems almost as Nature might have left it. But we can soon alter all that. Kindly turn round, sweet child. [Cecily turns completely round.] No, the side view is what I want. [Cecily presents her profile.] Yes, quite as I expected. There are distinct social possibilities in your profile. The two weak points in our age are its want of principle and its want of profile. The chin a little higher, dear. Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present. Algernon!

ALGERNON. Yes, Aunt Augusta!

LADYBRACKNELL. There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile.

ALGERNON. Cecily is the sweetest, dearest, prettiest girl in the whole world. And I don't care twopence about social possibilities.

LADYBRACKNELL. Never speak disrespectfully of Society, Algernon. Only people who can't get into it do that. [To Cecily.] Dear child, of course you know that Algernon has nothing but his debts to depend upon. But I do not approve of mercenary marriages. When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way. Well, I suppose I must give my consent.

ALGERNON. Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADYBRACKNELL. Cecily, you may kiss me!

CECILY. [Kisses her.] Thank you, Lady Bracknell.

LADYBRACKNELL. You may also address me as Aunt Augusta for the future.

CECILY. Thank you, Aunt Augusta.

LADYBRACKNELL. To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think had better take place quite soon.

JACK. I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give.

LADYBRACKNELL. Upon what grounds may I ask? Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say an ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?

JACK. It pains me very much to have to speak frankly to you, Lady Bracknell, about your nephew, but the fact is that I do not approve at all of his moral character. I suspect him of

being untruthful. [Algernon and Cecily look at him in indignant amazement.]

LADYBRACKNELL. Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian.

JACK. I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. This afternoon during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house by means of the false pretence of being my brother. Under an assumed name he drank, I've just been informed by my butler, an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89; wine I was specially reserving for myself. Continuing his disgraceful deception, he succeeded in the course of the afternoon in alienating the affections of my only ward. He subsequently stayed to tea, and devoured every single muffin. And what makes his conduct all the more heartless is, that he was perfectly well aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind. I distinctly told him so myself yesterday afternoon.

LADYBRACKNELL. Ahem! Mr. Worthing, after careful consideration I have decided entirely to overlook my nephew's conduct to you.

JACK. That is very generous of you, Lady Bracknell. My own decision, however, is unalterable. I decline to give my consent.



FURTHER ACTIVITIES

WRITTEN RESPONSE

The play is set in the late 1800's, early 1900's, how different would the play be in a contemporary setting? Are there people in contemporary society who you feel are hiding part of themselves away? Why might they do this?

DISCUSSION & WRITTEN ACTIVITY

Wilde's writing often references the two sides of a character, a socially accepted side and the secret concealed side. Discuss the common elements between Wilde's characters in the play with regard to this aspect and discuss why he felt the need to do this.

How do we adopt alter egos today? Has the world of social media allowed us to find ways to hide our true selves? Discuss.



Pia Gillings, Connor Pullinger, Anna Lindner and Carla Lippis in rehearsal: Photo Matt Byrne



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