

Theatre Education Pack

The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde

Production Dates: 7 October to 4 November 2023

Venue: Circa Theatre, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington

NOTE: This is the first, accessible version of this theatre education pack. The final version, which includes images and creative input, will be available shortly after the production premieres and freely available at circa.co.nz.

Contents

Contents

Introduction

Synopsis of the Play

About the Playwright: Oscar Wilde

 Biography

 Significant Works

 Writing Style and Literary Contributions

Historical & Social Context

 Victorian Morality and Social Rigidity

 Wilde's Satirical Lens on Victorian Society

Characters & Relationships

 John "Jack" Worthing, J.P.

 Algernon Moncrieff

 Gwendolen Fairfax

 Cecily Cardew

 Lady Bracknell

 Miss Prism

 Reverend Chasuble, D.D.

 Relationship Matrix

Key Themes & Symbols

Design Elements

Activities & Discussion Questions

 Pre-Show Activities

 Post-Show Discussion Questions

Further Reading & Resources

Books
Articles
Multimedia
Credits
Production Team
Cast

Introduction

Nau mai, haere mai.

You're about to dive into Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' a play that, despite being penned over a century ago, still resonates with audiences today. This isn't just another old drama; it's a sharp-witted satire that challenges societal norms, making us question our own values and conventions.

Set in the intricacies of Victorian society, Wilde crafts a narrative that cleverly interweaves humour with potent commentary. As you venture through this play, you'll recognise it's not merely about characters tangled in their own webs, but a broader reflection on identity, society, and the personas we sometimes feel compelled to adopt.

Our production at Circa Theatre, under the direction of Jonathan Price, aims to bring this classic to life in a way that's both authentic to Wilde's era and relevant to ours.

This Education Pack is here to enhance your experience. Dive into the background, understand the motivations of the characters, and gain insights into the societal critiques Wilde masterfully embeds. Whether you're looking to deepen your understanding or fuel a discussion, this guide is your resource.

Synopsis of the Play

In Oscar Wilde's comedic masterpiece, 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' deception and wit are the order of the day.

The story kicks off in London with the charming Algernon Moncrieff, who uncovers a secret: his friend John Worthing leads a double life. In the country, he is the responsible John, guardian to Cecily Cardew. But in the city, he becomes "Ernest," living out adventures and romancing Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen. Gwendolen, funnily enough, claims she could only love a man named "Ernest." A name, it seems, is crucial in the business of love.

In a parallel deception, Algernon has an imaginary sick friend named "Bunbury," an excuse to escape tedious social obligations. Intrigued by John's tales of his ward Cecily, Algernon visits the countryside, posing as the rogue "Ernest." Instantly smitten, Cecily and "Ernest" (Algernon) become engaged.

The play teems with mistaken identities when both women believe they're engaged to "Ernest." The comedy reaches its peak when both men decide to get christened as "Ernest" to win their respective beloveds. But with the formidable Lady Bracknell on the scene, revelations come forth: John's mysterious origins involving a handbag, familial ties, and more.

Wilde's wit culminates as identities are untangled, lovers are united, and the importance of being "Ernest" (earnest) is both celebrated and satirised. The play, while a frolic through high society's foibles, also uncovers the masks we wear in the name of love and societal convention.

About the Playwright: Oscar Wilde

Biography

Born on October 16, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was a beacon of wit and flamboyance during the late 19th century. Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and later at Magdalen College, Oxford, Wilde was an outstanding classicist. At Oxford, he was deeply influenced by the aesthetic movement and embraced its mantra of "art for art's sake." Wilde's life, however, wasn't just a quiet journey of literary pursuits. His outspoken personality, coupled with a penchant for controversy, saw him celebrated as much as he was criticised. Wilde's personal life, especially his open homosexual relationships, became the subject of public scrutiny and legal penalties. In 1895, he was imprisoned for "gross indecency," serving two years of hard labour. This tragic chapter deeply impacted his health and spirit. Upon release, he lived in exile in France and published little new work. Wilde passed away in relative obscurity in Paris in 1900 at the age of 46.

Significant Works

- **'The Picture of Dorian Gray' (1890):** Wilde's only novel, it explores the themes of decadence, morality, and the nature of beauty in a society on the brink of the modern era.
- **'The Importance of Being Earnest' (1895):** Perhaps his most celebrated play, this work is a comedic satire of Victorian society, focusing on themes of identity, love, and the constraints of societal conventions.
- **'De Profundis' (1905):** Written during his imprisonment, it's a long letter to his former lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, reflecting on love, suffering, and spirituality.

- **'Salomé' (1893):** Originally written in French, this play is a retelling of the biblical story of Salome, blending religious themes with eroticism and decadence.

Writing Style and Literary Contributions

Oscar Wilde was renowned for his sharp wit, flamboyant style, and biting social commentary. His works often explored the dichotomy between one's public persona and inner self. He questioned societal norms, critiquing the hypocrisy and moral rigidity of Victorian society. As a proponent of the aesthetic movement, Wilde believed in the intrinsic value of art, divorced from any moral or utilitarian purpose. His plays, known for their sparkling dialogue, deftly used humour and satire to illuminate societal flaws. Wilde's literary legacy is vast. Beyond his plays and novel, he also contributed a myriad of poems, essays, and fairy tales. He is often credited with pioneering a new kind of comedy, the comedy of manners, and for his unique blend of profundity and levity. Above all, Wilde championed individualism and freedom in the face of societal constraints.

Historical & Social Context

The Victorian era, named after Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, was a time marked by rapid industrialization, urbanisation, and the expansion of the British Empire. But, while this period saw great advancements in science and culture, it was equally marked by rigid societal norms and conventions, many of which are satirised in Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest.'

Victorian Morality and Social Rigidity

- **Duty and Respectability:** Above all, the Victorians valued a sense of duty and respectability. There was an immense pressure to uphold one's family name, and any scandal was a source of deep shame.
- **Gender Roles and Marriage:** Women's roles were restricted mainly to the domestic sphere, with a strong emphasis on their roles as wives and mothers. Marriages were often less about romantic love and more about securing one's social and economic status. A woman's reputation was especially fragile and of utmost importance.
- **Class Distinctions:** The boundaries between the classes were distinct. The new industrial bourgeoisie might have been wealthy, but they lacked the aristocratic lineage, and moving between classes was fraught with challenges.

- **Superficial Virtues:** The Victorian public life demanded a strict adherence to manners and decorum. However, what went on behind closed doors often contradicted the public face of morality, leading to a society characterised by its dualities.

Wilde's Satirical Lens on Victorian Society

Oscar Wilde, with his sharp wit, keenly observed the hypocrisies of his society and laid them bare in his play.

- **Dual Lives:** The very premise of the play, with characters like John Worthing leading dual lives, mocks the dual nature of Victorian society - the divide between public virtue and private vice.
- **Marriage as a Social Tool:** Lady Bracknell's almost mechanical vetting process for a suitable husband for Gwendolen lays bare the utilitarian approach to marriage, devoid of genuine emotion.
- **Name and Status:** The fixation on the name "Ernest" by both Gwendolen and Cecily satirises the superficial attributes that Victorians might have used to judge character.
- **Aristocratic Indifference:** Through Algernon's nonchalant attitude, especially his creation of an imaginary friend "Bunbury" to escape social duties, Wilde lampoons the sometimes trivial and self-serving concerns of the upper class.
- **Scandal and Reputation:** The revelation of John's origins in a handbag and Lady Bracknell's horrified reaction is a comedic critique of the weight given to lineage and the fear of scandal in Victorian society.

Through 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' Wilde not only presents a hilarious comedy of manners but also offers biting commentary on the societal norms and conventions of his day. The play holds up a mirror to the Victorian society, revealing its quirks, contradictions, and, at times, utter absurdities.

Characters & Relationships

Meet the captivating personalities of Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' each a mirror reflecting the complexities of Victorian society.

John "Jack" Worthing, J.P.

Jack Worthing, in his countryside residence, is a guardian, a responsible figure, and a moral pillar. Yet, in the city, he dabbles in mischief under the guise of his invented brother, "Ernest." His double life is a secret escape from his responsibilities.

At the heart of the play's title, Jack's journey reflects the struggles of leading an earnest life in the face of societal pretensions. He deeply desires to be honest but finds himself entangled in his own web of lies, mainly for love and societal acceptance. The contrast between his country and city personas offers insight into the tensions of Victorian morality.

Algernon Moncrieff

A charming dandy, Algernon, or "Algy," is carefree, hedonistic, and lives for pleasure. Unlike Jack, Algernon openly acknowledges the necessity of "Bunburying" – leading a double life to escape societal obligations.

Algernon is almost the antithesis of Jack. His openly cynical views on marriage, love, and society reflect the inherent contradictions of the Victorian upper class. Through Algernon, Wilde humorously critiques the shallowness and superficiality of the elite.

Gwendolen Fairfax

Sophisticated, assertive, and cosmopolitan, Gwendolen is the embodiment of a modern Victorian woman in the city. She cherishes style over substance, evident in her fascination with the name "Ernest."

Gwendolen's character satirises the superficial qualities that the upper class valued. Despite her modern airs, she's bound by societal expectations, especially under her mother's influence. Her fixation on the name "Ernest" as a symbol of earnestness is ironically contrasted with her acceptance of Jack's deceit when the truth unravels.

Cecily Cardew

Young, fanciful, and sheltered, Cecily is an epitome of innocence and rural Victorian womanhood. Her diary, where she documents her fictional romance with "Ernest," reflects her longing for excitement.

Cecily's fantasies are a playful poke at the Victorian penchant for melodrama and romantic novels. Her interactions with Algernon, especially when their fiction becomes reality, showcase the collision between genuine innocence and cultivated pretence.

Lady Bracknell

A domineering matriarch, Lady Bracknell is the voice of Victorian societal norms and values. She's a formidable force, wielding her opinions with certainty and authority.

Through Lady Bracknell, Wilde exposes the rigid classism, materialism, and hypocrisy of the Victorian aristocracy. Her inquiries into Jack's suitability as a husband, based on lineage and wealth rather than character, and her views on

marriage as a societal duty rather than a romantic union, highlight the era's misplaced priorities.

Miss Prism

Cecily's governess, Miss Prism, is a seemingly prim and proper educator with a secret past. Her misplaced manuscript, which led to Jack being left at a train station as a baby, adds a layer of comedy to the plot. Her romance with Reverend Chasuble adds a subplot that gently mocks the subdued romances of the older generation.

Reverend Chasuble, D.D.

The local clergyman, Dr. Chasuble is a symbol of Victorian piety, yet he's not immune to the charms of romance, especially regarding Miss Prism. Dr. Chasuble's character, while mostly comedic, offers a gentle critique on the role of the church in Victorian society – pious on the surface but susceptible to human desires and hypocrisies.

Relationship Matrix

- **Jack:** Loves **Gwendolen**, guardians **Cecily**, and is friends with **Algernon**. He often finds himself clashing with **Lady Bracknell** due to his societal status and unknown lineage. He's unaware of the past mistake of **Miss Prism** that shapes his life.
- **Algernon:** Cousin to **Gwendolen**, he's intrigued by and later becomes engaged to **Cecily**. Often shares banter and wit with **Jack** and occasionally mocks his aunt, **Lady Bracknell**.
- **Gwendolen:** Engaged to **Jack** and looks up to her mother, **Lady Bracknell**, for guidance. Cousin to **Algernon** and initially rivals **Cecily** due to the "Ernest" confusion.
- **Cecily:** The ward of **Jack** and engaged to **Algernon**. She learns from **Miss Prism** and, despite initial tensions, forms a bond with **Gwendolen**.
- **Lady Bracknell:** Holds influence over **Gwendolen** and remains sceptical of **Jack**. Aunt to **Algernon** and an authoritative figure in all their lives.
- **Miss Prism:** Governess to **Cecily**, she shares a romantic subplot with **Dr. Chasuble** and harbours the secret of mistakenly abandoning baby **Jack**.
- **Reverend Chasuble:** Attracted to **Miss Prism**, he often provides comic relief in his interactions with her and offers religious counsel to characters like **Jack** and **Algernon**.

Key Themes & Symbols

- **Dual Lives and Deception:** The play's central theme revolves around the characters' double lives and their need for deception. John creates "Ernest" to break free from societal expectations and responsibilities in the country, while Algernon uses "Bunbury" to evade societal duties. Wilde uses this theme to shed light on the dualities and hypocrisies present in Victorian society.
- **The Superficial Nature of Society:** The characters often prioritise appearances and societal norms over genuine feelings and moral values. Lady Bracknell's emphasis on status and wealth, Gwendolen and Cecily's obsession with the name "Ernest", and Algernon's flippant view on important matters all highlight the superficial values of the upper class.
- **The Critique of Marriage:** Wilde critiques Victorian views on marriage, portraying it as a societal duty rather than a bond of love. Through characters like Lady Bracknell, who views marriage primarily as a means to uphold social status, Wilde exposes the societal reduction of marriage to a mere transaction.
- **The Irony of Earnestness:** The title itself plays with the word "earnest", juxtaposing the name "Ernest" with the notion of sincerity. As characters strive to be "Ernest", they ironically become less "earnest", revealing the discrepancies between names, titles, and true character.
- **The Name "Ernest":** Throughout the play, the name "Ernest" holds significant weight, symbolising both a literal identity and the broader idea of earnestness or sincerity. The play's conclusion, where John discovers his real name is indeed "Ernest", reinforces the blurred line between truth and fiction.
- **The Handbag:** The handbag in which John was found as a baby is a symbol of his uncertain origins. It's both a comedic element and a comment on the arbitrary nature of societal status. Despite the profound impact of lineage in determining one's position in Victorian society, the handbag humorously illustrates that origins can sometimes be quite trivial.
- **Food and Tea:** Throughout the play, scenes involving food, particularly muffins and tea, are used as comedic elements to highlight the characters' frivolity and trivial concerns. Algernon's indulgence in food, for instance, contrasts the more serious matters at hand, pointing to the superficial concerns of the elite.
- **The Diary:** Cecily's diary, where she documents her fictional romance, serves as a testament to the power of imagination and the human need for romantic

fantasy. It becomes a tangible record of the blurred lines between reality and fiction in the play.

Design Elements

NOTE: Input from designers available in the final version of this document.

Activities & Discussion Questions

Pre-Show Activities

- **Research Activity: Dive into Victorian etiquette.** Victorian society was characterised by strict codes of behaviour and manners. Research and document ten aspects of Victorian etiquette that surprise or intrigue you. How might they be relevant to the play you're about to see?
- **Creative Writing: Write a diary entry from Gwendolen's perspective.** Based on your understanding of Gwendolen's character from the play or its summaries, write a diary entry as if you were her. What are her daily thoughts? Concerns? Hopes? This will help immerse you into her world before watching the performance.
- **Costume Design: Victorian Fashion Sketch.** Explore the fashion of the Victorian era and design a costume that a character from the play might wear. Use online resources or library books to guide your designs.
- **Character Mapping: Understand the Relationships.** Using the list of characters from the play, create a relationship map. Who knows whom? What are their relationships? This will help in understanding the complexities of interactions once the play starts.

Post-Show Discussion Questions

Use these activities and questions as a starting point to dive deeper into Wilde's world and the intricacies of his social commentary. The goal is to spark curiosity and engagement with the text both before and after the performance.

1. **Discuss Wilde's critique of the Victorian upper class.**
How does Wilde satirise the mores and values of the upper class? What are the most biting moments of critique in the play?

2. How does the title play into the story's themes?

Considering the word "earnest" and its dual meaning – both as a name and as an adjective meaning sincere – how does the title reflect the play's exploration of identity and deception?

3. What are the roles of women as portrayed in the play?

How do characters like Gwendolen and Cecily challenge or conform to Victorian ideals of femininity? What does Wilde seem to be saying about women's roles and freedoms in society?

4. Explore the theme of 'dual lives'.

How do characters in the play lead double lives, and what does this duality say about the society they live in? Is Wilde suggesting that everyone has a public face and a private one?

5. Discuss the use of wit and humour in the play.

How does Wilde utilise humour to convey serious critiques of society? Can you recall moments in the play that made you laugh but also think deeply?

6. Consider the ending of the play.

Was it satisfying? What might Wilde be suggesting about the nature of love, relationships, and society with the play's resolution?

Further Reading & Resources

For a deep understanding of Wilde's work and its context, exploring these resources can provide deeper insights into 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and the era it depicts.

Books

- Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. This biography offers a thorough examination of the life, works, and controversies associated with Wilde. Ellmann provides a vivid portrayal of Wilde's world and the intricacies of his life.
- Flanders, Judith. *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London*. An in-depth exploration of Victorian London, this book offers insights into the daily routines, habits, and struggles of its inhabitants.
- Goodman, Ruth. *How to Be a Victorian: A Dawn-to-Dusk Guide to Victorian Life*. This guide comprehensively details the everyday customs of Victorian life, spanning topics from attire to etiquette.

Articles

- DeOrnellis, D. (2019). When Life Imitates Art: Aestheticism in The Importance of Being Earnest. *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, 21, Article 6. Available from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol21/iss1/6>

Multimedia

- *Wilde* (1997). [Film]. Directed by B. Gilbert. Featuring Stephen Fry and Jude Law, this film offers a detailed exploration of the life, romances, and adversities faced by Oscar Wilde.
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002). [Film adaptation]. Directed by O. Parker. This adaptation brings Wilde's esteemed play to life, featuring a stellar cast.

Credits

Production Team

Director - **Jonathan Price**
 Producer - **Nathan Mudge**
 Production & Stage Manager - **Anna Barker**
 Production Designer - **Meg Rollandi**
 Lighting Designer - **Isadora Lao**
 Sound Designer - **Matt Asunder**
 Technical Operator - **Esteban Jaramillo**
 Assistant Stage Manager - **Kathy Keane**
 Set Constructor - **Joshua Bourdeau**
 Graphic Designer - **William Duignan**

Cast

John "Jack" Worthing, J.P. - **Andrew Paterson**
 Algernon Moncrieff - **Isobel Mackinnon**
 Gwendolen Fairfax - **Ryan Carter**
 Cecily Cardew - **Dawn Cheong**
 Lady Bracknell - **Irene Wood**
 Miss Prism - **Anne Chamberlain**
 Reverend Chasuble, D.D. - **Peter Hambleton**
 Lane / Merryman / Understudy - **Rebecca Parker**

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