

# SHAW60 FESTIVAL

2022 SEASON

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

**By** Oscar Wilde

**Directed by** Tim Carroll

**Set designed by** Gillian Gallow

**Costumes designed by** Christina Poddubiuk

**Lighting designed by** Kevin Lamotte

**Original music and sound designed by** James Smith

Hello!

Let me introduce myself.

My name is Dillan Pickelsworth from Gerkinshire, Cucumbria.

I am just a normal everyday cucumber, nothing special about me... except for my fancy hat and shoes! ... and that I'm a talking cucumber.

Okay... I love this play and will tell you all about it.

And secretly, I hope to join the upper class and maybe one day become a cucumber sandwich...? Oh, to join the upper crust and have no crust!

Okay, let's learn about the play!

### INVITATION

Why IS it Important to be Earnest?

Let's travel back to (an imagined) 1895. And get your fancy-pants on!

Make sure to pack your English accent, because the director of the play Tim Carroll (or TC for short) says that this play is "An engine for the creation of delight!"

### THE STORY

*"The truth is rarely pure and never simple."*

In a fashionable flat in London's West End, eligible young bachelor Algernon Moncrieff is expecting the arrival of his aunt, Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen Fairfax, when he is surprised by the arrival of his friend Ernest Worthing.

Algernon soon discovers that Ernest is living a double life, and that his real name is Jack Worthing. To escape his dull country life, Jack has invented a wayward brother, Ernest, whose escapades provide him the excuse to come to the city and visit the ravishing Gwendolen, whom he is courting.

On this occasion, Jack (as Ernest) has come to town specifically to propose to Gwendolen. Although Lady Bracknell intervenes and prevents the engagement from going ahead, Gwendolen is taken with the proposal as she has always wanted to marry a man named Ernest.

In order to pursue Jack's ward Cecily, Algernon arrives at Jack's house in the country pretending to be Jack's brother, Ernest. Cecily too is taken with the proposal, saying she has always wanted to marry a man by the name of Ernest.

But how will both Gwendolen and Cecily react when they discover that neither of their fiancés' names are, in fact, Ernest?

Earnest, adjective.

Earnest people are very serious and sincere in what they say or do, because they think that their actions and beliefs are important.

Ernest, noun.

a given name: from an Old English word meaning "vigour, intent."

So, the character that both women want to marry is named Ernest, the character that both men pretend to be is named Ernest. And Ernest is not really in the play.

This is a farce! It's meant to be confusing, even if it confuses the characters in the play! Can you tell that this is a comedy???

Okay, let's learn more about the play.

## **WORLD OF THE PLAY**

*"The growing influence of women is the one reassuring thing in our political life."*

The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People by Oscar Wilde was first performed on Valentine's Day February 14, 1895 at the St James's Theatre in London, England.

In August and September of the previous year, Wilde took a holiday with his family to Worthing, a seaside town in England. There he wrote the majority of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play was subtitled "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People"; because Wilde believed that "we should treat all trivial things very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

The play is set in the period of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 until her death in 1901. This is called the Victorian era and was renowned for its rigid social codes and etiquette rules. Manners dictated every facet of life, from social interactions and romantic relationships to dress codes and how much champagne one should drink.

Another Victorian era characteristic was the industrialization of Britain. New factories led to vast improvements in living and working standards. Trains and railways replaced the traditional horse-drawn carriages. A lot of scientific inventions happened like the telephone, radio, sewing machine and more!

The play uses one of Bernard Shaw's most favourite narrative devices: inversion. With this play Wilde inverts or flips the Victorian melodrama, becoming instead a comedy of manners and farce. Wilde was satirizing the hypocrisy and artificiality of Victorian society and pokes fun at the class system, family lineage, money, manners and more.

## **OSCAR WILDE**

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

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16th, 1854 in Dublin Ireland. He was a popular writer in Victorian England, and was best known for his wit. He wrote a novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as several plays including *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and many short stories. Oscar Wilde was married in 1884 to a wealthy English woman named Constance Lloyd. They had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan.

Wilde had an ongoing romantic affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and in February 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of being gay which was illegal in Britain at the time. Wilde sued the Marquess for libel, lost and was subsequently found guilty of gross indecency. He was sentenced to two years of hard labour at Reading Gaol. When he was released, Wilde went into exile and lived in France.

During his lifetime, Oscar Wilde was an important voice for the late 19th-century Aesthetic Movement, which advocated "art for art's sake," the belief that art needs no justification,

agenda or function and only serves as the self-expression of the artist.

He lived a gloriously notorious, eccentric and decadent life and 122 years after his death, Oscar Wilde is as popular as ever.

## **OUR PRODUCTION**

*"Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear."*

The play takes place in 1895 and Set & Prop Designer Gillian Gallow drew inspiration from the idea that the nature of the show is theatrical, meaning - it's larger than life! Art for beauty (or art for art's sake) and the Aesthetic Movement is a direct response to restrictive Victorian ideals.

These inspiration images show a jewel box quality of room which is heavily decorated with lots of things with a mixture of patterns and textures. Look at the colours and the deep rich jewel tones!

Beautiful garden hedges help frame the play and anchor the setting. Hedging and elegant gardens are also a symbol of the upper class - they could afford a gardener!

The stage is framed by smaller and smaller arches.

This is called forced perspective.

It helps the audience focus on the action on such a large stage!

The play is set in 1895 England so that means BIG SLEEVES!

Each character has a different outfit for each location: a city, town, and country outfit - with traveling wardrobe to boot!

## **INFLUENCE**

*"Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul."*

Oscar Wilde was a daunting wit, a trend setter, a political symbol and remains a lasting icon. In fact, marks of adoration – especially lipstick kiss-marks – were placed on his grave in Paris so often that Wilde's monument is now surrounded by glass.

Oscar Wilde paved the way for future trend-setters, queer icons, 2SLGBTQ+ activists, and celebrity known for their wit.

Don't believe me?

Let's play a game!

WHO SAID IT??? Wilde or RuPaul?

"When you become the image of your own imagination, it's the most powerful thing you could ever do."

RuPaul!

"Never love anyone who treats you like you're ordinary."

Wilde!

"There are only two kinds of people who are really fascinating: people who know absolutely everything, and people who know absolutely nothing."

Wilde!

"Never forget that the most political thing you can ever do is follow your heart."

RuPaul!

"Life is not to be taken seriously."

"Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about."

RuPaul! and Wilde!

Isn't it interesting that they both said similar things nearly 120 years apart?

## **CUCUMBER SANDWICHES**

*"Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such a reckless extravagance in one so young?"*

Cucumber sandwiches achieved literary notoriety in Oscar Wilde's play when Algernon devours an entire plate full in the first act and there are none left for his aunt, Lady Bracknell.

At that time, cucumber sandwiches were the domain of the wealthy, and Wilde uses this delicious sandwich as a means to poke fun at the class system.

Cucumbers weren't accessible year-round and cucumber sandwiches offered little in the way of nutrition. While the upper class could afford the luxury of cucumber sandwiches, the working and lower classes chose heartier and more filling sandwiches to eat.

Even the visual presentation of the cucumber sandwich showcases the class system. They were cut into triangles and bread crusts were removed for aesthetic reasons. As time went on, it became a status symbol to have the thinnest possible slices of bread.

Why not make one yourself?  
Pause the video and get cooking!

That's it, that's all!

Oh...

Here I am, wanting to rise above myself and become an extravagant cucumber sandwich...

Oh, to be fancy and fine.

WAIT WHAT'S HAPPENING!?!?!?

At last! Look at me now!  
As Jack says in the last line of the play

"I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being a Cucumber Sandwich."

...

or something like that!

"I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest!"

Ta-ta!