

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST COMPANY
WOULD LIKE TO THANK THEIR FAMILY, FRIENDS,
COLLEAGUES, AND ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE
COMMUNITY, WHETHER EARNESTS OR BUNBURY,
FOR EVERYTHING THEY DID TO MAKE THIS
PERFORMANCE POSSIBLE. YOU KNOW WHO YOU
ARE.

*The soul is born old, but grows young. That is the comedy
of life. The body is born young and grows old.
That is life's tragedy.*

Bennington College
Drama Faculty and Staff

Kathleen Dimmick
Michael Giannitti
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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

BY OSCAR WILDE

FRIDAY, SATURDAY, SUNDAY, 11TH, 12TH, AND 13TH

LESTER MARTIN THEATRE

DIRECTED BY JEAN RANDICH



WHAT FICTION MEANS, OR, THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF BEING

OSCAR

Oscar Wilde dashed out a scenario of the play that would become *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a letter to George Alexander, the manager of the St. James Theatre, who had produced Wilde's first comedy, *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Wilde, who was supporting two households in addition to his extravagant lifestyle, was pressed for funds. He wished to provide a comedy for the States "of no serious interest," and sought to entice Alexander and secure a hefty advance in exchange for an "amusing thing with lots of fun." Anticipating that some might judge the play not serious enough, he offered to return the advance should Alexander deem the comedy too trivial. Thus, from the outset, financial exigency and art, reality and fiction, appear as an inextricable, comic duo.

The claims of Truth and Fiction dueling in Wilde's life as they do in his play. He survived by the art of self-invention. I know of no other comedy in which fiction itself, the willful perpetuation of fiction, is rewarded to the extent it is in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Consider how expert in fiction the dramatis personae are.

Algernon Montcreiff and John Worthing are both Bunburyists; they invent fictional others in order to shirk their societal obligations. Algernon has concocted the permanent invalid Bunbury, and Jack an unfortunate younger brother, Ernest. But the women exist in their own fictional worlds as well, and even go so far as to produce documents to verify this fictional reality. The duel of the scandalous diaries, in which Gwendolen and Cecily dispute who has the prior claim to the fictional Ernest, is the height of Wildean absurdity. The force of Fiction is so powerful it can topple the sanctity of the Church. Wilde parodies the sacrament of Baptism by rendering the ritual of christening as just another type of performance art, a convenient way of re-inventing oneself. You can be called Ernest even if you are not earnest. And as far as Gwendolen and Cecily are concerned, it is the name itself, and not what it signifies, that produces vibrations. The surface, the symbol, the look suffices. Seeming, not being, is everything. Lady Bracknell, who clawed her way up the rungs of the social register, is perfectly aware of this contradiction. "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?"

Ultimately, in a brilliant subversion of the classical *deus ex machina*, Wilde imagines that Miss Prism's momentary privileging of Fiction over Reality is the inciting act that drives the whole play. In a moment of mental abstraction, she had deposited her cherished three volume work of fiction in the perambulator and relegated the baby to the handbag, triggering the chain reaction that explodes in the final fireworks of the play.

But what subversive energy courses beneath this perfectly structured comedy? The Absolute Victory of Fiction over Truth? The Trouncing of the Serious by the Trivial? The Claims of Art besting Life? At the top of Act II, Miss Prism defends her novel's happy ending to her charge, Cecily, who finds happy endings depressing:

"The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."

The Persons Of The Play:

John Worthing
Algernon Moncreiff
Reverend Canon Chasuble
Merriman
Lane
Lady Bracknell
Gwendolen Fairfax
Cecily Cardew
Miss Prism
Lady Bracknell's Pet

Gabriel Meyers
Caleb Rupp
Tim Taft
Tom Shoemaker
Noel Kanalley
Mollie O. Remillard
Lauryn Starkie Kreuder
Raphaela Rose Primus
Molly Tarlov
Tigger

The Persons Of The Production

Director: Jean Randich
Assistant Director: Jes Condyles
Dramaturg: Katelyn Kierstead
Stage Manager: Anna Burnham
Assistant Stage Manager: Abby Geoghegan
Assistant Stage Manager: Rhea M. Riley
Set Designer: Sue Rees
Assistant Set Designer: Carly Whitaker
Costume Designer: Zoe Chevat
Costume Designer: Kirian Langseth-Schmidt
Costume Designer: Bryony Thompson
Lighting Designer: Angela Traficante
Hair/Makeup Designer: Emily Tareila
Technical Director: Mike Rancourt
Costume/Pattern Construction: Terry Teitelbaum
Master Electrician: Frank LaFrazia
Sound Coordinator: Travis Garrison

The Persons Behind The Scene

Light Board Operator: Jes Condyles
Sound Board Operator: Rachel Healey
Stagehand: Jessica Cochrane
Stagehand: Christopher Lem
Stagehand: Nedjelko Spaich
Wardrobe/Costume: Annie Schwartz, Meredith Müller, Cheryl Venetian, Lillie Webb
Makeup Assistants: Anna Pease, Jenna Jurgelewicz, Kiley Malloch
Electrics Crew: Jessie Miglus, Heather Coleman, Mae Mitchell, Nat Silva, Marie Blocker, Mike Winward, Tyler Mayo, Monte Wilson, Michael Chinworth, Alex Simon
Ceramic Vases: Sophia Barbaresco, Alicia Best, Jazmine Carroll, Eric Conroe, Erin Desmond, Jeanette Geraci, Katelyn Kierstead, Dylan Meyer, Grady O'Neil, Maren Patrick, Rosalie Schulick, Brian Schultis, Lauryn Starkie Kreuder, Asher Woodworth, Kyle Whelan
Carpenter/Mechanics: Laura Elaine Allen, Jackson Emmer, Keith Eyrych, Aaron Fischer, Sophie Hinderberger, Jessica McAlister, Jacob Perkins
Poster/Program Design: Andrew Barton



Aesthetic Bridegroom: It is quite consummate is it not?

Intense Bride: It is indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!

George du Maurier started caricaturing the Aesthetic movement in *Punch* in 1879. This sketch entitled "The Six-Mark Tea-Pot" was undoubtedly inspired by Oscar's remark about blue china.

Wilde and the Gem-Like Flame

Oscar Wilde's "trivial comedy for serious people" stands out as one of the finest comedies written in the English language. Despite the desperate efforts of the status quo to snuff out Wilde's genius and ensure that his works were never read again, here we are, over a hundred years later, recreating his theatrical masterpiece. Although the society Wilde so wittily lampoons is both distinctly English and distinctly Victorian, his perfect paradoxes and hilarious axioms have lost none of their splendour nor relevance over time. We still marvel at Wilde's ability to spearhead the faults of human nature and to make us laugh at ourselves.

The challenge for anyone reviving a classic such as this is to bring a new, unique perspective to the play while still remaining true to its spirit.

However, there are countless nods to Wilde, his colourful lifestyle and the artistic ideals he championed. These references manifest themselves most prominently through our inspiration by the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century.

Wilde himself was a dazzling spokesperson for this revolutionary movement in art, literature, and design. The English aesthetes were influenced by the writings of Walter Pater, with whom Wilde studied at Oxford, but the aesthetic movement also has ties to romanticism, decadence and the French symbolist movement. The aesthetes lived by the creed "art for art's sake" and developed a cult of beauty that uplifted art's lack of purpose or morality. (To quote the man of the hour, "All art is quite useless.") The movement rejected the limitations that "polite society" imposed upon art and the human spirit. It is perhaps because of the sensual freedoms the movement embodied that it became so widely and wildly popular in England during the fin-de siècle.

The sleek, simple elegance of Japanese art and design was especially prominent in the aesthetic movement. The fanaticism for "all one sees that is Japanese" is evident in the works of art nouveau illustrators like Aubrey Beardsley and in Whistler's design project "The Peacock Room." The gilded lattice work of our set reflects the design of "The Peacock Room," and the stage itself is reminiscent of traditional Japanese Noh theatre.

The aesthetic movement was perceived by some as vapid and self-indulgent, and was so tremendously popular that it became the perfect subject for a satire. That satire is the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta "Patience," whose lead character—the foppish, melodramatic poet Bunthorne—is a caricature of the aesthetic poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. The women in the operetta, obsessed with the aesthetic craze, have ceased to dote upon their sweethearts in the military regiments because they have fallen in love with Bunthorne. But Bunthorne has no interest in them: He has fallen in love with the milkmaid Patience, a simple girl who knows nothing of art or poetry. When Bunthorne is alone on stage, he sings the song "If You're Anxious for to Shine," in which he reveals to the audience that his aestheticism is nothing more than an "affectation, born of a morbid love for admiration." A hysterically accurate litany of aesthetic pretensions, this is the song performed by our cast at the top of Act III.



In his scenario for the play, Oscar Wilde predicted the following endings, both fictional and actual:

MISS PRISM, WHO HAD IN EARLY DAYS BEEN GOVERNESS TO THE DUCHESS, SETS IT ALL RIGHT, WITHOUT INTENDING TO DO SO—EVERYTHING ENDS HAPPILY.

RESULT CURTAIN

AUTHOR CALLED.
CIGARETTE CALLED.
MANAGER CALLED.

ROYALTIES FOR A YEAR FOR AUTHOR.

MANAGER CREDITED WITH WRITING THE PLAY. HE CONSOLES HIMSELF FOR THE SLANDER WITH BAGS OF RED GOLD.

What Oscar Wilde could not foresee is what would come to pass. *The Importance of Being Earnest* opened on Valentine's Day, 14 February, 1895, at the St. James's Theatre, London, to thunderous applause. Several months later, Wilde was embroiled in a series of law suits for which he would be tried and found guilty of "acts of gross indecency." His homosexuality, his tortured alliance with Lord Alfred Douglas, and his refusal to shun the company of young men of the working class would not be tolerated. He was condemned to two years of hard labor designed break his body, if not his soul. *The Importance of Being Earnest* continued to play to full houses, but Wilde's name was removed from the marquee. No one was credited with writing this play.

The Importance of Being Earnest imagines a world in which Love and Fiction conquer all the strictures of severe Victorian morality and the pleasure-hating impulses that drive any repressive, industrial society. In his own life, Wilde was not as fortunate. It is fascinating that in the last play he crafted before the machinery of the British legal and class systems turned on him and ground away at his spirit until his fall, that he could dream of happiness and love only available to those who can create it:

"The good ended happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."

We thank Oscar Wilde for his truths and fictions and the chance to rise to his occasions.

By Jean Randich
Director

Quotations from play and letter taken from *The Importance of Being Earnest, and Other Plays*
By Oscar Wilde. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.



*Algernon: All women
become like their mothers.
That is their tragedy.
No man does. That's his.*

"Patience" was such a huge hit that Gilbert and Sullivan wanted to take it overseas to America- except that the Americans were practically oblivious to the aesthetic movement and would not understand why "Patience" is so funny. Thus, they enlisted the help of Oscar Wilde to go to America before the "Patience" tour and to show the Americans what aestheticism meant. After proclaiming when he arrived that he had "nothing to declare except my genius," Wilde toured the country delivering lectures on aesthetics and causing an extraordinary stir with his long hair, velvet knee breeches and irrepressible wit. He even met with silver miners in Leadville, Colorado and drank whiskey with them while he spoke of the early Florentines. In a saloon later that night he saw a sign that read, "Please do not shoot the pianist. He is doing his best." Wilde remarked that it was "the only rational method of art criticism I have ever come across."

We love and admire Oscar for such outbursts of wit: His brilliant sense of humor is the golden thread that holds works like "The Importance of Being Earnest" together. But beneath those witty axioms and paradoxes is a serious plea to a society suffocating within its own restrictions. Wilde urges us to think outside these restrictions that society would have us follow, because they obscure the true beauty of life. Wilde was a man who, to paraphrase his mentor Walter Pater, burned always with a hard, gem-like flame and was never afraid to defy convention or be true to himself. Through works like "Earnest," Wilde encourages us all to follow his example- and to laugh, of course. After all, "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about."

— Katelyn Kierstead, dramaturge

