



THE IMPORTANCE
OF BEING

EARNEST

UPSTAGE

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The UPSTAGE Callboard

Oscar Wilde's comedic masterpiece is a glorious comedy of mistaken identity, which ridicules Victorian codes of propriety and etiquette. Dashing men-about-town Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff pursue fair ladies Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. Matters are complicated by the imaginary characters invented by both men to cover their on-the-sly activities – not to mention the disapproval of Gwendolen's mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell, played by Tony Award® winner Brian Bedford.

(Who)

Written by Oscar Wilde

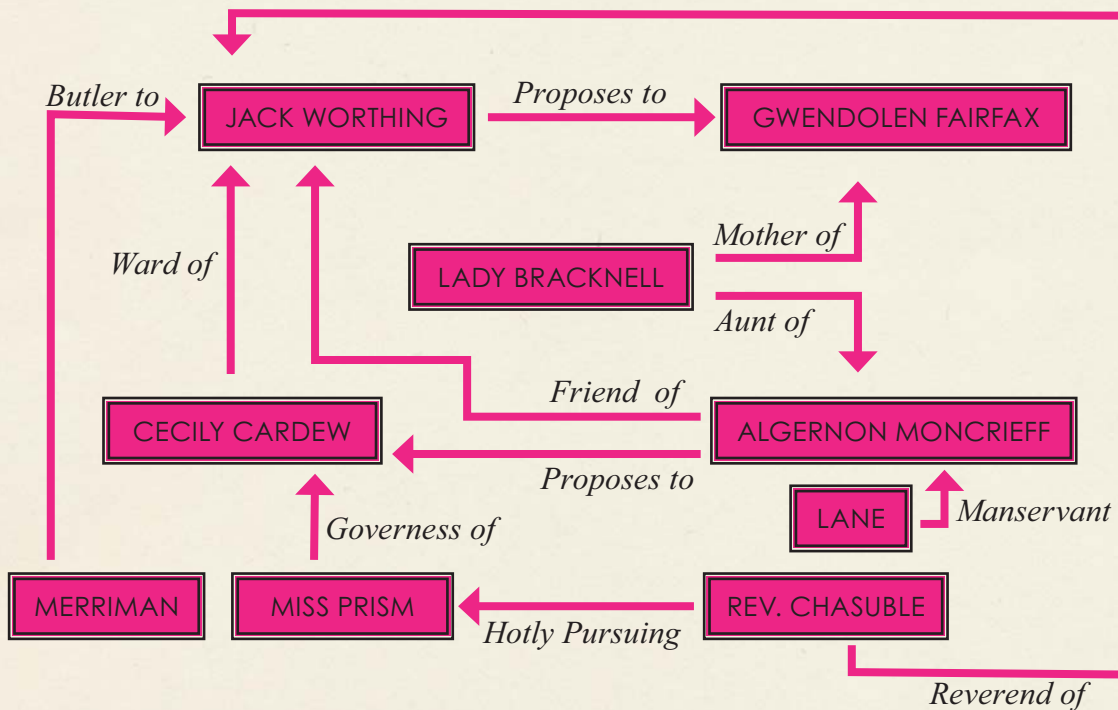
(Where)

London, England and surrounding countryside

(When)

Written in 1894; First performed on February 14th, 1895

CHARACTER MAP



Jack Worthing: A country gentleman who invents a fictional brother, "Ernest", who frequently requires his attention in London. Jack takes on the persona of "Ernest" when visiting the city. His true family history is a mystery.

Gwendolen Fairfax: A wealthy debutante who becomes engaged to Jack, thinking he is Ernest.

Algernon Moncrieff: A wealthy London bachelor who creates fictional ailing friend, "Bunbury", who frequently requires his attention in the country.

Cecily Cardew: Jack's young ward who becomes engaged to Algernon, thinking he is Ernest.

Lady Bracknell: An intimidating Victorian woman who represents the upper class society.

Miss Prism: An intelligent governess of Cecily, who knows the truth of Jack's identity.

Rev. Chasuble: A typical country clergyman in Jack's county who lusts after Miss Prism.

Lane: Algernon's manservant who assists Algernon in his lies.

Merriman: Jack's butler who stays within the neutral guidelines of a servant.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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Oscar Wilde was known for using his writing to make social commentary. Look for this image of Oscar Wilde throughout the guide for some classic Wilde quotes!





UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH DIRECTOR AND ACTOR BRIAN BEDFORD TO HEAR HIS THOUGHTS ON THE PLAY AND HIS CHARACTER LADY BRACKNELL.

TED SOD: Let's start by talking about you. When did you realize you were going to be a man of the theatre?

BRIAN BEDFORD: As long as I can remember. Even before I knew the theatre existed I was an actor. It wasn't that I wanted to become an actor, I was one. When I was a tiny child, the radio was everything. The BBC had fewer programs than they do now but they had the BBC Third Program, which was a sort of cultural channel that did rather high falutin plays. I lived with my parents in a little semi-detached house, not unlike the one you see at the beginning of *Brief Encounter*.

TED SOD: Suburban?

BRIAN BEDFORD: We lived in northern England in Yorkshire in a small town. My father was a postman and my mother worked in a weaving mill that made high quality woolen material – a speciality of the area. I came from a humble background, as they say. My mother was one of 13 children who came over from Ireland during the potato famine. My father started working in a foundry when he was 11 years old. Later on he took night classes and passed the exam to become a civil servant and a member of the post office. This was a great achievement for him. Unfortunately, I spent a lot of my childhood in an atmosphere of terminal illness. I had three elder brothers and two of them died of tuberculosis just before there was a cure for it. TB is a long, lingering disease. One young man was about 17 when he got TB and just before he



died, he passed it on to the other brother. I was four when World War II broke out so there was the war going on along with all the illness in my family. I was more or less left to my own devices. I used to place an arm chair at an angle in the corner of our living room, sit behind it, and pretend to be a radio for hours and hours. It was great for my family because they could ignore me and get on with what they had to do. I remember doing a lot of acting by myself in the bathroom. Not elaborate stuff, just pretending to be someone else. I didn't go to the theatre till later. Leeds was the big city about five miles away and there was a weekly rep company at the Theatre Royal there. They did a different play every week, and Monday nights were half price because it was more or less a public dress rehearsal. An aunt of mine used to take my cousin and me. It cost four-and-a-half pennies each. It was marvelous.

TED SOD: Where were you educated?

BRIAN BEDFORD: I wasn't really educated at all. I was a complete dunce at the local school and left there when I was 15; got myself a job at a warehouse in Leeds and joined the Bradford Civic Playhouse, a very accomplished amateur dramatic society. Tony Richardson, who later

became a highly successful film and theatre director, was part of the company and a lot of the other members eventually did extremely well in the professional theatre. I was terribly self-conscious because I had a very strong Yorkshire accent and the others all seemed so grand and posh-sounding to me. When I was nearly 18, I bought a book called *How to Become an Actor* and discovered that there was a place in London called The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). I got myself down there (unbeknownst to my father), auditioned, and by some miracle managed to get in to this hallowed organization. Not only that, I got a scholarship which included a little bit of money to live on. This was all presented to my father as a *fait accompli*! In my class at RADA, there was Peter O'Toole who also came from Leeds. (His mother worked with my father at the Leeds post office.) There was also Albert Finney, Alan Bates and lots of other people who later became successful. There we all were, working class boys, all from the provinces, away from home for the first time, our lives just beginning, and all determined to have as good a time as possible, going to endless parties and seeing a lot of really wonderful theatre in London. We were mysteriously confident and felt that RADA was a very old fashioned organization.

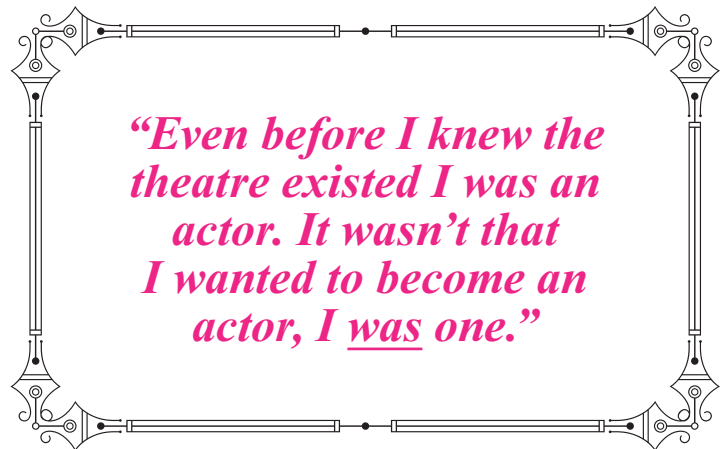
TED SOD: By this time Osborne and Pinter were writing plays, correct?

BRIAN BEDFORD: Yes, lucky for us the theatre was starting to deal with working class people rather than with aristocrats. And that meant work for us. I got my first chance because of this new movement and through my roommate Alan Bates. He was a great friend of mine throughout his whole life; a wonderful actor and a beautiful guy.

TED SOD: You came up, for lack of a better word, in an amazing time in theatre: a golden era.

BRIAN BEDFORD: Yes this radical change of direction proved to be quite historic.

TED SOD: When did you make the transition to



directing? Was that at Stratford?

BRIAN BEDFORD: The first major thing I directed was in '77 or '78. Robin Phillips was the Artistic Director of Stratford Canada, where we had a very exciting and charismatic company including Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn, Peter Ustinov and Maggie Smith. Maggie and I had a wonderful partnership up there and had a terrific time doing lots of plays.

TED SOD: Did you do *Private Lives* there?

BRIAN BEDFORD: We did, probably the best production of the play either of us ever did. We also did *Beatrice and Benedick* in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard III*, *The Guardsman* and *As You Like It*. Robin Phillips was trying to put together a season for the following year and I said, "why don't you let me direct a play?" And he came up with, of all things, *Titus Andronicus*! I was absolutely thrilled. I got Desmond Heeley (who has designed sets and costumes for the current production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*) to design it. That's when I started working with Desmond. His designs for *Titus* were out of this world. As indeed they are for *Earnest*.

TED SOD: I read that you appreciate directing the plays of Shakespeare that are difficult to stage. Didn't you also do *Coriolanus*?

BRIAN BEDFORD: Yes, and lots of others: *Lear*, *Othello*, *Winter's Tale* etc.

TED SOD: Is there a play that you have yet to direct that you want to do?

“Even before I became a director I was fascinated by every single component of the production And now I’m more interested than ever.”



BRIAN BEDFORD: I'm directing *The Misanthrope* next year, a great Moliere play, but there are lots and lots of other plays I'd like to direct.

TED SOD: You have this fidelity to Moliere and Shakespeare. How did that come about?

BRIAN BEDFORD: When I was 21 or 22 I worked with great classical actor John Gielgud at Stratford-on-Avon [England]. I actually played Ariel to his Prospero in Peter Brooks production of *The Tempest*. He became my mentor and eventually a close friend of mine. I absolutely worshiped him. A lot of his principles and feelings about the theatre rubbed off on me. And since then I have pretty well devoted myself to the classics which, for me, has led to a very interesting career. Since moving to the US almost 50 years ago I have spent about a third of that time at Canada's Stratford Festival, and that has really made my professional life.

TED SOD: Tell me about *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Did you propose this to Des McAnuff, the current Artistic Director at Stratford, Ontario?

BRIAN BEDFORD: No, he proposed it to me. Strangely I had never been a fan of the play; it seemed rather showy-offy to me, a sort of litany of aphorisms. So when Des said, "why don't you direct *Earnest* and play Lady Bracknell?" I wasn't entirely enthusiastic. However after reading it carefully a few times it was very clear that Lady B. was a wonderful part and I started to suspect there might be a way of doing the play in a more dimensional, organic way than I had seen hitherto.

TED SOD: Tell me about directing yourself. Is that a challenge? You've done it before, correct?

BRIAN BEDFORD: I think I've always to a certain extent directed myself. (I think most experienced actors do.) That's not to say that I haven't benefited immensely from great directors like Gielgud, Mike Nichols, Robin Phillips, Michael Langham and Joe Dowling. In fact it is a combination of their collective influences on me that provided me with whatever directorial skills I have. Even before I became a director I was fascinated by every single component of the production. And now I'm more interested than ever.

TED SOD: What were you looking for in casting the actors? You have some top notch people.

BRIAN BEDFORD: I was looking for people who could connect with Oscar Wilde's text and mine its extremely rarified reality.

I wanted people who'd produce the opposite of the superficial acting I'd seen in previous productions. In other words proponents of George M. Cohen's theory that comedy is a very serious business. Wilde talked about the psychology of his characters. He wanted the comedy to be real. It is a very elusive style. It's obviously a satire which he described as "a serious play for trivial people". And behind the comedy there is something serious, even subversive, about this play. Wilde's view of the upper class society of his time was that they were empty-headed people who had far too much influence and power. They were taking their cue from the woman who was sitting on the throne of course. By this time, she was a bundle of morality and religiosity. It amazes me in all that I've read about *Earnest* that no one has likened Lady Bracknell to Queen Victoria. There is a similarity there. Oscar called it a farcical comedy and of course it is. Farces find their seeming reality only on a stage. This is the approach Desmond and I took with the design. But conversely, I'm convinced that what makes the play funny is that the characters actually believe what they are saying, and that makes *Earnest* hard for the actors because it's quite difficult to make these mad people organic. But if you can do that, you provide the audience a fuller experience of the play than if you don't. Wilde thought that these people were deeply stupid and hypocritical but of course they thought quite the opposite.

TED SOD: Why has this play stayed in the repertory? Why is it a classic?

BRIAN BEDFORD: Because basically human nature doesn't change. Today we have just as much stupidity, hypocrisy, pseudo-morality and obsession with money as existed in 1895. So *Earnest* is as meaningful today as it was 120 years ago. Also, it's quite possibly the funniest play ever written.

TED SOD: Wilde was such an acute social critic but he doesn't show his hand at all.

BRIAN BEDFORD: No he keeps his characters

completely unaware of their own delusion. They are not baddies and this is what makes them so scary as well as so funny. They are victims of their upbringing.


TED SOD: He must have wanted the audience to see themselves and yet be able to laugh at themselves.

BRIAN BEDFORD: Moliere and Shakespeare do the same.

TED SOD: Shakespeare does it on all different class levels.

BRIAN BEDFORD: Absolutely. You've used the "C" word: class. And that is an important theme in *Earnest*.

TED SOD: It is tragic that Wilde never wrote another play after *Earnest*. His career was ended because of his private life.

BRIAN BEDFORD: Yes he was a victim of the kind of hatred and intolerance that exists today. But poor Oscar, like a lot of artists, was a self-destructive, reckless soul. He claimed to have put his talent into his writing but his genius into his life. And indeed Oscar's friends and admirers said yes, his work was wonderful but the truly dazzling experience of Wilde was being in his presence and listening to his conversation. In *Earnest*, unlike his other plays, we actually get just that. Each character is endowed with Oscar's own facility for brilliant talking. So, assuming that his self-assessment was correct, we the actors (and more importantly the audience) get the double whammy of Oscar's talent and his genius. What a treat! 



who is **OSCAR WILDE?**

Despite his short life, Oscar Wilde was a brilliant wit, satirist, poet, novelist, playwright, journalist, creator of epigrams, lecturer, aesthete, and dandy, whose colorful and provocative Wilde-ness characterized not only his work, but his lifestyle as well.

The Wilde Child: Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland on October 16th, 1854 into a successful family of intellectuals. His mother was a poet and Irish nationalist who instilled in Wilde a sense of the rebel spirit. He was home-schooled until he was nine, and at 17 enrolled at Trinity College, Dublin. Later, like many of his Irish counterparts, he abandoned Ireland for England enrolling at Magdalen College, Oxford.

The Wilde Identity: At Oxford he cultivated his nonconformity and began to fashion a personal style that would make him famous. He wore his hair long, disdained the masculine, entertained decadently, and dressed in a flashy manner. He adopted the attitude and manner of an *aesthete* and *dandy*; however, while his message centered on living for beauty and art for art's sake, his underlying agenda was a subversive commitment to making society better through his art. Wilde's personality would frequently be caricatured in the press, and later, mocked by the public.

Running Wilde: Although Wilde was married and had two sons, he had his first homosexual experience in 1886 with Robert Ross, a precocious young admirer. In 1891 he was introduced to Lord Alfred Douglas; they began an intense and intimate friendship and would later become lovers. This would be the beginning of his undoing in Victorian society, where homosexuality was illegal.

The Wilde Card: *The Importance of Being Earnest* – Wilde's breakout comedy, considered by many to be his masterpiece – premiered on St. Valentine's day in 1895. Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, threatened to attend the opening night and publicly humiliate the playwright, but Wilde got wind of his plan and prevented him from entering the theatre. This saved the opening, but subsequent threats and insults resulted in Wilde suing Alfred's father for libel. After several trials, and despite eloquent testimony on his own behalf, Wilde was found guilty of being a sodomite and of "gross indecency" and sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor.

A Wilde Ride: Wilde would never write another play. He never recovered physically from his time in prison, but in the end, he did experience a sense of renewal and believed that his difficulties strengthened his spirit. He lived in poverty and exile until his death in France at the age of 46 on November 30, 1900. Today, his grave is covered in lipstick kisses by visitors in tribute to both his brilliant wit and bold life. A Wilde life indeed!



"Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much."

The genius of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not as a new theatrical form; rather it is how Wilde plays with familiar comedic styles, pokes at well-known plot conventions, and masters verbal wit to serve up a highly original and unique comedy that continues to entertain and provoke audiences.

WILDE'S COMEDY

SATIRE: Seeks public reform, improved standards, or a heightened awareness of a corrupt society. Irony, wit, exaggeration and extremes all help to raise audience awareness. Satire sometimes uses strong character types as targets of critique instead of identifying specific people. The author relies on the audience to recognize “clues” in order to understand the target of the satire.

COMEDY OF MANNERS: Portrays the manners, conventions and stylized fashions of the upper classes in an artificial, sophisticated society. Romantic plots often turn on illicit or amoral romantic affairs. Humor is expressed through witty language, character “types” (such as fops or jealous husbands) and making fun of characters who fail to conform to the conventional attitudes and manners of an elegant society.

FARCE: Broad physical comedy, built on tightly constructed plots about middle-class characters. Exaggerated situations (often about love, sex, and money) push characters to rush at frantic paces, slamming doors and hiding in closets. Farce builds to absurd situations, but in the end, stability of relationships and class hierarchy is restored.

WILDE'S WORDS

INVERSION: the reversal of words from their expected order in a sentence. Wilde uses inverted statements to satirize Victorian morality and society. Algernon's remark, “Divorces are made in Heaven,” undermines the institution of marriage by inverting the popular saying that “marriages are made in heaven.” When Jack declares “It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he's been telling nothing but the truth,” Wilde comments upon the hypocrisy of this society.

EPIGRAM: a short, witty, and often paradoxical saying (example: “A stitch in time saves nine”). Epigrams allow Wilde to display his own mastery of language, literature, and life and to challenge the wit of his listener.

WITTICISM: a clever witty and often biting or ironic remark. Nearly every line spoken in the play is a kind of witticism.

WORDPLAY: playful use of words.

WILDE'S COMEDY CHECKLIST

(Plot conventions found in many comedies)

- The plot focuses on love or romantic relationships
- Two or more romantic couples must overcome obstacles and misunderstandings before being united
- Parent (usually a father) or other authority figure stands as an obstacle to the lovers from coming together
- Incidents of mistaken identity cause confusion and threaten the romances
- City life and country life are contrasted and humor is found in stereotypes
- Strong distinctions in social hierarchy (nobles/commoners) are established – although characters may willfully disregard them (noble marries a commoner)
- Instant conversions occur (wicked people repent)
- Discovery of a long lost relative solves the problem
- Conflicts are resolved through divine intervention or an improbable coincidence
- Happy ending with marriages or appropriate couplings for all the couples

*“Art is the only serious thing in the world.
And the artist is the only person who is never serious.”*



THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

VICTORIAN ENGLAND



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST takes place in 1895 near the end of the Victorian Era in England. The Victorian Era refers to Queen Victoria's historical reign of over 60 years, in which she oversaw significant advances in both human rights and technology.

At this time, English citizens felt wary of the political upheaval they had seen abroad in the American and French revolutions. In an effort to avoid a coup at home, the English people adopted a new code of ethics with an emphasis on moral and civic duties to society and the government.

In politics, the right to vote was extended to include working class men, while women remained excluded from the vote throughout Queen Victoria's reign.

In technology, the steam engine had progressively shifted the economic advantage from farm work in the country to manufacturing and trade in cities.

The economic shift had made the rich wealthier and the poor more desolate. *The Importance of Being Earnest* reflects the Victorian Era through its representation of varied social classes and reminders of civic and moral duties.



Click here to see a video of 19th century ballroom dances and learn a few steps to impress your friends!

"Wilde's view of the upper class society of his time was that they were empty-headed people who had far too much influence and power. They were taking their cue from the woman who was sitting on the throne of course. By this time, she was a bundle of morality and religiosity. It amazes me in all that I've read about *Earnest* that no one has likened Lady Bracknell to Queen Victoria. There is a similarity there."

-BRIAN BEDFORD



In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, **LADY BRACKNELL** is the epitome of upper class Victorian society. Queen Victoria was the leading figure of politics and morality during her reign and believed that the Crown overruled all political parties. Like Lady Bracknell, Queen Victoria was determined to uphold her family's upper class status. She was devastated when her son, Edward, disregarded her wish for a prearranged marriage and had an affair with an actress. Lady Bracknell also strives to uphold her family's reputation by controlling all decisions around her daughter Gwendolen's marriage.



ARISTOCRACY

- Mostly landowners whose wealth at the end of the Victorian Era came from investments in industry and inheritances.
- Aristocrats were expected to lead an honorable lifestyle including interests in religion and government.

BOURGEOISIE

- Mostly property owners who made their living in banking, commerce and industry.
- Could rise into the aristocracy by means of the dowry, when an indebted aristocrat could only continue their lifestyle by marrying a bourgeoisie.



WORKERS

- Diverse group made of artisans, factory workers, domestic servants.
- Servants were under close scrutiny of their employers.

LOWER-MIDDLE CLASSES

- Mostly shopkeepers, lawyers and doctors.
- Families worked together in the shops.
- Shopkeepers in poorer areas had to open and close several business while those in richer areas prospered.



PEASANTRY/URBAN POOR

- Peasants were hired by wealthy landowners to do the physical work needed on their farms. The peasants were paid low wages and lived in cramped housing. If they were lucky, they got a small piece of land to grow crops for their own consumption.
- The urban poor congregated in industrial cities and consisted of a variety of residents including unemployed shopkeepers with failed businesses, disabled citizens, and ethnic minorities.



“Do not speak ill of society, Algie.

Only people who can't get in do that.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPRIETY

MANNERS FOR VICTORIAN WOMEN



The following are excerpts from two books, *Manners for Women* and *Manners for Men*, written in 1897 by a Mrs. Humphry. These guides to Victorian etiquette prescribe the proper behavior of well-bred, upper-middle-class men and women in a variety of social and personal circumstances.

THE REALLY NICE GIRL

Can anything in the world be nicer than a really nice girl? [The typical English girl] is usually healthy-minded, and therefore not given unduly to introspection. She is far too well occupied in enjoying herself – riding her bicycle, punting herself about on the river, playing tennis or golf, and making sunshine in her home – to have much time for profitless self-analysis. She reads often enough that the sex she belongs to is a mystery, a problem, and she is content to leave herself unsolved, like a difficult conundrum. She is bright, frank, good-natured, merry, modest, and simple.

THE WELL-BRED GIRL

One can almost invariably distinguish the well-bred girl at the first glance, whether she is walking, shopping, in an omnibus, descending from a carriage or a cab, or sauntering up and down in the Park. Though the fashionable manner inclines to a rather marked decisiveness and the fashionable voice to loudness, even harshness, there is a quiet self-possession about the gentlewoman, whether

young or old, that marks her out from women of a lower class, whose manner is florid. The well-bred woman goes quietly along, intent on her own business and regardless of the rest of the world, except in so far as to keep from intruding upon their personal rights.

HOW TO DRESS

Women dress irrationally. I admit it fully and completely. No one knows so well as women themselves how very inconvenient modern dress is. We soon begin again to feel where the shoe pinches – perhaps the corset too – to suffer from the weight of our over-wide skirts, and to commiserate ourselves for difficulties with hats and hairpins. How truly fiendish a hairpin can be no mere man can ever know. And why do women dress irrationally? If we did not do so, we should be unpleasantly singular. The object of a fashionable woman in dressing is to make herself distinctive without becoming conspicuous. There are half a dozen women in London society who succeed in thus accomplishing a task that bristles with contradictions.

GENDER ROLES WOMEN:

Upper Class

All women were expected to maintain the home and carry on the family line, but after the childbirth, wealthy women could still enjoy a leisurely lifestyle. With inheritances or their husband's income, they could take control over a portion of the family's financial resources to hire governesses and servants to take care of their homes while they spent time elsewhere. It became a status symbol for a man when his wife was able to spend her time appreciating the arts and socializing.

Lower Class

Husband and wives worked more as a team to maintain farmlands but remained segregated in defined roles. Women and girls carried out housework and prepared meals. Like the aristocratic women, middle and working class women had control over some financial matters in the family. They would sell items at the markets in order to gain money to buy goods needed for the household.

“The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous.”





THE IDEAL MAN

Like every other woman, I have my ideal of manhood. The difficulty is to describe it. First of all, he must be a gentleman; but that means so much that it, in its turn, requires explanation. Gentleness and moral strength combined must be the salient characteristics of the "gentleman," together with that polish that is never acquired but in one way: constant association with those so happily placed that they have enjoyed the influences of education and refinement all through their lives. He must be thoughtful for others, kind to women and children and all helpless things, tenderhearted to the old and the poor and the unhappy, but never foolishly weak in giving where gifts do harm instead of good—his brain must be as fine as his heart, in fact. There are few such men but they do exist.

TEA TIME

Gentlemen are in great request at five o'clock tea. Their duties are rather onerous if there are but one or two men and the usual crowd of ladies. They have to carry teacups about, hand sugar, cream, and cakes or muffins, and keep up all the time a stream of small talk, as amusing as they can make it. They must rise every time a lady enters or leaves the room, opening the door for her exit if no one else is nearer to it, and, if the hostess requests them, they must see the lady downstairs to her carriage or cab.



ENGAGEMENT & MARRIAGE

Should the lady accept the offer, the happy wooer must take the earliest opportunity of seeing her father, or, failing him, her nearest friend, and begging him to permit the engagement. Should he consent, all is well; but in the contrary case, his decision must be accepted. To allow a girl to engage herself against the wish of her family is to drag her into a false position.

DRESSING

If a man does not dress well in society he cannot be a success. If he commits flagrant errors in costume he will not be invited out very much, of that he may be certain. If he goes to a garden party in a frockcoat and straw hat, he is condemned more universally than if he had committed some crime.


GENDER ROLES MEN:

Upper Class

The aristocratic gentleman generally was associated with government, law, higher education and business but he was expected to also be familiar with art, poetry and literature. Dueling and sports were also a part of maintaining the appearance and lifestyle of an aristocrat. Gentlemen were largely considered aristocratic and respectable by the occupation they held.

Lower Class

While the women carried out housework on the farm, men and boys worked in the fields and cared for farm animals. The lower class also included a class of factory workers who labored for long hours and low wages. The sons of factory workers could expect either to take over their fathers' jobs or work beside them in the mill.



"A man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing."

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN

INTERVIEW WITH COSTUME AND SET DESIGNER: DESMOND HEELEY



UPSTAGE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK WITH **DESMOND HEELEY** ABOUT HIS VISION FOR ROUNDABOUT'S PRODUCTION AS BOTH THE COSTUME AND SET DESIGNER.

TED SOD: Tell me a little bit about yourself. You were born in England?

DESMOND HEELEY: Guilty as charged.

TED SOD: Based on what I've read about you, you've never had any formal training.

DESMOND HEELEY: I began work on my 16th birthday as a gofer at Stratford-upon-Avon. It was called Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, now called the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company). I was a useful pair of hands, and I think I was quick. I could make things and I did what I was told and if I couldn't, I faked it. It was an extraordinary group of people I fell in with, just because a headmaster of mine said, "I think you should try this" and I did. I mopped things and scrubbed buckets. I unknowingly kept my eyes and ears open. I taught myself to draw. It's a different world from today. But the most important thing was that we were all very strong personalities. Then I did my Air Force stint for the conscription and when I came back I worked at Stratford again. I went to London with my friend Ray Diffen who had a costume business and I made head-dresses and props. It was my calling card. Peter Brook was doing *The Lark (L'Alouette)*. He came and asked for someone to do research and I was the research; "Des will do that," is off how it went. Little did I know that my research drawings would become the costume designs. I made the chains for Joan out of gas piping. Evidently, Peter was impressed enough to ask me to be his assistant on *Titus Andronicus* at Stratford. It was going back to my alma mater, but this time as assistant to Peter Brook, designing *Titus* with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh.

TED SOD: It sounds like you were a part of a family.

DESMOND HEELEY: You looked after your own, you took care of your own, you helped each other out and if you couldn't do the job, you passed it on to someone else as carefully as you could.

TED SOD: You are one of the few designers who designs both sets and costumes. How did that come about?

DESMOND HEELEY: It is the European way, especially in the theatre, ballet, and opera worlds. In a strange way it makes sense, because if you are working with the director you can compose the complete picture. If it's appropriate you know when to rely heavy on the clothes and simple on the set or vice-versa. I love working with performers and I love dancers; the ballet world I'm very fond of. I've also been lucky to work with the opera as well. What is interesting and useful is that I come from a fairly practical background. From each venue: dance, opera, classical theatre, I've learned so many useful things – movement, comfort, scale, etc.

TED SOD: Tell me about the designs for *The Importance of Being Earnest* and how you approached it.

DESMOND HEELEY: It's a theatre piece, and Brian Bedford, the director, and I are hoping desperately to create the effect of it taking place in a theatre, with footlights even. From the minute you enter the theatre, you know you're entering into a theatrical experience during the Victorian regime. It's just a reminder—it's not a

I have a feeling that the minute you go into the theatre, the minute you go through the door and you are directed to your seat, that's when the performance starts.

reconstruction. It's homage in a way. And Brian is terrific in it as Lady Bracknell.



TED SOD: It's become a tradition for men to play Lady Bracknell. William Hutt played the role. And Ellis Rabb.

DESMOND HEELEY: And there's a guy in Australia doing it right now.

TED SOD: I'm curious about your approach—I read that you do some research but sometimes you just throw the research out.

DESMOND HEELEY: The approach really is making a list—that's the approach; making a list of all the trouble spots—writing them all down and I go for those first. Don't go for Lady Bracknell's hats, go for: where is the bookcase going to be placed? I'm very wary of the word "concept." And I'm very wary of some of those pompous folks that say "how do you feel?" I don't feel, I make theatre. Then I trust my instinct about the flavor of the period. It's terribly important, the flavor of what the music was around then, what the political life was like, what life was like then. So when you draw maids, or Lane, the butler Merriman—you know who they were, what kind of people they were. It's telling the story with a light hand or a heavy hand.

TED SOD: How do you and Brian work together? Do you have many meetings with your directors? It seems like you've collaborated with Brian before, correct?

DESMOND HEELEY: It's a give and take. We're

of an age, Brian and I, and we both come from roughly the same theatre background. Our appreciation of theatre things is very similar. He is a marvelous editor. With any director I can't really say how I work, because my work is always different. It's different play-to-play. Different directors have different approaches: there are ones who come prepared, ones who want to offer some notions and ones who say "oh just do it" – always an adventure! My concern is to make *Earnest* or any play I design plausible to an audience.

TED SOD: Is there a color palette in your design for *Earnest*?

DESMOND HEELEY: Color is like money, you spend it very, very carefully. Where it's necessary and where it can speak for you. Form is more important than color. I like color, per se, to earn its living. The idea is to produce an atmosphere first and there are lots of things that happen that the audience doesn't know. I like the audience sitting in their seats and seeing it from afar. I don't like them coming up close and saying "what's it mean?" They're meant to see it from 13-14 feet away and then they can judge. Some of the things you want to use or have to use are sometimes a little alarming to the ordinary person, texture-wise and color-wise. All my life, I've wanted for things to read from out there, where those wonderful people are sitting in the dark. I think if you dot all the *i*'s and cross all the *t*'s, you don't leave the audience much to enjoy or do. I think audiences are pretty quick about catching on. Even if people don't know period, they'll know instinctually if something is wrong or not quite kosher.

TED SOD: I saw a photograph of Lady Bracknell in a red dress, which I don't think I've ever seen before. Can you talk to me a little bit about how you came upon that?

DESMOND HEELEY: Well, why not? It's not red, red, red, but it's a red made up of very many reds. I tend to use fabric like paint. The idea of the red? Why not?



The Importance of Being Earnest curtain designed by Desmond Heeley



The Importance of Being Earnest model of set design by Desmond Heeley

TED SOD: There's a real sense of depth in the set design, but the focus is center stage. When you go to the garden, does it flip around?

DESMOND HEELEY: No it's a separate set for the garden. Again, it's the artifice of basically the same ground plan. The downstage area is prime real estate, as most actors and directors know, center's always best.

TED SOD: I know our audience fairly well, and I'm sure they're going to gasp and erupt into applause when the curtain you've designed rises.

DESMOND HEELEY: I have a feeling that the minute you go into the theatre, the minute you go through the door and you are directed to your seat, that's when the performance starts. So the ushers, your seat, the curtain, the people around you—it's all part of the show. So the sense of expectation should build and hopefully you're in for a good time. The delicious pleasure of watching people do something so well—we wish we could speak like that, we wish we could wear clothes like that.

TED SOD: Is there advice you have for a young person who wants to design sets and costumes?

DESMOND HEELEY: If you can't think of anything else you want to do, do it. You need stamina. And a sense of humor is a huge requisite. Even though computers are magic these days, I still think being able to draw is of supreme importance because it's a pleasure and because if you're able to say to a director, "Oh you mean like this?" and draw it for them, that's quicker and nicer than saying "Oh, tap, tap, tap, tap, I'll send you it on the computer." Try to enjoy life. I have no blood family at all, so my family is the people I've worked with over the years from different countries. Remember, it is hard work. You're the first to start and quite often the last to finish! During which time you may be called on for any manner of tasks; counselor, advisor, all manner of situations. Irene Sharaff, the great costume designer, said once, "If it's not fun, don't do it." I absolutely agree.



TED SOD: Is there something you've always wanted to design but haven't gotten to do—a play or an opera or ballet?

DESMOND HEELEY: Not really, because I've been lucky. I wish I had done more 18th century things, that's all. I love the 18th century. *Amadeus* was a marvelous piece to do.

TED SOD: So even if it is a contemporary play that is set in the 18th century, you're happy designing it?

DESMOND HEELEY: As long as it doesn't have a real fireplace and real lamps and real stove. Yawn, yawn, yawn. 

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES



INVERSIONS: HOW DOES A PLAYWRIGHT USE INVERSION TO SATIRIZE HIS SOCIETY?

Oscar Wilde uses inversion, the reversal or replacement of words from their expected order in a sentence, throughout most of the dialogue in Earnest. To understand how inversion works, choose one of these inverted lines from the play and change words that will restore the original meaning of the sentence.

Example: "Divorces are made in heaven" should be: "Marriages are made in heaven."

"I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much."

"You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none."

"In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."

Write your own inversions based on these modern day sayings (or create new ones based on other familiar expressions).

The early bird gets the worm.

Children are meant to be seen and not heard.

It's better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all.

REFLECTION:

How do you use inversion? _____

What is the effect of inverting sentences? _____

Why do you think Oscar Wilde uses inversion throughout the play? _____



POLITENESS/ARTIFICE: HOW DOES AN ACTOR DEMONSTRATE THE IMPORTANCE OF VICTORIAN ETIQUETTE IN *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*?

Try this activity to understand how men and women’s behavior were affected by the rules of etiquette in Victorian England.

- *Refer to the Manners for Victorian Women and Men section of this guide for the activity.*
- *Divide students into groups of three.*
- *Select one paragraph from the manners section (pp. 12-13) to work with.*
- *Choose one person to narrate the manners while the other two create a tableau (a still picture) or a series of gestures (movement without speaking) to illustrate the illustration.*

REFLECTION:

How did it feel to act this way? _____

How was Victorian behavior different from our own time? _____

Why do you think the Victorians enforced this type of behavior? _____

When watching the play, ask students to identify how the actors move and speak to demonstrate Victorian etiquette. _____



HOW DOES A PLAYWRIGHT CREATE A SATIRE OF AUTHORITY FIGURES?

You've seen how Wilde created Lady Bracknell to satirize the morality and hypocrisy of Victorian society. Use the dialogue below as a model to create your own satire of an authority figure from your world.

Lady Bracknell: A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

Jack: Twenty-nine.

Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack: (after some hesitation) I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance...What is your income?

Jack: Between seven and eight thousand a year.

Lady Bracknell: (Makes a note in her book.) In land, or in investments?

Jack: In investments, chiefly.

Lady Bracknell: That is satisfactory.

WHO IS YOUR LADY BRACKNELL?

Make a list of modern day people (either people you know or people you've seen in the news) who may be similar to Lady Bracknell. _____

Make a list of modern day people (either people you know or people you've seen in the news) who may be similar to Jack Worthing. Choose one person from each of your lists. _____

What are some questions YOUR authority figure might ask? _____

What are some answers YOUR "Jack Worthing" character would use to respond? _____



HOW DOES CREATING AN ALTER EGO GIVE US FREEDOM?

You've seen how Algernon and Jack create a fake identity named "Ernest" in order to escape from their everyday lives and do whatever they like. Ernest is a kind of alter-ego for both men. Now, invent your own alter-ego:

What is her/his name? _____

Describe this person in a short biographical sketch

Where would your alter ego go? _____

What would your alter ego do? _____

Do you have a "Bunbury" (the fake relative Algernon used as an excuse to leave town)? _____

Does your alter-ego get into trouble or face consequences for his/her actions? _____



AESTHETE	A person who professes a superior appreciation of what is beautiful
AESTHETICISM	The quality of being aesthetic; of or pertaining to the appreciation the beautiful or of art
APOPLEXY	The medical term for a stroke
BUNBURY	Named after Wilde's friend Henry S. Bunbury; Bunburying is Algernon's term for leaving the city without telling anyone where he's going
DANDY	A man whose style of dress is ostentatiously elegant or fashionable, or affectedly neat, trim or smart
DOG-CART	Small, two-wheeled, horse-drawn cart with a box for carrying dogs, originally used for hunting
EPIGRAM	Concise, pointed saying
GORGON	Monster from Greek mythology with snakes for hair, also called Medusa; she was blatantly ugly so that the sight of her turned the viewer to stone
INDECOROUS	Violating generally accepted standards of good taste or propriety; unseemly
MACHINATIONS	Crafty schemes; plots; intrigues
METAPHYSICAL	Highly abstract, subtle, or abstruse
MISANTHROPE	A person who hates humankind
MISTAKEN IDENTITY	Comedic convention where a character either pretends to be someone else or is mistaken for someone else and doesn't know why
PERAMBULATOR	Baby carriage
PULPIT	A platform or raised structure in a church, from which the sermon is delivered or the service is conducted
SEMI-RECUMBENT	Slightly reclining or leaning
SODOMITE	A derogatory term for a homosexual



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WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE...

Below are some helpful tips for making your theatre-going experience more enjoyable.

TICKET POLICY

As a student participant in producing partners, page to stage or theatre access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "who's who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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