

The Importance of Being Earnest

BY Oscar Wilde



Education Partner



Shaw FESTIVAL

PRESENTS

The Importance of Being Earnest By Oscar Wilde

This study guide for *The Importance of Being Earnest* contains background information for the play, suggested themes and topics for discussion, and curriculum-based lessons that are designed by educators and theatre professionals.

The lessons and themes for discussion are organized in modules that can be used independently or interdependently according to your class's level and time availability.

The general information is on white paper and the lessons are on blue.

THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY DENIS JOHNSTON, DEBRA MCLAUCHLAN, AND BARBARA WORTHY. ADDITIONAL MATERIALS WERE PROVIDED BY RONALD BRYDEN, CHRISTOPHER NEWTON, AND JUDITH BOWDEN.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Previews April 2

Opens May 7

Closes December 4

For a calendar of performances check:

www.shawfest.com

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The Players

Algernon Moncrieff..... David Leyshon
Lane Robert Benson
John Worthing, J.P..... Evan Buliung
Lady Bracknell..... Goldie Semple
Honourable Gwendolen Fairfax..... Fiona Byrne
Miss Prism..... Brigitte Robinson
Cecily Cardew Diana Donnelly
Reverend Canon Chasuble, D.D Bernard Behrens
Merriman..... Guy Bannerman

Directed by Christopher Newton
Designed by Judith Bowden
Lighting designed by..... Jeff Logue

Running Time

APPROXIMATELY 2 1/2 HOURS INCLUDING TWO INTERMISSIONS

Production History

Wilde wrote his last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in three weeks during a family holiday at a seaside resort. Subtitled “A Trivial Play for Serious People,” it opened in London in February 1895 to tumultuous acclaim, just a month after the opening of *An Ideal Husband*, and suddenly Oscar Wilde had two West End hits running simultaneously! But *Earnest* was so different from his other plays -- they were mainly witty melodramas with strong moral themes -- that Wilde himself commented: “There are two ways of disliking my plays. One is to dislike them, and the other is to prefer *Earnest*.”



Costume sketch for Lady Bracknell by Judith Bowden

Despite its initial success, the run of *Earnest* was cut short by the public scandal surrounding Wilde’s trials on criminal charges of gross indecency. He was sentenced to two years imprisonment at hard labour, moved to France on his release in 1897, and died in Paris three years later.

This production completes the Shaw Festival’s cycle of all Wilde’s major plays, following productions of *Salomé* (1987), *An Ideal Husband* (1995-6), *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1998) and *A Woman of No Importance* (2000).

The Author

OSCAR FINGAL O'FLAHERTIE WILLS WILDE

OCTOBER 16, 1854 - NOVEMBER 30, 1900

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Lady Windermere's Fan, 1892

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854, lived a gloriously notorious, eccentric and decadent life until his tragic demise in 1895, and died in obscurity in Paris, 1900. More than one hundred years later we are still celebrating his plays, his life and his inimitable style. He was born to Jane and William Wilde, both extremely accomplished individuals in their own right. William Wilde was knighted for his work as an internationally recognized ear and eye specialist; his mother was referred to as one "of Ireland's noblest daughters" for her outspoken and unflinching nationalist views. She was a regular columnist in one of Ireland's leading newspapers, as well as the author of articles, plays and poems. She was perhaps the greatest influence on Wilde's life.

Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1891

When he was 27, following his notoriety in Europe, Oscar Wilde took the U.S. and Canada by storm on a whirlwind lecture tour, spreading the beautifying gospel of the British "Aesthetic Movement", of which he considered himself a true "Professor". With unabashed self-promotion, he achieved remarkable celebrity status, well known for his famous eloquence on all things regarding society, philosophy, beauty, manners and fashion. His fame as a writer, and his tragic infamy as a lover of men, were still years away. The tour made him famous as a wit and an eccentric, but some painted him as a dilettante and a clown, even an unhealthy influence. These conflicting views followed him all of his life.

Men know life too early. Women know life too late. That is the difference between men and women.

A Woman of No Importance, 1893



Oscar Wilde, Oxford, aged 21yrs

Wilde had married Constance Lloyd in 1884. She was a linguist, beautiful and intelligent, and they had two sons, Vyvyan and Cyril. But after Wilde's imprisonment in 1895, Constance changed her name to protect her two young boys from the devastating effects of his notoriety. She too died young, shortly before Oscar; tragically, the boys were not allowed to see their father and were subsequently raised by guardians. In an essay about his father's brilliant collection of fairy stories, Vyvyan Holland credits Constance for his early introduction to the world of imagination. Poignantly, he remembers only her, and not his father, reading him his bedtime stories.

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

The Importance of Being Earnest, 1895

In 1891, Oscar met Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, the third son of the Marquis of Queensberry, and they soon became lovers. But in April 1895, the Marquis accused Wilde of homosexuality and in return Oscar sued for libel. He withdrew his case but was ultimately arrested and convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor.

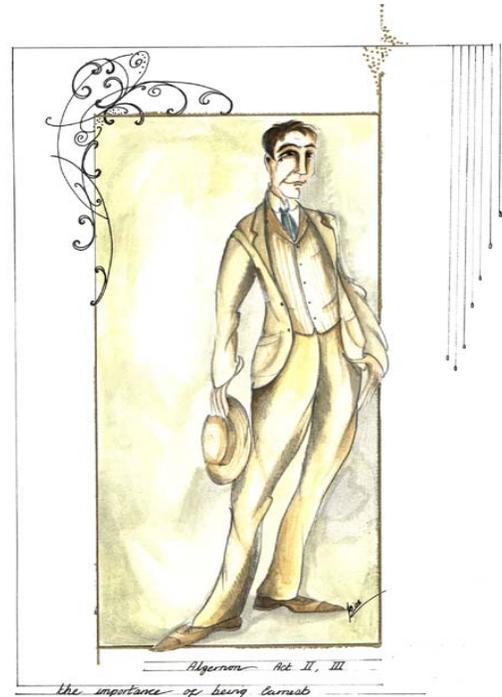
He never recovered from the prison experience, never finished another play or novel, and in 1900 he died penniless in Paris, shunned by all but his closest friends. Still, the Wildean wit was not easily suppressed. In the final week of his life, bedridden, he confided to a friend, "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has to go."

The Characters

Jack Worthing – The central figure of the play, he loves Gwendolen and wishes to marry her but cannot secure the approval of her mother, Lady Bracknell. When he is in the city, he goes by the name of Ernest; when he is in the country, he goes by the name of Jack, which he believes is his real name. Jack does not know his personal history; he was discovered as a baby in a handbag in Victoria Station. He is the legal guardian of Cecily Cardew, who lives in the country and knows him only as Uncle Jack.

Algernon Moncrieff - He lives in the city and is a good friend of Jack's - though at the beginning of the play he thinks that Jack's name is Ernest. Algernon lives in an expensive flat in a prestigious part of London. He is the nephew of Lady Bracknell. When he learns about Jack's attractive "niece" Cecily in the country, Algernon goes out to visit and falls in love with her.

Gwendolyn Fairfax - The daughter of Lady Bracknell, she is in love with Jack, but believes that she could not love him if he were named anything other than Ernest.



Cecily Cardew - Jack's ward. She falls in love with Algernon when he visits her under the assumed name of Ernest, and she tells him that she could never love a man named anything but Ernest.

Lady Bracknell - The aunt of Algernon and the mother of Gwendolen. A well-entrenched member of the English aristocracy, she forbids her daughter to marry Jack, whom she does not think is suitable because of his obscure background.

Dr. Chasuble - The Rector of the church nearest Jack's country house. He and Miss Prism flirt with one another throughout Act II and Act III, and he is asked by both Jack and Algernon to re-christen them Ernest.

Miss Prism - Cecily's tutor. She has a mysterious past, involving former employment at Lady Bracknell's house, a trashy three-volume novel, and a missing baby. She enjoys flirting with Dr. Chasuble.

Lane - Algernon's butler. He appears in Act I only.

Merriman - The butler at the Manor House.



The Story

Act I:

The play begins in the flat of Algernon Moncrieff, an upper-class English bachelor. He is visited by his friend Jack Worthing -- though Algernon and everyone else in London know Jack as "Ernest." Jack says that he has come to town to propose to Gwendolen Fairfax, the daughter of Lady Bracknell and first cousin of Algernon. Algernon tells Jack that, as first cousin, he refuses to give his consent for Jack to marry Gwendolen until Jack can explain why the name Cecily is inscribed in Jack's cigarette case. After making up a story about an elderly aunt, Jack finally admits to Algernon that Cecily is his ward who lives in the country. Jack also admits that his name is not Ernest but rather Jack, which is what everyone at his country Manor House calls him. Algernon jokingly accuses Jack of "Bunburying," his own fanciful term for removing himself from an unpleasant situation in the city, and embarking on a much more pleasurable occupation in the country. Algernon then determines to meet Jack's attractive young ward by posing as Jack's fictitious brother, Ernest.

Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell arrive at Algernon's flat for tea. Algernon tells Lady Bracknell that, due to the illness of his friend Bunbury, he must leave London, and as a result will not be able to attend her dinner that night. He distracts her in a different room for a while so that Jack can propose to Gwendolen. Jack tells Gwendolen that he loves her, and she replies that she loves him too, particularly because he is named Ernest, a name that "seems to inspire absolute confidence." Jack, knowing that his name is not really Ernest, gets worried, and privately resolves to get baptized and change his name. Gwendolen, meanwhile, accepts his proposal just as Lady Bracknell returns; Lady Bracknell announces that Gwendolen may not marry Jack until she gives her approval. Algernon and Gwendolen exit while Lady Bracknell interrogates Jack to determine how suitable a husband he is. She is pleased with his answers until she asks him about his parents. When Jack admits that he was abandoned by his parents and found in a handbag by a Mr Thomas Cardew in Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell is horrified. She refuses to let her daughter marry a man with no knowledge of his own parentage, and suggests to Jack that he "acquire some relations as soon as possible." Gwendolen returns, having heard of Lady

Bracknell's disapproval, and agrees to meet Jack at his country estate to figure out what to do. He gives her the address, which is overheard and copied down by Algernon.

Act II:

At Jack's country estate, Cecily, his ward is learning German and geography at the hands of Miss Prism, a tutor who once wrote a long novel that mysteriously disappeared. Miss Prism, in between teaching Cecily, likes to flirt with the neighbourhood Rector, Dr Chasuble. While she is taking a walk with him, Algernon, pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest, arrives to meet Cecily. The two show an immediate romantic interest in one another, and go into the house to get some food. As they leave, Prism and Chasuble return from their work and meet Jack as he arrives back home from the city. He is dressed in mourning in order to keep up the ruse that his brother, who does not actually exist, has died. While speaking with Chasuble and Prism, Cecily comes out of the house and sees Jack, and quickly informs him that his brother has returned. Jack is shocked and angered when his "brother" Algernon comes out of the house. After the others exit to allow the two reunited brothers time to resolve their differences, Jack tells Algernon that he must leave the house at once. Algernon replies that he will leave only if Jack changes out of his morbid mourning clothes. As Jack exits to do so, Cecily returns. Algernon proposes to her, and she agrees, although she tells him that she particularly loves him because he is named Ernest, a name that "seems to inspire absolute confidence." Cecily, in fact, has been pretending in her journal to be engaged to "Ernest" ever since she first found out that her guardian had a brother. Algernon grows secretly worried about the fact that he is not named Ernest; he resolves to get rechristened.

After Algernon exits, Gwendolen arrives to see Jack, but in the meantime she chats with Cecily, whom she has never met before. Gwendolen is surprised to hear that "Ernest" has a ward but has never told her about it. Cecily is confused when Gwendolen says that she is engaged to Ernest, and things become heated as, in the confusion, they believe they may be engaged to the same man. Both try to refute the engagement claims of the other, and when that fails, they sit in silent hos-

The Story, continued

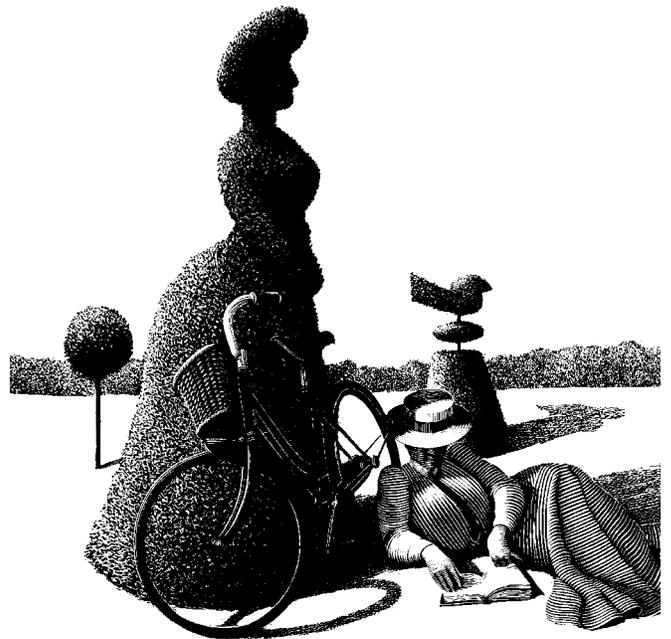
tility until Algernon and Jack re-enter. The two men confess that they lied about their names and that neither of them is named Ernest. The two women are shocked, and because both are engaged to someone named Ernest, they retreat together into the house to await the appearance of this brother named Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack begins to panic while Algernon sits back and stuffs himself full of muffins.

Act III

Act III moves inside the Manor House. Algernon and Jack enter shortly after the act begins. Algernon tells Cecily that he lied to her about having a brother so that he could spend more time in the city with her. The women are satisfied, although they still cannot accept marrying the men because neither one is named Ernest. When the men reply that they are scheduled to be christened that afternoon, all seems well, until suddenly Lady Bracknell arrives. She again refuses to give her consent to the engagement of Gwendolen and Jack. Algernon tells her that he is engaged to Cecily, and when Lady Bracknell learns that Cecily is extremely wealthy thanks to her father's estate, she gives her consent. However, as Cecily's legal guardian, Jack will not give his consent to the marriage unless Lady Bracknell approves of his engagement to Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell again refuses and prepares to leave with Gwendolen. Dr Chasuble enters and learns that a christening will no longer be necessary, so he resolves to return to Miss Prism. Lady Bracknell, suddenly realizing that she once employed a Miss Prism to take care of her sister's baby, asks to see Miss Prism, who readily appears. Lady Bracknell demands to know what happened to the baby, which we soon find out disappeared twenty-eight years previously when Miss Prism was supposed to be taking it for a stroll in the perambulator. Miss Prism confesses that she accidentally put her three-volume novel in the perambulator and the baby in her handbag, which she mistakenly left in the cloakroom at Victoria Station. Jack, suddenly realizing that he was that baby, fetches the handbag in which he was found, which Miss Prism confirms as being hers.

Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he is the son of her sister and the elder brother of Algernon. A search through the military periodicals of the time reveals that their father's first name

was Ernest, and because first sons are always named after the father, they realize that Jack's name has, indeed, all along been Ernest. Overjoyed, Jack realizes that he has been telling the truth his whole life even though he thought he was lying. In the end, he gets together with Gwendolen, Algernon gets together with Cecily, and although Lady Bracknell accuses Jack of triviality, he retorts that he has only just discovered "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."



The Upsetting of A Gower Street Omibus

Excerpts of an essay written by Ronald Bryden for the Shaw Festival house programme for the 2004 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It was thirty years ago -- "in younger and happier times," as Miss Prism, the governess in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, says sadly in the play's climactic scene -- that I stumbled on the title of the book I believe to have inspired, at least in part, Oscar Wilde's great comedy. I had picked up in a secondhand bookstore an anonymous Victorian guide, published in 1859, to what it called "the habits of good society." It told so much more about the Victorians than it realized (arguing with infinite subtlety that all breaches of social decorum are the result of people behaving in ways proper to a higher class than their own -- bakers' daughters, for example, wearing silk wedding dresses) that I devoured the list at the back of the book of other works offered by the same publisher. One title leaped out at me: *Men Who Were Earnest*. Could its punning summary of the plot of Wilde's comedy be pure coincidence? Over the years I have come to believe, though I shall never be able to prove it, that it played a central part in the creation of his masterpiece.

I have no evidence that Wilde ever read the book or even heard of it. It is highly unlikely that he would have found it in the family nursery in Merrion Square or the library of his Anglican boarding school at Portora. I suppose it could have caught Wilde's eye in some country house where he spent a weekend or one of the country hotels where he took Lord Alfred Douglas and his friends. It is an eye-catching volume. It is possible that some irreverent scapegrace of his acquaintance passed it on to Wilde, knowing he would find it a howl. In any case, I shall go to my grave persuaded that the book gave Wilde not only the title but the structure of his play.

The Importance is about the triumph of fantasy over fact, imagination over the nonconformist conscience. It is a fairy tale in which two errant young knights rescue a pair of maidens from dragons -- Lady Bracknell, the dragon of the status quo, guards the English class system, and Miss Prism, custodian of John Worthing's pretty ward Cecily, guards the intellectual heritage of the Victorian middle class.

We meet Miss Prism at the start of the second act of Wilde's

play summoning Cecily to her day's studies -- German, geology and political economy. The first night audience at the St James Theatre would have recognized the governess at once as a product of University College, London, the first British institution of higher learning to admit women to its classes in 1869. Built in the 1830s in the fields of Bloomsbury, north of the British Museum, University College was known to its enemies as "the Cockney college" or "the godless institution of Gower Street." Modelled on the German universities whose scientists, industrialists and engineers were rapidly outstripping their British rivals, it offered a modern education in useful knowledge, including modern languages and their literatures, instead of the Greek, Latin and divinity that still dominated the curricula of Cambridge and Oxford. The world of University College and its products was the new industrial world of hard scientific facts. In Wilde's four-act draft of his comedy, Miss Prism praises John Worthing for his devotion to the factual. "He never deviates from the facts," she tells Cecily. "He would think it dishonourable to do so." She has not yet discovered that he leads a fictitious life in London pretending to be his own disgraceful younger brother Ernest. Though she has read enormously in the history of economics and geology, she has not come on that landmark of modern culture, Oscar Wilde's essay "The Decay of Lying".

Wilde's essay, written in 1888, takes the form of a dialogue between two aesthetes who sound very much like his notorious friend Lord Alfred Douglas and himself. The elder of them maintains that the modern world is the discovery of its poets and artists, not its scientists. Until Turner painted them, no one had ever really seen a sunset. Until its artists displayed its beauties, Japan never existed. Until Balzac wrote his *Comédie Humaine*, no one had ever really seen France. The scientific observers of the facts see only what is so familiar to every eye that we never notice it. The poet and artist reach past the everyday and habitual to show us the glory of the world as it ought to be. The reality anatomized by Emile Zola and his disciples is a world that cannot change. The duty of the poet and artist is to bring a better world into being by telling beautiful lies that will kindle the desires of their audiences. Liars are chosen by the gods to bring about the future. Or as Shelley put it in his *Defence of Poetry*, poets are the unac-

Programme Essay, cont.

By Ronald Bryden

knowledgeed legislators of the world. The conflict between the liars and the devotees of fact in *The Importance* is resolved by the discovery that the principal champion of the empire of hard facts is herself a fabulist. In the play's climactic scene, Miss Prism identifies the scars on her long lost handbag, [and] a whole life history is hinted at. "Here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus, in younger and happier days." Was that accident the beginning or the end of her happiness? Did it throw her into the arms of a German geologist, also bound for the doors of University College? Certainly the happiness is over, and youth behind her, when the next scar appears -- "the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington." Clearly she had then embarked on the life, one of sobriety and self-denial, of a governess in the residential communities of the Victorian *rentier* class. Was it then that, her Bloomsbury notes on Schiller and the fall of the rupee blurred and sodden by a flood of barley water, she decided to use her handbag to carry around the manuscript of her three-volume novel? Presumably it was at some point earlier than this that she decided defiantly, recognizing that marriage would not be her lot, to inscribe the initials of her maiden name on the bag's lock.

When you learn to draw, you are shown how to find the point on the horizon from which a landscape's perspectives all derive. In the perfect structure of *The Importance*, the upsetting of the Gower Street omnibus is the equivalent, the point from which Wilde's entire plot springs. Whatever made her youth in Gower Street so happy turned Miss Prism into a creator of romantic fiction rather than a genuine product of the godless institution. But for the lovely lies she committed to paper, the tiny Ernest John Moncrieff would never have been found in her handbag at Victoria Station nor adopted by the wealthy Mr Thomas Cardew. He might well have grown up bullying his younger brother Algernon and Pulling the hair of his cousin Gwendolen, terrified of his choleric father the General and with the same sense of victimization that leads everyone to describe his poor mother as "poor". That is what the world of fact would have held for him. But having been born miraculously in a handbag, he grows up a prince of the beautiful neverland of lies.

Wilde's comedy subtly imitates the strategy of the Victorian pantomime. From the moment Lady Bracknell hears Dr Chasuble utter the name Prism, we can feel the scene moving toward a fairy tale transformation. The laws of probability laid down by statistics for our guidance begin to go into reverse. The walls of fact and science start to crumble. People cease to be the characters they have been throughout the play and turn into other people. Everyone winds up in everyone else's arms, including Jack and Algy. The end of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is so perfect it makes you want to cry. If only the world could always be made to change like that! If only it could have stayed like that forever for Oscar! If only our lies could come true, especially the ones we tell about ourselves! It is the greatest comedy ever written.

Ronald Bryden is the former Literary Adviser to the Shaw Festival. He has also been dramaturge to Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company, drama critic of The Observer, and head of the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. His most recent book, Shaw and His Contemporaries: Theatre Essays (2002), is available in the Shaw Festival Shops.



Director's Notes

By Christopher Newton

Here is the golden summer of late Victorian England: elegant apartments in London, beautiful country estates, gorgeous clothes, soft summer weather, where the irritants of life -- things like trademen's bills -- are turned into jokes. It is a fantastical world that never really existed in this form, and yet the strange thing about *The Importance* is the number of realistic touchstones.

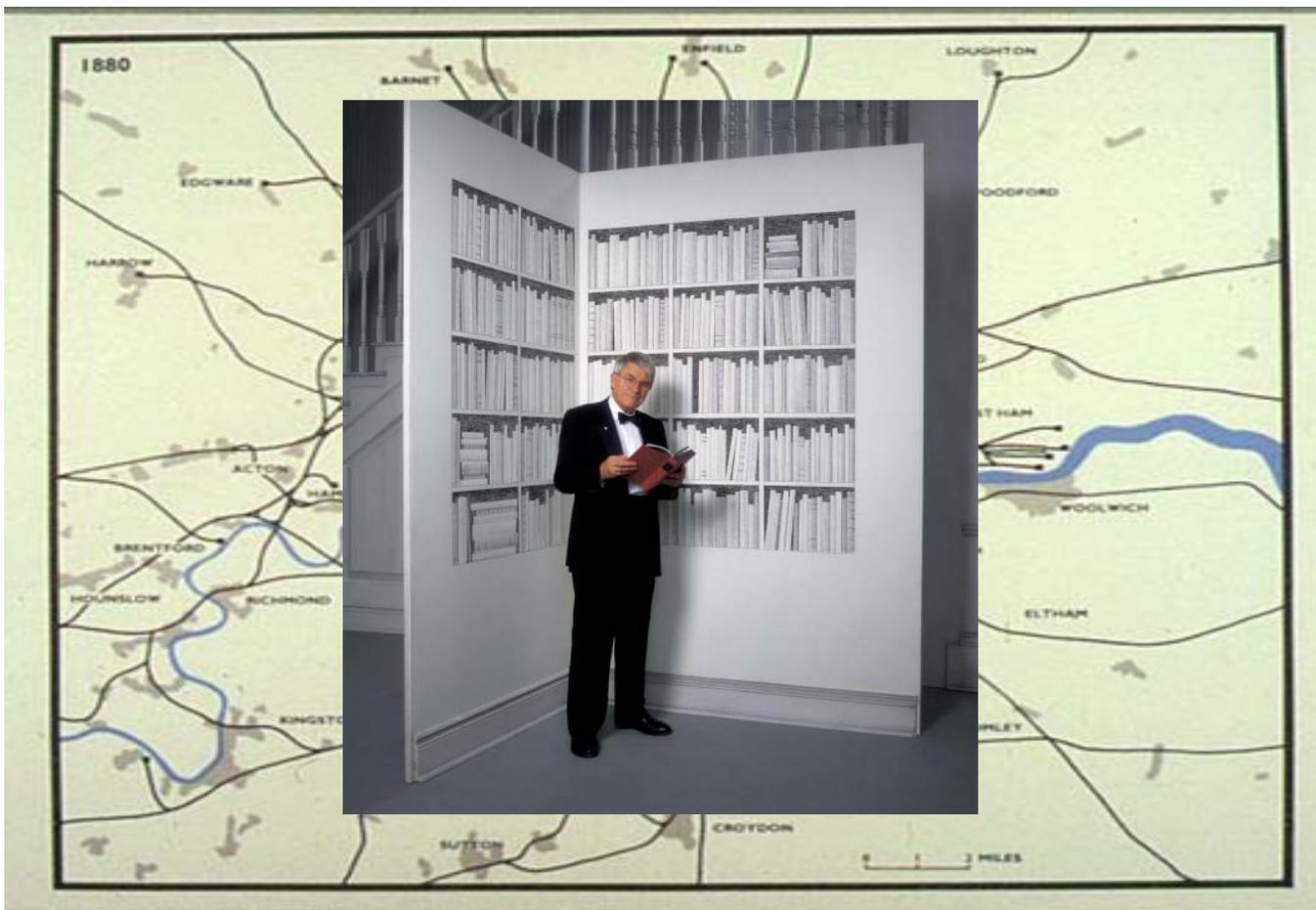
Everyone in the audience on the 14th February 1895 would have known the references. Algy talks about going to dinner at Willis's: in fact, Willis's was next door but one to the St James Theatre, and many of the audience would go there for supper after the show. (It's as if today's audience heard the character at the Royal George suggesting a sandwich at the Epicurean!) Algy's apartment is three minutes from the theatre, just the other side of Piccadilly. Some of the audience would have lived in Belgrave Square. Many of them would

have been at the Empire, Leicester Square, in the last week.

Trains. Telegrams. Gower Street omnibuses. This fantastical world was made out of the reality of upper class London life. It was a life that depended on servants, that was afraid of revolution, that manipulated its environment in terms of manners and social and political position because a dangerous world was changing so rapidly. It is everyday life turned into a dream.

Even the plot is made up of bits and pieces of other plays. There are odd echoes of *Charley's Aunt* and W.S. Gilbert's *Engaged*. Indeed, although the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a direct descendant of Gilbert's *Topsy Turvydom*, the play transcends its time because it knows its own time so well. It is a perfect example of a playwright being so specific that his work becomes universal.

Below: Christopher Newton, against a backdrop of a map of London, circa 1890's.



Question 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF A NAME

Different characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* place great value or usefulness in a person's name:

Both **Miss Gwendolen Fairfax** and **Miss Cecily Cardew** feel destined to love a man named Ernest because, as they each state at different times in the play, "there is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence." They also both declare that they could not possibly love a man who was not named Ernest.

Both **Algernon Moncrieff** and **Jack Worthing** pretend they are named Ernest in order to further their own interests.

Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, will not allow her daughter to marry a man whose family name is unknown.



Have you or anyone you know ever been judged based on family name or reputation?

In your community, are there family names associated with different professions or characteristics?

Do you associate any first names with certain characteristics in people? If so, is this association caused by the sound of the name or your knowledge of people who have the name?

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, two lovers are forbidden to marry because of their family names. Do such situations exist in real life today?

Many authors have written under assumed names or pseudonyms. Research either a modern author (Stephen King, for example) or an author from the past (George Eliot, for example), who have published novels under names other than their own. Why do you think someone would choose to write under an assumed name?

Question 1 Cont.



Name Game Part 1

This exercise involves the entire class standing in a circle. In turn, each student says his/her first name preceded by a characteristic that begins with the same letter (for example, “bashful Beverly”). After the student has spoken his/her name plus the adjective, the rest of the class repeats what the student has said. On the second time around the circle, the student repeats the name and adjective and also adds an accompanying action. As in the first round, the rest of the class repeats each student’s name + adjective + action.

Name Game Part 2

This part of the game is more difficult than the first part. For this reason, the students should be divided into circles of approximately 6 people. In turn, each student says a name that he or she would like as a pseudonym. The entire circle practices saying each new name for 3 or 4 rotations. Then, the students select someone to start “throwing names.” Student #1 says his/her assumed name, followed by another assumed name in the circle. The named student says his/her assumed name, followed by another name. This pattern continues and gains speed until everyone is familiar with all the names. When the circles all return as a large group, people from each circle introduce their peers by pseudonym to the rest of the class. Students may be encouraged to address each other by pseudonym in the hall or cafeteria.

Name Game Part 3

This part of the game requires students to assign qualities and actions to characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* based on their names. Divide the class into groups of 3-4. Have them select at random one of the following names: **Lady Bracknell**, **Miss Prism**, **Mr Chasuble**, **John Worthing**, **Algernon Moncrieff**, **Gwendolen Fairfax** or **Cecily Cardew**. Based solely on the name, have the students decide on three personality traits of the character, as well as three or four activities the character might habitually be doing. Then have the students each pose in a selected activity to present a complete portrait of their assigned character. Each student in the group should choose a separate activity for the character to be displaying in the portrait. Have the rest of the class describe the character based on the portraits created. After viewing the play, ask the students to compare their portraits of the characters to the actual characters in the play.

Question 2

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PLACE

One of the main characters in the play (**Algernon**) lives in the city and visits the country. Another main character (Algernon's friend, **Jack**) lives in the country and visits the city.

Jack says that he visits the city for pleasure, to avoid the responsibilities of home. He states: "When one is in town, one amuses oneself. When one is in the country, one amuses other people."



DISCUSSION

What do you think would be the major city and country pastimes of the wealthy in 1895, the year the play was first produced?

In today's society, what activities do we associate with the city? What activities do we associate with the country?

How do you think today's city schools are both similar and different from today's country schools? What are the advantages and disadvantages of attending a city school/country school?



ACTIVITIES

Soundscapes

A soundscape is an aural depiction of a location. Its visual equivalent is a landscape picture.

In groups of about 6 people, create soundscapes of either the city, the country, or both. After performing the soundscapes, compare the types of sounds associated with each location.

Steps for creating a soundscape:

1. Identify sounds associated with a particular setting, environment or experience.
2. Assign at least one sound to each group member.
3. Practice creating the sounds individually.
4. Determine which sounds should be introduced first, second, third, etc.
5. Experiment with the beginning of the soundscape, gradually building to a crescendo.
6. Determine which sounds should be dropped first, second, third, etc.
7. Experiment with the ending of the soundscape, gradually going from crescendo to silence.
8. Put the entire soundscape together.
9. Practice until everyone is satisfied with the order of sounds, volume and tempo.

Question 2 Cont.



Modern Gothic/Modern Urban

The American artist, Grant Wood, who grew up in rural Iowa, painted a depiction of life in the country called *American Gothic*. The painting features a farmer holding a pitchfork and standing next to his spinster daughter. They are posed before their house, whose gabled window and tracery, in the American Gothic style, inspired the painting's title. *American Gothic* captures the Puritan ethic that Wood believed defined the Midwestern rural character of the early 20th century.

In pairs, representing a father and a daughter, create a modern version of *American Gothic* to depict rural life today. What object would be included in the picture? What would the living quarters look like?

In the same pairs, create a depiction of a modern urban father and daughter. What object would be included in the picture? What would the living quarters look like?

Practise moving slowly from one picture to the other, revealing the difference between life in the city and life in the country for the people in both pictures.

Country Mouse/City Mouse

Literature and television have built stories on the topic of adapting to life in either the city or country. How many students in the class recall the children's story of *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse*? How many have watched the old sit-com *Green Acres*? What other examples of rural/urban contrast can they recall from either literature or media?

In groups of 3-4, students will decide on creating a scene to take place in either the country or the city. At least one character in the scene will be unaccustomed to life in this environment.

Identify two problems the character might face during a typical day in the location your group has selected.

In drama, characters usually do not solve problems easily. Imagine three possible attempts the character(s) might make to solve each of the two problems you have identified. It will be up to you to decide whether or not the character(s) succeed(s) in solving the problems.

Improvise the characters' attempts to solve the problems in these stages: first, a character meets problem #1; next, show the initial attempt to solve the problem; then the second attempt; then the third. After the first problem has been dealt with, work on the second problem. Finally, figure out a way to end the scene.

Question 3

THE IMPORTANCE OF EATING

Many scenes in *The Importance of Being Earnest* involve either eating or planning to eat.

In the opening scene of the play, **Algernon** and his servant **Lane** recall the wine drunk at Thursday's dinner party, and discuss the sandwiches prepared for the imminent visit of **Lady Bracknell**.

When **Jack** visits **Algernon**, they eat the sandwiches meant for **Lady Bracknell**, and discuss dinner plans for later in the day. **Algernon** says: "I hate people who are not serious about meals."

When **Lady Bracknell** arrives, she reviews with **Algernon** the music and seating arrangements for her final dinner party of the season.

When **Cecily** and **Gwendolen** meet for the first time, they drink tea and eat cake.

When **Cecily** and **Gwendolen** are angry with **Jack** and **Algernon**, the two young men argue about the muffins they are eating. **Algernon** declares: "When I am in trouble, eating is the only thing that consoles me."



Eating is an important social activity in most cultures. What social events are associated with eating in contemporary society? What rituals or customs of eating accompany these events?

According to Algernon, food is a comfort in times of trouble. For what reasons, aside from hunger, do people most often eat?

Question 3 Cont.



The Dining Room

The Dining Room, a play by A.R. Gurney, is a collection of scenes that occur over several years in the same dining room. The following exercise involves constructing scenes that might also occur in a single dining room.

Divide the class into groups according to the following topics:

1. A young man and his friend discuss their plans for the evening. One of them wants his friend's help in impressing a young woman.
2. An older relative asks a younger one for help in planning a large party or event. They discuss the guest list and make arrangements.
3. A young man meets his girlfriend's family for the first time. An important family member tries to learn important information about him to determine whether he is a suitable match for the young woman.
4. An adult tries to impress upon a teenager the importance of education. The teenager finds school boring and tries to draw the adult's attention to other topics, including romance.
5. Two girls argue about a boy they both like. The boy has led each of them to think that she is his girlfriend.
6. Two young men are worried that their girlfriends are going to end their relationships. They discuss their situations and take out their problems on each other.

As a class, decide on the location of the dining room. Is it in someone's house? A restaurant? Is it a formal or informal room?

In each group, decide on the time of day and food involved in your scene. Will the food be prepared for you or do you have to cook it as part of your scene? What is the social status of the characters in your scene?

In each group, work out the scene, including a definite beginning and end. Make sure that the food becomes an important component of the scene, and not merely business accompanying the action.

After watching *The Importance of Being Earnest*, discuss whether your scenes shared any elements of scenes from the play.

Question 4

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING SOMETHING

The main characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are independently wealthy and have no jobs. Their days are occupied by the pursuit of entertainment and amusement. They spend much of their time either making plans for the evening or discussing previous social engagements. What people are wearing, eating, and gossiping about are very serious matters of interest. Escaping boredom is a major goal.

When Jack first enters the play, he declares that he has come to town for “pleasure, pleasure. What else should bring one anywhere?”

Algernon states, “It is awfully hard work doing nothing”. Later, he says, “One must be serious about something if one wants to have any amusement in life”.

Cecily, bored with the idleness of her life in the country, writes a fictional account of a romance in her diary, as if the story were really happening to her.



Is it desirable to be born into enough wealth that you would never have to earn money in your life? Why or why not?

Will today's generation have more earning power than their parents? Why or why not?

Imagine that you are a young unmarried adult living in a wealthy family. You have no career and no household responsibilities because servants attend to cooking and cleaning. What would you do during a typical day in your life?

Why are people so fascinated with the lives of rich people?

Question 4 Cont.



Writing in Role

The Importance of Being Earnest uses the device of irony to mock the lifestyles of the wealthy gentry. One way that irony is used is by having the wealthy characters take seriously very unimportant details of life and treat impulsively very important ones. For example, choices of food, clothing, and seating arrangements at dinner are given careful thought, while choices of spouse are made quickly and based on superficial qualities.

In character as a young adult of leisure, write a letter to a close friend you haven't seen in a couple of weeks. Use the same device of irony found in the play by treating unimportant details very seriously and important issues very flippantly. Your letter should let the friend know where you are and what you have been doing lately.

As a class, prepare a chart of qualities to look for and avoid in a spouse. The chart should have the following headings:

Qualities	Qualities	Qualities	Qualities	Qualities	Qualities
Parents	Parents	Sons Like	Sons Don't	Daughters	Daughters
Like	Don't Like		Like	Like	Don't Like

When you see the play, compare your charted responses to the criteria of the main characters.

At random, mix and match qualities on the chart the class has created. Write a personal ad describing yourself as a character with these qualities. Give yourself a pseudonym. Distribute one ad to each member of the class. Write a letter of response to the ad you received, in character as the person who wrote your own ad.

After Attending the Play

After viewing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the class should be able to examine theatrical techniques and ideas introduced by the play.

Question 5

STYLE VERSUS SINCERITY

According to Gwendolen Fairfax: "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."



ACTIVITY

Mocking the idea of 'style over sincerity'

Select an issue of importance to teenagers. Draw examples from such events as: getting a driver's license, writing an examination, taking a job interview.

Pretend the teenager is totally unprepared for the important event chosen.

Decide on ways the teenager might use style to help hide his or her lack of preparation.

Identify adults who might interact with the teenager during the event.

Create a short scene in which the teenager succeeds because of style, despite a lack of preparation.

Create another short scene in which the teenager fails due to lack of preparation, despite an abundance of style.

Discuss the difference in tone and effect between the two scenes.

Question 5 Cont.



Using media to show 'style over sincerity'

Select advertisements from magazines and television that use style rather than important information to sell their products.

Identify various appeals that advertisers make to customers based on style rather than information (for example, using status images to sell cars).

In groups, create television ads to sell the same product, each ad featuring a different element of style over substance.

Modelling a scene from the play

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Gwendolen and Cecily have tea together during the time they believe they are both engaged to the same man. Maintaining rules of extreme politeness during the meal, they insult and mistreat each other.

With a partner, decide on a conflict that would make two modern young adults very angry toward each other.

Imagine that you and your partner are involved in a social friendly activity, like playing sports or shopping.

Create a short scene in which you and your partner maintain strict rules of polite behaviour, while also subtly expressing your anger through your use of words and gestures.

After watching the scenes, discuss why they tend to be comical.

Question 6

THE COURSE OF LOVE



Mirror Relationships

A similar pattern defines the interactions between Gwendolen and Jack and Cecily and Algernon. Each couple faces slightly different situations so that the two relationships might be viewed as mildly distorted mirror images.

In groups of four, assign the roles of **Gwendolen**, **Jack**, **Cecily**, and **Algernon**. Gwendolen and Jack will be Couple #1; Cecily and Algernon will be Couple #2.

The interaction story between each couple is as follows:

1. A young man and young woman are attracted to each other before they meet. Neither one knows how the other one feels.
2. The two meet and carefully introduce the topic of their feelings.
3. They make a commitment to marry each other.
4. Family complications forbid them to wed.
5. The couple vows undying love regardless of family circumstances.
6. A misunderstanding angers the young woman.
7. The discovery of a truth causes the young woman to break off the engagement.
8. The young man wins her back by proposing a solution to the problem.
9. Family complications are resolved.
10. The couple happily prepares to marry.

Without consulting each other, both Couple #1 and Couple #2 prepare frozen pictures of each numbered section of the interaction story.

They divide their playing space as if separated by a large mirror.

They practise each frozen image, one on one side of the mirror and the other on the other side. The idea is to create images that are not identical, but portray the same section of the story.

They decide on transition moves that will take them from one frozen picture to the next. The moves should be timed so that they begin and end at the same time.

They rehearse the entire sequence until it is memorized and the timing synchronized.

Music may be used in the presentation of the piece.

Question 6 cont.



Love in a minor key

While the two young couples provide the main focus of the play, a secondary love story also develops between Miss Prism and the Reverend Doctor Chasuble.

The sequence of this romance will be developed through words as well as actions.

In groups of four, assign the roles of **Miss Prism (words)**, **Miss Prism (actions)**, **Reverend Doctor Chasuble (words)**, and **Reverend Doctor Chasuble (actions)**.

The following lines, somewhat modified from the play, will be used to trace the development of the Prism/Chasuble relationships in three different encounters.

The First Encounter (Dr Chasuble interrupts Miss Prism's lesson with Cecily)

Miss Prism: Dr Chasuble! This is indeed a pleasure.

Dr Chasuble: Miss Prism, you are, I trust, well.

Miss Prism: I have not mentioned anything about a headache.

Dr Chasuble: Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil, I would hang upon her lips.

Miss Prism: We do not expect Mr Worthing till Monday afternoon.

Dr Chasuble: I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer.

Miss Prism: My name is Laetitia, Doctor.

Dr Chasuble: I shall see you at Evensong?

Miss Prism: I think, dear Doctor, I will have a stroll with you. I find I have a headache after all.

Dr Chasuble: With pleasure, Miss Prism, with pleasure.

The Second Encounter (Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble return from their walk)

Miss Prism: You are too much alone, Dr Chasuble. You should get married.

Dr Chasuble: The primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.

Miss Prism: Unmarried men are too tempting to women. No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

Dr Chasuble: And often not even to her.

Miss Prism: That depends on the age of the woman. Ripeness can be trusted. Young women are green.

(activity continued on next page)

Question 6 cont.



The Third Encounter (Dr Chasuble meets Jack and Algernon to discuss the baptisms)

Dr Chasuble: For the last hour and a half Miss Prism has been waiting for me in the vestry. She is the most cultivated of ladies, and the very picture of respectability.

Miss Prism: I was told you expected me in the vestry, dear Doctor. I have been waiting there for you for an hour and three-quarters.

Dr Chasuble: Laetitia!

Miss Prism: Frederick! At last!

Both Miss Prism and the Reverend Chasuble are very cautious about expressing their feeling and concerned about the proper rules of behaviour. The playing of their relationship should display this cautiousness and concern very strongly.

Before developing the Prism/Chasuble scene, have the students discuss the subtext of the characters' lines. What do they really want to say to each other?

In developing the scene, the characters of Miss Prism (words) and Reverend Doctor Chasuble (words) sit back to back on chairs. Their task is to deliver the lines of their characters, attending to the layering of subtext with cautious concern for propriety.

The characters of Miss Prism (actions) and Reverend Doctor Chasuble (actions) stand behind the two chairs facing downstage. For each line spoken by the seated characters, the action characters provide a suitable physical representation.

Practise each encounter separately. Then join the entire sequence.

After the scenes have been performed for the class, discuss similarities and differences in the portrayals of the couple from various groups.

Question 7

UNDERSTANDING THE RULES OF THE GAME

The Importance of Being Earnest includes various cultural customs, such as courtship, marriage proposals, planning for dinner parties, and taking tea. In each case, the characters either discuss or are already aware of distinct rules of behaviour that must be obeyed. Several comedians, including the cast of **Monty Python**, have satirized our culture by enacting well-known customs with a new set of rules.



As a class, decide on various customs that are appropriate topics for satire. The ones listed from the play are good examples, but the class might identify others as well.

In groups, select one custom for the group to satirize.

The group will create new rules of behaviour for the custom they have selected. For example, a new rule of courtship might involve giving a certain gift, wearing a certain item of clothing, approaching each other in a certain way, etc.

In the performance of the custom, one person in the group will pretend not to know the rules. Other members of the group will teach the rules. The person who has just learned the rules will then try them out with other characters in the group taking different roles, perhaps with coaching from another character in the group.

In order to be truly satirical, the scenes must be played with great seriousness.

After viewing each of the scenes, the class might discuss the possible origins and importance of cultural rules and rituals.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Most of the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* greatly criticize marriage. The only married character is **Lady Bracknell**, a very strong authority figure whose husband seems overpowered by her. The other main characters, all single, spend most of their time trying to get engaged, although they speak of marriage as the end of romance. Why do the characters want to get married? What common perceptions of marriage do young people voice today?

The play draws irony from the homonyms 'Ernest' (the man's name) and 'earnest' (the adjective). What does the adjective 'earnest' mean to you? Why do you think the play is titled *The Importance of Being **Earnest*** and not *The Importance of Being **Ernest***? When **Jack** discovers that his name really is Ernest after all, why does he say: "I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of Being Earnest"?



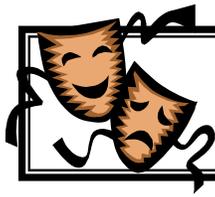
Algernon Act II, III
the importance of being earnest



Lady Bracknell Act I
the importance of being earnest



Gwendolyn Act II, III
the importance of being earnest



GLOSSARY OF THEATRE TERMS

BLOCKING: The actor's movement on stage is known as "blocking". The Stage Manager writes the blocking notation into the Prompt Script.

COSTUME: Anything that an actor wears on stage is referred to as a costume. The Wardrobe department (the department responsible for creating costumes) provides clothes, shoes, hats, and any personal accessories such as umbrellas, purses and eyeglasses.

DROP: A drop is a large piece of painted canvas that is "flown in" by the flyman (see FLYMAN opposite).

GREEN ROOM: The green room, usually near the entrance to the stage, is where the actors and crew sit while waiting for their turn to go on stage. One possible explanation of how the green room got its name is that actors used to wait for their entrances at the back of the theatre in an area where the scenery was stored. Perhaps the scenery was green, or the name "scene room" evolved into "green room".

ORCHESTRA PIT: The orchestra pit is the place where the musicians perform during a musical. Usually the orchestra pit is between the front row of the audience and the stage.

PROMPT SCRIPT: The prompt script is the written record of any production. It is annotated and maintained by the Stage Manager. Some of the information included in a prompt script would include: blocking notation, character notes the director has given an actor, the technical cues (such as lighting, sound, curtains and smoke) and their descriptions, and all technical information relating to the production.

PROPS: A property or "prop" is anything that the audience sees that is not worn by an actor or is not a structural part of the set. Some examples are: tables, chairs, couches, carpets, pictures, lamps, weapons, food eaten during a play, dishes, cutlery, briefcases, books, newspapers, pens, telephones, curtains and anything else you can imagine.

PROSCENIUM: Proscenium is a term describing the physical characteristics of a theatre. A proscenium theatre is one in which the audience and the actors are separated by a picture-frame opening that the audience looks through to see the actors. Surrounding this opening is the PROSCENIUM ARCH. If there is an acting area on the audience side of the proscenium arch, it is referred to as the APRON or FORESTAGE.

SCRIM: A scrim is a piece of gauze that is painted and used as part of the scenery. When a scrim is lit from in front it is opaque - you cannot see through it. When a scrim is lit from behind it is transparent - you can see through it. This allows for many different visual effects to be created by the lighting and set designers.

THRUST STAGE: A thrust stage is a stage that is surrounded on three sides by the audience.

WHO WORKS IN A THEATRE

DIRECTOR: The person who guides the actors during the rehearsal period. The director decides what the important messages of the play are and how they will be conveyed to the audience.

DESIGNERS: The people who work with the director to decide what the production will look like. Designers must choose the colour, shape and texture of everything you see on the stage. There are several areas that need to have designers: costumes, set, lighting and sometimes sound. The designers work very closely with the director to create the environment in which the play will take place.

DYER: The person who dyes fabrics for the Wardrobe department.

FLYMAN: The person responsible for the manipulation of the scenery which is in the fly gallery (the space above the stage). The scenery is manipulated by ropes attached to a counterweight system.

MILLINER: The person who makes the hats which the actors wear on stage.

PROPS BUYER: The person who buys items that will be used or adapted to become props. Props buyers also purchase the raw material used to build props.

SCENIC ARTIST: The people who are responsible for painting and decorating the surfaces of the set. Some of the techniques they use include: wood graining, stenciling, marbling and brickwork. They also paint the drops and scrim that are flown in.

STAGE CARPENTER: The person who ensures that everything runs smoothly on stage during a performance. The stage carpenter and stage crew are responsible for changing the sets between scenes and acts.

STAGE MANAGER: The person who makes sure that all rehearsals and performances run smoothly. During performances the stage manager also makes sure that all of the technical elements (e.g. lights, sound, curtains flying in and out) happen at exactly the right time.

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR: The person who is responsible for co-ordinating all of the technical elements of a production. Technical directors work with the people who build the sets, props, costumes, wigs and special effects to make sure that everything runs smoothly.

Importance of Being Earnest **STUDY GUIDE RESPONSE SHEET**

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Did you make use of the following? If so, please make any comments you feel might be useful:

The Players: YES _____ NO _____

Running Time: YES _____ NO _____

The Author: YES _____ NO _____

The Characters: YES _____ NO _____

The Story: YES _____ NO _____

Programme Essay: YES _____ NO _____

Lessons before the play: YES _____ NO _____

Lessons after the play: YES _____ NO _____

Please feel free to make any other comments or suggestions:
