

SOUTH COAST REPERTORY  
PLAYGOER'S GUIDE

*to*

*THE IMPORTANCE  
OF BEING EARNEST*

*by* Oscar Wilde

*directed by* Warner Shook

SEGERSTROM STAGE

February 8 – March 9, 2008

Honorary Producers  
Elaine J. Weinberg *and*  
Deutsche Bank Private Wealth Management

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## PART I: THE PLAY

### The Importance of Being Hilarious

“I hope you will enjoy my ‘trivial’ play,” wrote Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde to the friend to whom he dedicated *The Importance of Being Earnest*. “It is written by a butterfly for butterflies. It has as its philosophy [. . .] that we should treat all trivial things seriously, and the serious things in life with sincere and studied triviality.”

One of the funniest and most charming plays ever written, *The Importance of Being Earnest* features diamond-bright dialogue, ridiculous yet recognizable characters, and a wildly improbable plot. Though not a farce per se, the script teems with classic farcical elements—puns, innuendo, disguises, mistaken identities—that often teeter precariously on the brink of genteel slapstick.

Yet beneath this frothy façade lurks a scathing critique of *fin-de-siècle* British society. Wilde activates his rapier wit to mercilessly skewer the late Victorian obsession with etiquette and appearances while simultaneously managing to craft a text that exudes more warmth and decency than any of his other works for the stage. So much for being a trivial play!

The action centers on Jack Worthing (Tommy Schridder) and Algernon Montcrieff (Michael Gotch), who are in love with Gwendolen Fairfax (Christina Marie Brown) and Cecily Cardew (Elise Hunt) respectively, both women claiming to be madly in love with Ernest, whom neither of them has ever met. Stir into the mix the formidable busybody Lady Bracknell (Kandis Chappell), an absent-minded governess, and a dubious story about a baby in a handbag and voila—the ultimate comedy of manners.

Clearly the primary goal of *Earnest* is to make audiences laugh, and no one is better suited to this pleasurable task than director Warner Shook. Former Artistic Director of Seattle’s Intiman Theatre, Shook is no stranger to SCR. His previous work on Segerstrom Stage includes *Born Yesterday* (2005-06), *Last Days of Ballyhoo* (2003-04), *The Circle* (2001-02) and *You Can’t Take It With You* (1990-91), as well as *Beyond Therapy* (1986-87) and *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1989-00) on the former Second Stage.

### Scenes and Settings

- ACT I: Algernon Moncrieff's flat in Half-Moon Street, St. James’s
- ACT II: The garden at the Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire
- ACT III: Drawing-room at the Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire
- TIME: The Present [i.e., 1895].

## Synopsis

Jack Worthing, who lives in the country, pretends to have a younger brother, Ernest, whose escapades frequently call Jack to London. Algernon Moncrieff pretends to have an invalid friend, "Bunbury," whose attacks call Algernon into the country whenever there is a distasteful social function in prospect. This activity Algernon refers to as "Bunburying."

Jack has managed to hide from Algernon the location of his country place and the existence of an attractive ward, Cecily Cardew. In Algernon's bachelor flat at the tea hour, Jack confesses he has come to town to propose to Algernon's cousin, Gwendolyn, who knows him as "Ernest." Algernon refuses his help unless Jack explains the inscription on his cigarette case which Algernon has found. Thus Cecily's existence is revealed, but Jack stubbornly refuses to reveal her whereabouts.

Gwendolyn accepts Jack, confessing she has always felt that she was fated to love a man called "Ernest." Under interrogation by Gwendolyn's mother, Lady Bracknell, Jack gives his country address which Algernon takes down with the intention of going "Bunburying" during Jack's absence from home. When Lady Bracknell learns that Jack's identity dates from the discovery of a baby in a large black handbag at Victoria Station she refuses to consent to the marriage.

Alone in the country with her governess Miss Prism, Cecily is agreeably surprised when Algernon shows up in the guise of the much-discussed "Ernest." Losing no time, the young couple becomes engaged almost immediately. When Jack returns unexpectedly to announce that "Ernest" has suddenly died in Paris, he is understandably surprised to learn that "Ernest" is, in fact, in the house at that very moment.

While Jack and Algernon are separately arranging with the rector for a christening ceremony, Gwendolyn arrives. The discovery by Gwendolyn and Cecily that they both seem to be engaged to "Ernest Worthing" results in a highly strained situation until the appearance of both young men together clarifies the matter. It also reveals, however, that neither is named "Ernest." When the girls learn that their fiancés had been about to be rechristened for their sakes, they forgive the deception.

With the arrival of Lady Bracknell the question of consent again surfaces. Lady Bracknell is quite willing that Algernon should marry Cecily (with her considerable fortune). Jack, however, refuses his consent unless Lady Bracknell permits his own marriage to Gwendolyn. The appearance of Miss Prism, who is immediately recognized by Lady Bracknell, results in the identification of Jack Worthing as Algernon's lost elder brother whose real name is—Ernest! Thus matters are settled matters to everyone's satisfaction.

## Background

According to George Sampson in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1961), *The Importance of Being Earnest* "is one of the two best comedies written since the time of Sheridan." In 1894 Wilde was living in fashionable Chelsea's Tite Street when he decided upon a seaside holiday for himself and his family. He took rooms at The Haven, 5 The Esplanade, in Worthing, West Sussex. There, between August and September, he wrote most of a new play that broke the mold of his previous society comedies, remarking in a letter at the time, "I find farcical comedies admirable for style, but fatal to handwriting."

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is his exuberant parody of the 'trivial comedies' (his own amongst them) which the 'serious people' had established in the English theatre. It contains all the features of Wilde's earlier plays — the shameful secret (Worthing's origin in a handbag), the mistaken and assumed identities (Bunburying), and the sensational dénouement in which Worthing turns out to be Lady Bracknell's long-lost nephew. It even contains a sally against the dual morality which distinguished male and female infidelity.

Although the play is indebted to "W. S. Gilbert's exploitation of ludicrous logic," it is very much original — it may be argued that each of the characters is an extension of Wilde himself. The playwright with characteristic wit and tendency towards epigrams satirizes the British nobility in the person of Lady Bracknell and the British clergy in the person of the Reverend Canon Chasuble. The play centers around the aspiration of a Wilde-like young aristocrat named Jack Worthing for the hand of the more obviously blue-blooded Gwendolyn Fairfax. The marriage is opposed by the girl's mother, the imperious Lady Bracknell, because of Worthing's obscure origins: he was found as an infant in a handbag in London's Victoria Railway Station (still the terminus for trains to the south of England), and consequently has no idea as to who his real parents are. Eventually the difficulty is resolved by the discovery that Jack is in fact Ernest Moncrieff, older brother to his scape-grace friend Algernon and nephew to Lady Bracknell.

The play opened at London's St. James's Theatre on 14 February 1895 with actor-manager George Alexander, who had produced Wilde's first stage success in 1892, in the leading role. Ever since, its argument, which Rowell describes as "ridiculous but irresistible," has never failed to convulse audiences throughout the English-speaking world. Wilde said of it, "It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has as its philosophy ... that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

Excerpted from an article by Phillip V. Allingham. Read the entire text  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/pva99.html>

## Glossary

### Act I:

*Half Moon Street* -- a street in London's fashionable Mayfair district.

*Shropshire* -- idyllic inland county well-known for pastoral landscapes.

*in town* -- "town" (at least in southern England) always meant London.

*Divorce Court* -- After 1858, Divorce Court had the power to hear and decide divorce cases. Before that time, a divorce had only been obtainable by a special Act of Parliament.

*Scotland Yard* -- until 1890 the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Force.

*Turnbridge Wells* -- a quiet spa town in southern England.

*the Albany* -- a block of expensive London apartments for single gentlemen.

*guardian* -- someone placed in legal charge of an orphan, who is referred to as a ward.

*Willis's* -- fashionable Almack's Assembly Rooms, later called Willis's after the owner's niece who inherited them.

*sent down* -- When guests had assembled in the drawing room (on the second floor), they went down to the ground floor dining room in pairs of one man and one woman, the most important pair going first.

*corrupt French drama* -- French plays of the period were popularly supposed to be concerned exclusively with questionable (i.e. scandalous) subject matter.

*ready money* -- payment in cash, as opposed to credit.

*crumpets* -- yeast buns (known to us as English muffins) served at tea.

*the Season* -- short period in early summer when balls and parties were held in smart London society, mainly to arrange suitable marriages.

*christening* -- baptism in a ceremony to give a child its "Christian" (or first) name.

*Grosvenor Square* -- (pronounced "grove'-ner) fashionable square in London's West End inhabited by the upper classes.

*duties* -- Death duties, or taxes on money left in a will, were instituted in 1894.

*Belgrave Square* -- fashionable square behind Buckingham Palace.

*Liberal Unionists* -- political party which broke away from the Liberal Party and gradually became associated with the Conservative Party (Tories), so its members were almost respectable in Lady Bracknell's view.

*come in the evening* -- Guests invited to come after dinner were less important than those invited to dine first with the family.

*Radical* -- supporting the more socially progressive, reforming views.

*Purple of Commerce* -- Purple, being a royal color, suggest a superior group among those who have made their money by industry.

*handbag* -- small suitcase carried by either sex.

*Victoria Station* -- large London railway station.

*Brighton line* -- train route serving Brighton, a popular seaside resort in East Sussex.

*Gorgon* -- mythological creature who turned people to stone with its gaze.

*the Club* -- Gentlemen's clubs in London were commonly used as meeting places.

*the Empire* -- music hall in Leicester Square, which was famous for its 'promenade' of high-priced call girls. It had been attacked by a Purity Campaign only the year before the play opened.

*three-volume novel* -- Most novels of the period were published in installments in weekly periodicals prior to being reissued in three hardbound volumes.

*Hertfordshire* -- (pronounced "hart'-ford-sure") county just north of London, much more accessible than Shropshire.

## Act II:

*Mudie* – Mudie's Library was an old lending library which also exchanged books by mail.

*canon* – clergyman attached to a cathedral or in charge of the local parish.

*rector* – clergyman of the Church of England performing duties for a particular parish.

*Egeria* – in Roman mythology, one of the Muses, proverbially used of a woman who inspires.

*evensong* – the daily evening religious service.

*rupée* – unit of currency in India, which at the time was a troublesome part of the British Empire.

*Australia* – Once a destination for English criminals, by 1895 Australia was considered a good place to send unsatisfactory members of prominent families for a second chance, or to be forgotten.

*quixotic* – reference to the impractical hero of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

*Maréchal Niel* – a variety of yellow rose.

*cape hatband* – It was customary to wear black clothes after the death of a family member or close friend. Black crape was a popular fabric in mourning wear during the Victorian period.

*Paris* – popularly considered a city of sin and frivolity.

*manna in the wilderness* – refers to the miraculous supply of food for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus.

*immersion of adults* – Christening in the Church of England is generally accomplished by a token sprinkling of water, but certain sects require total immersion.

*canonical* – according to the rules or 'canons' of the Church of England.

*port manteaus* – large traveling cases.

*dog-cart* – a light, horse-drawn, two-wheeled vehicle.

*the four-five* – train scheduled to depart at five minutes after four o'clock.

*14<sup>th</sup> of February* – St. Valentine's Day was also opening night for *Earnest* in 1895.

*Bankruptcy Court* – court where the affairs of possible bankruptcies would be discussed.

*Morning Post* – Most newspapers contained columns in which the upper classes could pay to insert announcements of engagements, weddings, births, etc.

## Act III:

*dreadful popular air* – probably a derogatory reference to Gilbert & Sullivan's operettas.

*University Extension Scheme* – provider of educational lectures and classes for the general public.

*Dorking, Surrey* – country town near enough to London to make it convenient for country houses.

*Fifeshire, N.B.* – N. B. stands for North Britain – that is, Scotland. Rich persons might own a house in Scotland so that they could pursue the country sports of hunting, fishing, and shooting.

*Court Guides* – generally annual publications recording 'who was who' at court.

*the Funds* – stocks issued by the Government, considered a very safe investment.

*comes of age* – legally attains full adult status, which in this period was usually twenty-one.

*Oxonian* – graduate of Oxford University.

*Perrier-Jouet, Brut '89* – superior French champagne bottled in 1889.

*Anabaptists* – 16<sup>th</sup>-century Christian sect that was opposed to infant baptism.

*Upper Grosvenor Street* – street in the fashionable West End of London, off Grosvenor Square.

*Bayswater* – an unfashionable area west of the City of London.

*Gower Street omnibus* – Gower Street is just north of the West End. An omnibus of the period would have been horse-drawn, and the upper classes would not have traveled in it.

*temperance beverage* – any drink said not to contain alcohol.

*Leamington* – a spa visited for the sake of its mineral waters.

*Army Lists* – monthly distribution list of officers on active service. The quarterly list gave the seniority, appointments, and war services of officers in detail.

## PART II: THE PLAYWRIGHT

### A Life of Surface and Symbol

“All art is at once surface and symbol.

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.

Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.”

From *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

- 1854 Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde born in Dublin
- 1871 began studying classics at Trinity College Dublin
- 1874 began studies at Magdalen College, Oxford (UK)
- 1878 won Newdigate Prize for his poem “Ravenna”; took degree
- 1879 settled in London
- 1881 *Poems* published, lampooned in operetta *Patience*
- 1882 lecture tour of North America, unsuccessful first play *Vera* produced in New York
- 1883 *Duchess of Padua* (play) written in Paris
- 1884 married Constance Lloyd
- 1885 elder son, Cyril, born; wrote reviews for *Pall Mall Gazette*
- 1886 younger son, Vyvyan, born
- 1887 became editor of *Woman’s World*; *The Canterville Ghost* (novella) written
- 1888 *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (children’s stories) published
- 1889 “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (short story)
- 1891 *A House of Pomegranates* (fairy tale collection), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (his only novel), *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime* (short story collection), *Intentions* (essays); meets Lord Alfred Douglas
- 1892 *Lady Windermere’s Fan* produced; *Salomé* (play written in French) banned
- 1893 *A Woman of No Importance* produced; *The Sphinx* (poem) written
- 1894 *Salomé* published, produced in Paris with Sarah Bernhardt
- 1895 *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* produced in London. Sued Marquess of Queensbury (Douglas’ father) for libel; sued by Queensbury; found guilty of “unnatural practices”; sent to Reading Gaol (Berkshire)
- 1897 *De Profundis* (letter) written; released from prison; lived in France, Italy and Switzerland; adopted name of Sebastian Melmoth
- 1898 *Ballad of Reading Gaol* (poem) published; death of wife, Constance
- 1900 died in France on November 30; buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris

Sources: *Oscar Wilde* by Richard Ellman (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987) and *Oscar Wilde* by Phillippe Julian (London: Constable, 1969).

The Picture of Oscar Wilde, or How His Contemporaries Describe Mr. O. W.

<http://users.belgacom.net/wilde/picofos.html>

## I Feel Witty, Oh So Witty

“Would you like to know the great drama of my life?” Oscar Wilde once inquired of André Gide. “It is that I have put all my genius into my life; I have put only my talent into my works.” Wilde is certainly among the most quoted writers in English, perhaps second only to William Shakespeare. His genius—as well as this talent—was to give memorable and striking expression, through wit and brilliance, to his keen observations on human nature and society in general. For that reason, his public and private conversations often attained the same high artistic level as his plays, fiction, poetry and criticism. Wilde’s verbal virtuosity and mental agility, coupled with an ardent disregard for propriety, resulted in a steady stream of epigrams and aphorisms that were widely admired in his time and have lost none of their popularity in our own.

I like men who have a future and women who have a past.

People who want to say merely what is sensible should say it to themselves before they come down to breakfast in the morning, never after.

Extraordinary thing about the lower classes in England—they are always losing their relations. They are extremely fortunate in that respect.

The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.

The only thing that ever consoles man for the stupid things he does is the praise he always gives himself for doing them.

The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered.

When we are happy, we are always good but when we are good, we are not always happy.

I never put off until tomorrow what I can possibly do the day after.

I would sooner have fifty unnatural vices than one unnatural virtue.

If your sins find you out, why worry! It is when they find you *in* that trouble begins.

The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.

It is not good for one’s morals to see bad acting.

Popularity is the crown of laurel which the world puts on bad art. Whatever is popular is wrong.

There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

Murder is always a mistake... one should never do anything that one cannot talk about after dinner.

One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.

Work is the curse of the drinking class.

Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination.

I think that God in creating Man somewhat overestimated His abilities.

My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go.

Bigamy is having one wife too many; monogamy is the same.

from *Oscar Wilde's Wit & Wisdom: A Book of Quotations* (Dover, 1998).

### **About Oscar Wilde:**

*Rudyard Kipling:* No, I've never cared for his work. Too scented.

*Max Beerbohm:* An Assyrian wax statue, effeminate, but with the vitality of twenty men.

*W. H. Auden:* From the beginning, Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands.

*James McNeil Whistler:* What has Oscar in common with Art except that he dines at our tables and picks from our platter the plums for the puddings he peddles in the provinces.

*William Butler Yeats:* My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an astonishment. I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he has written them all overnight with labor and yet all spontaneous.

*Dorothy Parker:*

If, with the literate, I am  
Impelled to try an epigram,  
I never seek to take the credit;  
We all assume that Oscar said it.

More Famous Quotes by Oscar Wilde <http://wordpower.ws/quotations/oscar-wilde.html>

Quotes from Wikiquote [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Oscar\\_Wilde](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde)

Wit and Wisdom of Oscar Wilde [www.ralphkeyes.com/pages/books/wilde/index.htm](http://www.ralphkeyes.com/pages/books/wilde/index.htm)

## The Wild Wilde West

Richard D'Oyly Carte was the London producer of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience* (1881), which spoofed Oscar Wilde in the character of foppish aesthete, Bunthorne. Despite the fact that Wilde himself had been in defiant attendance on opening night, most people did not believe that the real-life poet could possibly be as ridiculous as Gilbert had portrayed him onstage. D'Oyly Carte realized that the best way to generate interest in the upcoming New York premiere of *Patience* would be to announce that the young Irish writer would soon embark on an American lecture tour. Having recently published his *Poems* (1881) yet being short of cash, he readily accepted D'Oyly Carte's offer and almost instantly, Oscar Wilde became a celebrity.

The 28-year-old arrived in New York City on January 2, 1882, famously informing Customs officials, "I have nothing to declare except my genius." The subject of his lectures was Aestheticism, which calls for beauty to be the guiding light in literature and in life. "A good work aims at the purely artistic effect. Love art for its own sake and all things that you need will be added to it." He explained that aesthetes loved the sunflower and lily because they were "the two most perfect models of design. They are the most naturally adopted for decorative art. The gaudy leonine beauty of the one, the precious loveliness of the other. . ."

Wilde "strode onstage with a circular black cloak thrown over one shoulder, walking slowly to model the knee breeches and black stockings worn with a lace-trimmed shirt under a dark purple coat lined in lavender satin." New York audiences loved him, but critical reaction was decidedly mixed and in fact, the press would continue to ridicule him mercilessly throughout his stay.

His 12-month tour took him to 70 destinations in the U.S. and Canada, introducing him to, among other, Kansas farmers, Utah Mormons, Texas cowboys, and Colorado miners (whom he identified as "the only well-dressed men . . . in America"). The westernmost stop on his tour was San Francisco, where he arrived by train on March 26, 1882 and gave his first lecture the following evening at Platt's Hall.

A rather vicious cartoon of Wilde appeared in the San Francisco *Wasp* soon afterward. [http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/English\\_Literature/Wilde/Oscar.htm](http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/English_Literature/Wilde/Oscar.htm) Many of the figures pictured following his steed are well-known members of San Francisco society who may well have attended the lecture. The cartoon's sunflower motif ridicules the symbol of the aesthetic movement; tied to the tail of the horse is a money bag that represented the \$5000 fee Wilde received, and the padlock around the neck carries the likeness of Charles E. Locke, San Francisco impresario, theatre manager, and Wilde's local sponsor.

During his brief stay, Wilde made the obligatory tour of Chinatown, visited the Bohemian Club, toured Oakland and San Jose, then left town on April 8, 1882, to a blizzard of editorial denunciations, as well as condemnation from the pulpit, of "Sunflower Aestheticism." The slang of the moment included such supposedly Wildean expressions as "too utterly utter," "just too too," and a popular song called "Oscar Dear" was received with condescending humor in the city's bohemian haunts.

Critic Ambrose Bierce's stinging denunciation appeared in the March 31, 1882, edition of *The Wasp*:

*"That sovereign of insufferables, Oscar Wilde has ensued with his opulence of twaddle and his penury of sense. He has mounted his hind legs and blown capital edification of circumjacent fools and foolesses, fooling with their foolers. He has tossed off the top of his head and uttered himself in copious overflows of ghastly bosh, of bad delivery, embroidering it with reasonless vulgarities of attitude, gesture and attire. Never was an impostor so hateful, a blockhead so stupid, a crank so variously and offensively daft. [. . .] The limpid and spiritless vacuity of this intellectual jellyfish is in ludicrous contrast with the rude but robust mental activities that he came to quicken and inspire. Not only has he no thought, but no thinker. His lecture is mere verbal dishwater—meaningless, trite and without coherence. It lacks even the nastiness that exalts and refines his verse."*

Another cartoon appeared in *Harper's Weekly* during Wilde's American lecture tour. <http://www.harpweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=September&Date=9> Notwithstanding the serious tone of his lectures, the image suggests that Wilde's audiences must have been at least mildly amused at his diatribes against "that monstrosity, the cast iron stove," which had been invented by the epitome of American practicality, Benjamin Franklin. Wilde said he could perhaps tolerate the stove "if you would not decorate it" as the festooned base and the "funeral urn surmountings" he found particularly objectionable.

At the completion of his tour, Wilde returned to New York City in November 1882, remarking that "life is too joyless in the United States . . . work has become your passion . . . American health is being undermined by stress of business and high-pressure life." Characterizing America as "an extensive lunatic asylum," Wilde stated his belief that "a most serious problem for American people to consider is the cultivation of better manners. It is the most noticeable, the most principal defect in American civilization."

When he departed for England on December 27, 1882, newspapers printed such comments as "Good-by Oscar, we shan't miss you" and "We know a charlatan when we see one." For his part, Wilde responded, "They say that when good Americans die, they go to Paris. I would add that when bad Americans die, they stay in America."

(Compiled from online articles by Robert C. Kennedy, [www.harpweek.com](http://www.harpweek.com); Adam Kirsch, *The New York Observer* [www.observer.com](http://www.observer.com). and The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco [www.sfmuseum.com](http://www.sfmuseum.com).)

## PART III: THE PRODUCTION

### Directing Oscar Wilde

This production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the Segerstrom Stage marks only the third staging of a play by Oscar Wilde's in SCR's 45-year history. While this theatre is known for the consistency of new works produced, classic plays from the dramatic cannon are also an important part of its literary repertoire.

Artistic Director Martin Benson's first encounter with Wilde was in 1961, when he played Lane in a summer stock production of *Earnest*, and thirty-five years later, he directed *An Ideal Husband* at SCR. "The play is overlooked, but superb," remarks Benson. "It's such a compelling script that still has so much to say. There's always humanity at the root of Wilde's humor." Regarding *Earnest's* inclusion in the current season, Benson states that "the driving force behind what we do here is commitment to the playwright, living or dead and *Earnest* continues to be a brilliant play, a really excellent example of dramatic literature. That is always going to be pertinent to what's going on in the world."

Indeed, Wilde's razor-sharp observations and comedic social commentary continue to ring true, over a century after the first performance. Producing Artistic Director David Emmes, who directed SCR'S first production of *Earnest* during the 1984-85 season, recalls it as a "marvelously fulfilling, joyous experience. Great plays are always worth revisiting. There will always be new insights and ideas, not to mention a new audience."

One such new audience for this production includes groups of high school students who will attend a performance in addition to studying the play in class. Emmes believes strongly in giving students every opportunity to see classic drama staged. "There's a huge difference between theatre and literature. Live theatre has an evanescent quality that isn't present in the written text. The words will always remain the same, but each performance is going to be a different experience."

While some members of the audience will undoubtedly remember SCR's previous production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, director Warner Shook is sure to provide an exciting new take on this classic comedy of manners. This is Shook's first experience directing this iconic play—one he has always wanted to tackle. "Warner has such a gift for comedy, and an ability to seat the humor in reality," says Emmes. "He challenges his actors to constantly pursue that goal, which brings a truth and fullness to the performances." Benson adds, "Wilde didn't write camp. The play is screamingly funny, but at the same time, we care about these characters. We wanted a director who could find that basic humanity, and for us, that director is Warner Shook."

### Cast & Creative Ensemble (print the program)

## Stages of Fashion

On February 14, 1895—St. Valentine’s Day—London was choked with a major snow storm. But this did not prevent the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James’s Theatre from being a major social event. This was in part due to the stunning popularity of Oscar Wilde in the theatre: *The Importance of Being Earnest* was Wilde’s fourth popular West End play in only three years, and *An Ideal Husband* had only opened a month before and was still playing to packed houses at the Haymarket Theatre a few blocks away. Fashionable London was out in force, in their most elegant clothes. As a tribute to Wilde’s dandified aestheticism, women wore sprays of lilies as corsages; and many young men wore lilies of the valley in the buttonholes of lapels of their tailcoats.

[...] For an upper-class bachelor in the 1890s, the little parish of St. James’s was the world. [...] Within a short walk or carriage ride, a young man could leave his bachelor apartment in the Albany (where Jack Worthing resides under the name of “Ernest”), shop, pay an “at-home” call in Mayfair or Belgravia, dine at his club, take in a play at one of a dozen theatres, or see a ballet at the Empire. And at the St. James’s Theatre (now demolished), he could take a seat in the stalls for *Lady Windermere’s Fan* or *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is a Society Comedy about life in St. James’s for audiences who lived or shopped or dined in St. James’s. Society Drama as a whole was a mirror in which fashionable audiences could see fashionable images of their own fashionable world of at-homes, dinner parties, and country-house weekends; a world in which gentlemen with hyphenated surnames, dressed in carefully-creased trousers and elegant cravats, and made small talk with titled ladies dressed *à la mode*, and flirted, for a moment only, with the dreaded possibilities of adultery and interclass marriage; a world in which one could pause for a moment to consider what to do with the women of doubtful reputation in one’s midst, but where one would not hesitate to banish these “fallen” women back to their *déclassé* world of Parisian boarding houses and second-rate continental resort towns.

With regard to clothing, Society Drama at the fashionable theatres was a mirror literally as well as figuratively. Actors employed at the St. James’s were contractually required to dress appropriately “off-stage as well as on,” and could be fired if spotted walking in Picadilly during the day in anything less than a well-tailored morning coat. New Society Dramas would often premier at the beginning of the London “season,” and women would wait until they saw the fashions worn by the female characters in the play before they ordered their new gowns and hats. And would-be *couturiers* with assumed French names would design theatrical costumes for Society Dramas and then, their reputations established, become high-society dress designers in the “real” world instead.

(Excerpted from “Wilde, Society, and Society Drama” by Cary Mazer. Read the entire article online @ [www.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/imp.html](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cmazer/imp.html))

## PART IV: EDUCATION STATION

### Before the Play

1. Imagine this: your teacher walks into the classroom one day holding tickets to a production of a British 19<sup>th</sup>-century comedy of manners—not *The Importance of Being Earnest* but one you've never even heard of. What is your initial reaction? You know you're going to have to go, so think about the sorts of things you'll be thinking about as you sit in the theatre waiting for the lights to go down. Make a list of your concerns and feelings. Share your list with the class and see if others share your attitude. Do you think you'll feel the same way after seeing the performance?

2. Make a list of character names, town names, emotions, basic plot devices, etc. from *Earnest*. Put this list on the board and have students write a story or scene using a specified number of these pre-selected elements. Do not provide any extra information about the play. Students should use only the given elements. When students read their versions aloud, comment on how many possibilities a playwright has to choose from when crafting the play, i.e., tone, symbols, characters, etc. Save the pieces to discuss more fully after seeing the performance, comparing and contrasting their stories with Wilde's original.

3. One complaint that students have about period texts is that the work has nothing to do with their real lives today. *Earnest* focuses on themes such as deceit, romance, social class distinctions, and keeping up appearances. Find a contemporary short story or poem that deals with one or more of these same themes. Read and work through the short story or poem with the students to illustrate the universality and timelessness of Wilde's themes and characters.

4. Choose any scene from *Earnest* and imagine that you are the director. Your task is to add written stage directions to the text, which might include significant movements, pauses in the action, changes in tone, use of props, music, or special effects. The revised scene should be accompanied by a short rationale explaining your choices. As you watch the SCR performance, compare Warner Shook's directorial decisions to those you made.

5. Ask two highly skilled student actors (and/or teachers) to memorize dialogue from a five-minute scene in the play. Students from the class are then asked to "direct" the actors by explaining how they perceive the relationship between the two characters. The actors then perform the excerpt according to the way they've been "directed" by the students, who will be surprised to see how many different ways there are to interpret this—or *any*—scene. (This exercise is most suitable for advanced level students.)

### Writing Projects

1. Research the position of women in late Victorian times—when a woman was Queen!—and develop a timeline showing the progress of women's suffrage since 1900. (Remember that women were not allowed to vote in California until 1911.) Write a brief explanation as to why you think it took women so long to achieve even partial equality.

2. The recent news has been full of accounts of shocking (not to mention immoral) behavior by people typically considered to be "upper class"—i.e. politicians, celebrities, CEOs, etc. Write about the idea of class in America. Is one's social status an accurate prediction of character? Americans often feel superior to the English for the absence of class in our society. Is that attitude justified? Why or why not?

3. This play pits the younger generation—Jack, Algy, Gwendolyn and Cecily—against their elders—Lady Bracknell, Amelia, and Canon Chasuble. What similarities do you see between your own life and the lives of the young characters in *Earnest*? Are there certain universal characteristics of youth that are unrelated to time and place? Using two characters from this play, develop a thesis comparing and contrasting the young people Wilde has created with you and your friends.

4. Pretend that you are telling the story of *Earnest* to a friend who has not yet read the play. Suddenly you realize that you can tell your friend anything you'd like. So ... rewrite the ending of Oscar Wilde's play, remaining faithful to his characters and resolving the plot in a way that is personally satisfying while different from the original.

## Discussion & Study Questions

1. What is this play about? Explain the subtitle "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People."
2. What kind of a mother is Lady Bracknell? Will Gwendolyn grow up to be just like her or not?
3. Describe the acting style in this production and discuss its effect on the story.
4. How do the scenery and costumes help to tell the story?
5. How does Wilde use language to develop the characters and guide the action?
6. Who is deceiving whom in this play and why is that significant?
7. What is the relationship between Jack and Algy? Cecily and Gwendolyn?
8. Do any of the characters change over the course of the action? How?
9. Discuss the idea of thematic contrast: i.e. city vs. country; deception vs. truth; style vs. substance; appearance vs. reality; manners vs. morality.
10. Retell the story from the point of view of:
  - a. Lady Bracknell; b. Miss Prism; c. Lane the butler.

## PART V: RESOURCES

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Echoes of Oscar or When Shaw Texted Wilde  
[www.oscholars.com/Shavings/Appendix/echoes.htm](http://www.oscholars.com/Shavings/Appendix/echoes.htm)

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Nineteenth Century Etiquette <http://members.aol.com/EastLynne/Etiquette.htm>

London Season of 1870 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/image:1870-London-season-cartoon.gif>

Official Web Site of Oscar Wilde [www.emgworldwide.com/historic/wilde/fastfacts.htm](http://www.emgworldwide.com/historic/wilde/fastfacts.htm)

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