

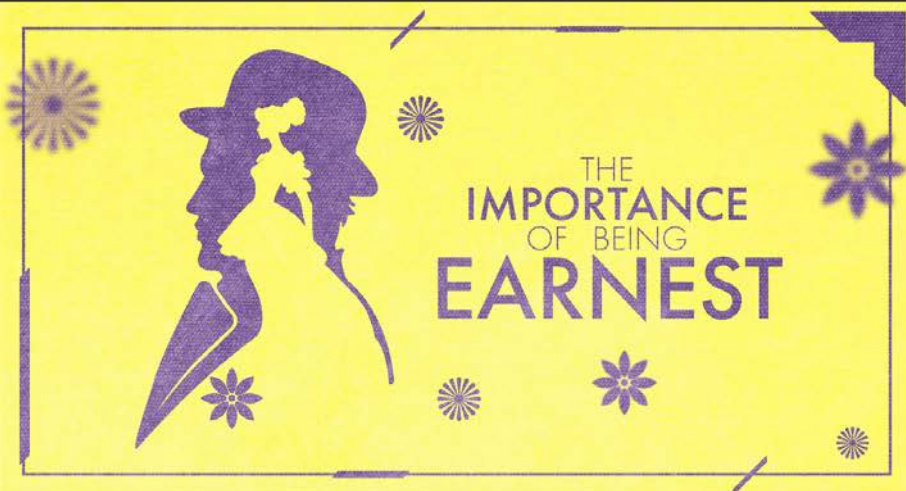


PLAY GUIDE



OPEN STAGE STUDENT MATINEE

PRESENTS:



BY
OSCAR WILDE


ADAPTED & DIRECTED BY
JENNY KOONS



For more information about this production,
including cast photos & bios visit:
<https://bit.ly/EarnestPPT>

For more info about PPT, including Racial Justice
Commitments & Land Acknowledgement visit:
https://ppt.org/ppt_home/about

EXPOSITION



Oscar Wilde's brilliantly clever comedic masterpiece tells the story of two young gentlemen in London, who each live a double-life, creating elaborate deceptions to find some balance in their lives. John "Jack" Worthing escapes the burdens of responsibility to have an exciting life in the city, pretending to be his fictitious younger brother Ernest. Algernon Moncrieff, meanwhile, has invented a convenient invalid, Bunbury, whom he uses as an excuse to gallivant off to the country whenever he pleases. When John falls in love with Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen, he is determined to come clean, but when Gwendolen reveals she can only love a man named Ernest, it somewhat complicates things.

When Algernon discovers John's secret and decides to visit John's pretty little ward in the country, posing as the debauched "Ernest," the situation gets entirely more complicated! Hijinks ensue and mistaken identities threaten to ruin friendships. The characters are in for more than they ever anticipated when formidable Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, begins sleuthing around to uncover the far-fetched truth. Oscar Wilde's brilliant comedy captures the struggle of four passionate lovers trying to conform to expectations and, in the most roundabout and delightfully funny way possible, love who they wish and live how they want.

Jenny Koons's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's classic play brings a fresh perspective to the timeless themes of identity, love, societal expectations, and the absurdity of social conventions. It further examines our roles in society and how we can overcome these barriers to strive to be the best version of ourselves. And in doing so, just possibly discover the true meaning of love.

This PlayGuide is designed to deepen your understanding of both the original play and this adaptation - and spark meaningful discussions both in and out of the classroom.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT



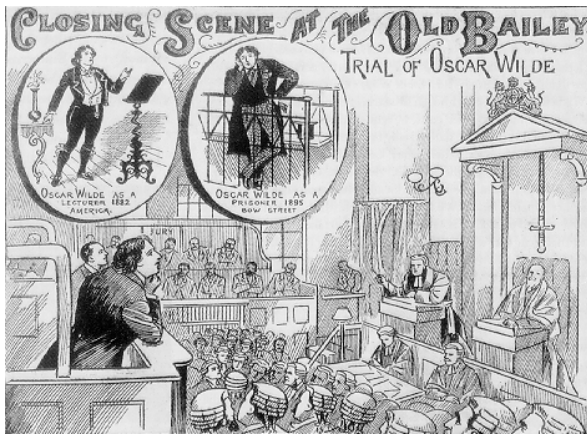
The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde was first performed in 1895 in London, during the Victorian era. This period in British history was characterized by strict social norms, moral conservatism, and a rigid class structure. These societal attitudes heavily influenced Wilde's life and work.

Wilde himself was a prominent figure in London's literary scene, known for his wit, flamboyant personality, and challenging of Victorian conventions. He was openly gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal and highly stigmatized. His plays often satirized the hypocrisies and superficialities of upper-class society, including its strict adherence to etiquette and the importance placed on appearances.

The Importance of Being Earnest is considered one of Wilde's masterpieces, renowned for its clever dialogue, comedic timing, and critique of Victorian societal norms. The play explores themes of identity, love, marriage, and the constraints of social expectations. Wilde's sharp wit and satire are evident throughout the play, particularly in the characters' absurd and often hypocritical behavior.

However, the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was overshadowed by scandal in Wilde's personal life. Shortly after the play's premiere, Wilde was publicly accused of homosexual relationships, leading to his arrest, trial, and eventual imprisonment. The trial and its aftermath had a profound impact on Wilde's reputation and health, and he died in exile in 1900.

Despite the controversies surrounding his personal life, Oscar Wilde's works, including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, continue to be celebrated for their wit, humor, and exploration of complex social issues. The play remains a classic of English literature, studied and performed around the world for its timeless themes and enduring relevance.



THE WORLD IN 1895



Victorian Era: The late 19th century was the height of the Victorian era, characterized by strict social norms, moral conservatism, and industrialization. Queen Victoria ruled the British Empire, and her influence extended across much of the globe.

Industrialization: The Industrial Revolution had transformed economies and societies, leading to urbanization, technological advancements, and the rise of a middle class. Cities were growing rapidly, and new inventions and innovations were changing daily life.

Art and Culture: The late 19th century was a period of artistic and cultural flourishing. It was the time of the Impressionist painters, including Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, and the peak of the Romantic movement in literature and music.

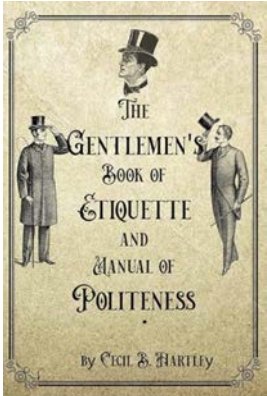
Science and Exploration: Scientific discoveries and explorations were expanding human knowledge. This was the era of figures like Marie Curie, who discovered radioactivity, and the beginning of modern psychology with Sigmund Freud.

Social Issues: Despite progress, there were significant social issues, including poverty, child labor, and poor working conditions. The era also saw the rise of social movements advocating for workers' rights, women's suffrage, and other reforms.

Politics: Political tensions were high in Europe, with rivalries between nations leading to increased militarization and alliances that would eventually contribute to World War I. In the United States, it was a time of industrial expansion and political reform.



CULTURAL CONTEXT



The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde is steeped in the cultural context of late Victorian England, a period characterized by strict social codes, rigid class distinctions, and a facade of propriety. Understanding this context is crucial to appreciating Wilde's satirical commentary on the society of his time.

- **Books on Etiquette:** every season, there would be a new etiquette book telling the members of society the latest fashions and trends. A comprehensive look at these can be found by clicking this link: [Gutenberg: Books about Etiquette](#)
- **Social Mores:** Victorian society placed a high value on decorum, respectability, and adherence to social norms. While the play's characters seem to conform to these expectations outwardly, they can also be found engaging in hypocritical and deceitful manors.
- **Class Divide:** The Victorian era was marked by a rigid class system, with the upper class maintaining power and privilege. Wilde pokes fun at this hierarchy through characters like Lady Bracknell, who embodies the snobbery and elitism of the aristocracy.
- **Gender Roles:** The play reflects the traditional gender roles of the time, with women expected to be delicate and domesticated. Characters like Gwendolen and Cecily challenge these roles to a certain extent, showing some agency and independence.
- **Marriage and Courtship:** Marriage was considered a crucial institution for social stability, often arranged to secure wealth and status. Wilde satirizes the superficiality of courtship and the importance placed on trivial matters like names and lineage.
- **Morality and Hypocrisy:** Despite the emphasis on morality, Victorian society was often hypocritical, with a gap between public appearances and private behavior. Characters in the play, such as Algernon and Jack, embody this duality.
- **Artificiality and Appearance:** The play highlights the artificiality of social conventions and the importance of appearances. The characters often prioritize maintaining a facade of respectability over genuine honesty and integrity.

By satirizing these aspects of Victorian society, Wilde challenges his audience to question the values and norms of their time.

MODERN PARALLELS



There are many parallels between the cultural context of 1895 and the modern day, despite the significant differences in technology, social structures, and global events. A few examples include:

- **Gender Roles:** Despite progress in gender equality, there are still lingering expectations and stereotypes around gender roles in modern society. The struggle for gender equality and recognition of LGBTQ+ rights continues to be an important issue.
- **Impact of Print and Social Media:** Often dictates how we engage with the world with ever-changing content, not unlike the etiquette books of the past; trends and societal rules are often set here and readily available to spread through pop culture and social connections.
- **Servitude and Class:** the importance of the "servant" in high society- many current shows also are interested in this: *Downton Abbey*, *Gilded Age*, *Bridgerton*, *The Crown*, *Victoria*, *Gentleman Jack*, etc.
- **Marriage and Courtship:** movies and shows that dominate in ratings include *90 Day Fiancé*, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Married at First Sight*, *Love is Blind*, etc., where the central focus is on the trajectory of people meeting and committing to each other in a very short time frame.

A lot of these parallels are the direct result of societal patterns and common questions that arise from the nuances of partnership, love, and how society often places value and judgement on those relationships.

ADAPTATION INSIGHTS & QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER



There are many things that adapter and director Jenny Koons considered as she worked on *The Importance of Being Earnest*. A couple key questions she grappled with include: *What do you choose to take and leave as you adapt? How will people receive this adaptation? Are there any lines or moments that people will be expecting to be in there?*

The actors will not be using accents in this production, but the look and style of England in the 1890s has still been kept. Specific regional references were also taken out. By doing so, the story becomes more accessible, and the distance between the audience and these characters is minimized. In fact, it enables us to see ourselves in these people. These are people we know, and they are recognizable; which then begs the question: *which character do you identify with?*

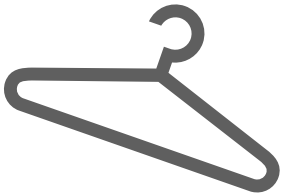
Unique highlights in this adaptation can be found in the interludes - music, movement, and excerpts from etiquette guides have been craftily woven into the script. *How do these interludes help shape and frame your view of the play and this adaptation?*

The theme of love, especially in plays, is interesting to consider. As the director discovers in her research, there are not many plays written in the last 20 years that have pure love at its center; love instead is often surrounded by conflict. *How do you find love and seek love when it feels that the world around you is in constant conflict?*

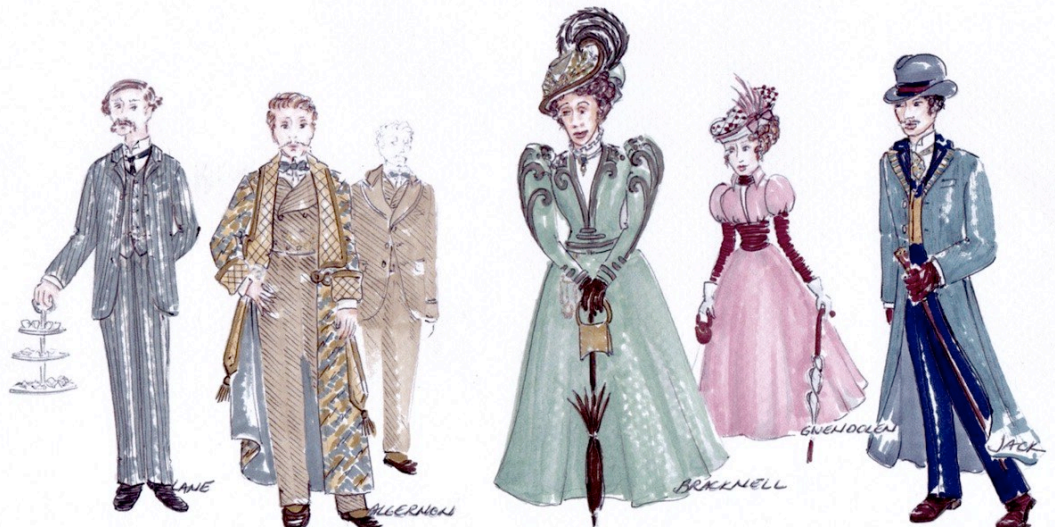
Seeing this world through a contemporary lens was centralized: we can be so judgmental when characters fall in love quickly, but why are we so quick to make this judgement? Love at first sight is all around us and in many of the shows we watch today. *Do you believe in love at first sight? Why or Why not?*

The original play can often make these couples feel as if their love is a set-up. The director wanted to explore more truth in these relationships and pushed the actors to find how these characters fully and whole-heartedly fall in love with each other.

COSTUME DESIGN



To the right and below are screenshot renderings of the costume design for this production!



The majority of these costumes are made in house at The Public's costume shop; for more of an inside look on the fitting process, visit:

[https://
www.facebook.com/
pittsburghpublictheater](https://www.facebook.com/pittsburghpublictheater)

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC THEATER OPEN STAGE: RESOURCE GUIDE



The Importance of Being Earnest was once called by critic W.H. Auden, “the only pure verbal opera in English.” It relies on word play, quick wit, and a lot of formality both in the dialogue and attention to detail in vocabulary. Click on the link below to find definitions and meanings for some of Earnest’s most decorated words in this adaptation:

[*The Importance of Being Earnest: Word Glossary*](#)

BRAINSTORM



“The truth is rarely pure and never simple” One of Oscar Wilde’s most famous lines - what does it mean to you? What are some examples of truths that are rarely pure but never simple?

What’s in a name? If you could create an alter ego, what would their name be? Where would they live? What alter ego would you create for a friend? Get together with a group and share!

PA Core Standard: CC.1.4.8.H
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re9.1.8

DISCUSSION POINTS



- The Importance of a Title - discuss the title of this play and its many implications. If you were to give the play a different title, what would it be?
- First impressions: name a time when first impressions proved to be right, and then when they proved to be wrong. How did that impact you?
- Why do you think the character of Lady Bracknell is often played by a man? What does that tell us about gender and how the playwright and/or society might view this construct?

PA Core Standard: CC.1.2.11-12.G
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8

THEMES IN THE PLAY



- Identity & Conformity
- Courtship and Marriage
- Societal Hierarchy and Status
- Rules and Rebellion
- Finding and Falling in Love
- Appearance vs. Reality
- Secrets and Dreams
- Queer Identity and Society

Critical Thinking: Choose a theme listed above and use examples of how it applies in the play. Give an example of how one of these themes connects to your own life.

PA Core Standard: CC.1.3.11-12.A
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8

MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*



SIGHT

- Tea and roses
- Cobblestone streets
- Books, diaries, paper items



SOUND

- Shoes on marble floors
- Parlor music and piano
- Water trickling
- Horse hooves



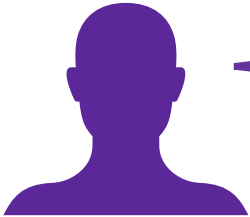
TASTE/SMELL

- Cucumber sandwiches
- Flowers
- City vs Country smells
- Inside vs Outside smells



TOUCH

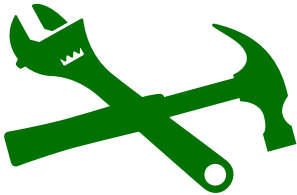
- Soft bread and crumpets
- Turning of a page in a book
- Piano keys
- Running fingers through hair



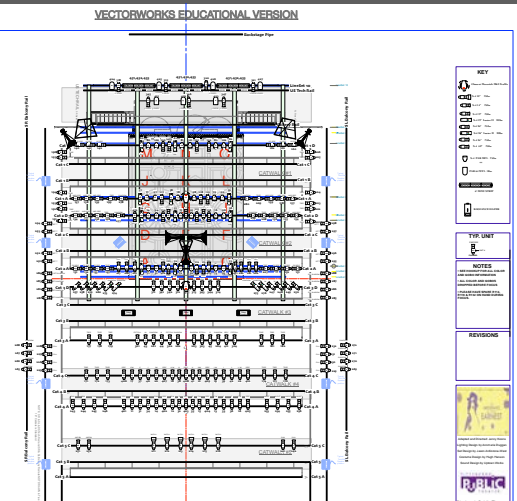
Awaken your senses! The lists above contain examples of what characters in the play might see, hear, taste, and feel. Add more as you watch the show. **Choose at least one from any column to consider further: try to imagine it, look up an image, find a recipe, add a song to your playlist, invest in the action of it, and get inspired!**

PA Core Standard: CC.1.4.8-12.M
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1.HSI

ON SET & BEHIND THE SCENES



To the right are screenshot renderings of the set design and light plot for this production!



DID YOU KNOW?

- Jenny Koons has directed 4 other adaptations, 3 of which have been classical. This is her first time with *Earnest*.
- The set utilizes secret doors that reflect the trajectory of what is revealed by certain characters in the story.
- The floor of the set and mural in the background are hand-painted. See if you can spot the sheep!

What is at least **ONE** new thing you learned from this play?
What impacted you the most from this show?
What is **ONE** question you have for anyone on the *EARNEST* creative team?

PA Core Standard: CC.1.3.11-12.C
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1.HSI

OPEN STAGE MATINEES ARE SUPPORTED BY: