

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
ENRICHMENT GUIDE



By Oscar Wilde
Directed by Jackie Maxwell

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THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theatre is an engaging and interactive experience. We want you to be an active participant when you see our shows; laugh when it's funny, cry when it's sad, gasp when it's shocking and enjoy the experience as much as possible. To ensure the most positive experience, please review the following information prior to arriving:

- Please turn OFF and put away all electronic devices such as cell phones, iPods, video game systems, etc. prior to entering the theatre. Ringing, beeping, vibrations and screen lights are extremely distracting to other audience members and performers. If you turn your device back on at intermission, please remember to power it down again before the second act begins.

- The taking of photographs, videos and audio recordings in the theatre is strictly prohibited by law and our professional labour agreements.

- The only food or beverages permitted in the theatre are bottled water, beverages in Citadel Sippies and unwrapped ice cream bars purchased in the lobby. Please enjoy all other snacks in the lobby. No outside food or drink is permitted in the theatre.

- Please respect the space by keeping your feet off the seats.

- Just as you can see and hear the performers, they can hear and see you. We kindly ask that audience members do not talk or move around during the performance, as it distracts the actors and your fellow audience members.

- There is no dress code at the Citadel Theatre, but we respectfully request that patrons refrain from wearing hats. For the safety of those with allergies, please refrain from using perfumes or scented products before coming to the theatre.

- Please keep backpacks and other bags underneath your seat. Placing them in front of you may impair the ability of people exiting the row in an emergency. Please also keep the aisles clear, as they are sometimes used as entrances and exits for our actors.

- Inappropriate behaviour including the use of laser pointers, interfering with an actor or the performances (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.) is strictly prohibited. Audience members identified as engaging in this type of behaviour will be removed from the theatre.

- Most importantly, we want to ensure that all audience members have a positive time at the Citadel. If you have any accessibility needs, or if there is anything we can do to improve your overall comfort at the theatre, please speak to any Citadel representative at the show!

CHARACTERS

JACK WORTHING

The play's protagonist. Jack Worthing is a seemingly responsible and respectable young man who leads a double life. In Hertfordshire, where he has a country estate, Jack is known as Jack. In London he is known as Ernest. As a baby, Jack was discovered in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Station by an old man who adopted him and subsequently made Jack guardian to his granddaughter, Cecily Cardew. Jack is in love with his friend Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. The initials after his name indicate that he is a Justice of the Peace.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

The play's secondary hero. Algernon is a charming, idle, decorative bachelor, nephew of Lady Bracknell, cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax, and best friend of Jack Worthing, whom he has known for years as Ernest. Algernon is brilliant, witty, selfish, amoral, and given to making delightful paradoxical and epigrammatic pronouncements. He has invented a fictional friend, "Bunbury," an invalid whose frequent sudden relapses allow Algernon to wriggle out of unpleasant or dull social obligations.

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

Algernon's cousin and Lady Bracknell's daughter. Gwendolen is in love with Jack, whom she knows as Ernest. A model and arbiter of high fashion and society, Gwendolen speaks with unassailable authority on matters of taste and morality. She is sophisticated, intellectual, cosmopolitan, and utterly pretentious. Gwendolen is fixated on the name Ernest and says she will not marry a man without that name.

CECILY CARDEW

Jack's ward, the granddaughter of the old gentlemen who found and adopted Jack when Jack was a baby. Cecily is probably the most realistically drawn character in the play. Like Gwendolen, she is obsessed with the name Ernest, but she is even more intrigued by the idea of wickedness. This idea, rather than the virtuous-sounding name, has prompted her to fall in love with Jack's brother Ernest in her imagination and to invent an elaborate romance and courtship between them.

LADY BRACKNELL

Algernon's snobbish, mercenary, and domineering aunt and Gwendolen's mother. Lady Bracknell married well, and her primary goal in life is to see her daughter do the same. She has a list of "eligible young men" and a prepared interview she gives to potential suitors. Like her nephew, Lady Bracknell is given to making hilarious pronouncements, but where Algernon means to be witty, the humor in Lady Bracknell's speeches is unintentional. Through the figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to satirize the hypocrisy and stupidity of the British aristocracy. Lady Bracknell values ignorance, which she sees as "a delicate exotic fruit." When she gives a dinner party, she prefers her husband to eat downstairs with the servants. She is cunning, narrow-minded, authoritarian, and possibly the most quotable character in the play.

MISS PRISM

Cecily's governess. Miss Prism is an endless source of pedantic bromides and clichés. She highly approves of Jack's presumed respectability and harshly criticizes his "unfortunate" brother. Puritan though she is, Miss Prism's severe pronouncements have a way of going so far over the top that they inspire laughter. Despite her rigidity, Miss Prism seems to have a softer side. She speaks of having once written a novel whose manuscript was "lost" or "abandoned." Also, she entertains romantic feelings for Dr. Chasuble.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE D.D.

The rector on Jack's estate. Both Jack and Algernon approach Dr. Chasuble to request that they be christened "Ernest." Dr. Chasuble entertains secret romantic feelings for Miss Prism. The initials after his name stand for "Doctor of Divinity."

LANE

Algernon's manservant. When the play opens, Lane is the only person who knows about Algernon's practice of "Bunburying." Lane appears only in Act I.

MERRIMAN

The butler at the Manor House, Jack's estate in the country. Merriman appears only in Acts II and III.

SYNOPSIS

Oscar Wilde's brilliantly clever comedic masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was once called by critic W.H. Auden, "the only pure verbal opera in English." *Earnest* tells the story of two young gentlemen in London, who each live a double-life, creating elaborate deceptions to find some balance in their lives. John Worthing escapes the burdens of responsibility to have an exciting life in the city, pretending to be his fictitious younger brother Ernest. Algernon Moncrieff, meanwhile, has invented a convenient invalid, Bunbury, whom he uses as an excuse to gallivant off to the country whenever he pleases. When John falls in love with Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen, he is determined to come clean, but when Gwendolen reveals she can only love a man named Ernest, it somewhat complicates things. When Algernon discovers John's secret and decides to visit John's pretty little ward in the country, posing as the debauched "Ernest," the situation gets entirely more complicated! Hijinks ensue, and the two gentlemen and their ladies are in for more than they ever anticipated when formidable Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen's mother, begins sleuthing around to uncover the far-fetched truth. Oscar Wilde's brilliant comedy captures with wit and charm the absurdity and delight of the Victorian "age of surfaces" (as Lady Bracknell calls it,) while capturing the struggle of four passionate lovers trying to conform to expectations and, in the most roundabout and delightfully funny way possible, love who they wish and live how they want.

TERMS AT A GLANCE

This section defines and offers context for some potentially unfamiliar terms or phrases in the script and some of the key terms used throughout this Enrichment Guide. The first time these terms appear in the guide, they have been bolded.

Forte: an asset of special worth or utility

*I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my **forte**.*

Salver: a tray for serving food or drinks

ALGERNON. And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

*LANE. Yes, sir. [Hands them on a **salver**.]*

Sententious: abounding in or given to pompous or aphoristic moralizing

*JACK. [**Sententiously**.] That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.*

Expurgation: the deletion of parts considered objectionable or harmful

*I'm sure the programme will be delightful, after a few **expurgations**. French songs I cannot possibly allow. People always seem to think that they are improper, and either look shocked, which is vulgar, or laugh, which is worse.*

Recumbent: lying down; in a position of comfort or rest

*Rise, sir, from this semi-**recumbent** posture.*

Profligate: unrestrained by convention or morality

*What about the **profligate** Ernest?*

Apoplexy: a loss of consciousness from the lack of oxygen in the brain

*I'll say he died in Paris of **apoplexy**. Lots of people die of **apoplexy**, quite suddenly, don't they?*

Quixotic: not sensible about practical matters

ALGERNON. Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

*CECILY. It is rather **Quixotic** of you.*

Misanthrope: someone who dislikes people in general

*You are too much alone, dear Dr. Chasuble. You should get married. A **misanthrope** I can understand—a womanthrope, never!*

Neologism: a newly invented word or phrase

*Believe me, I do not deserve so **neologistic** a phrase.*

Precept: a doctrine that is taught

*The **precept** as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against matrimony.*

Portmanteau: a large travelling bag made of stiff leather

JACK. His luggage?

*MERRIMAN. Yes, sir. Three **portmanteaus**, a dressing-case, two hat-boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.*

Equanimity: steadiness of mind under stress

*It is always painful to part from people whom one has known for a very brief space of time. The absence of old friends one can endure with **equanimity**. But even a momentary separation from anyone to whom one has just been introduced is almost unbearable.*

Effrontery: audacious behavior that you have no right to

*They're looking at us. What **effrontery!***

Insuperable: impossible to surmount

*Your Christian names are still an **insuperable** barrier.*

Terminus: either end of a railroad or bus route

*Until yesterday I had no idea that there were any families or persons whose origin was a **Terminus**.*

Heretical: departing from accepted beliefs or standards

*They savour of the **heretical** views of the Anabaptists, views that I have completely refuted in four of my unpublished sermons.*

Perambulator: a small wheeled vehicle in which a baby is pushed around

*Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a **perambulator** that contained a baby of the male sex.*

Capacious: large in the amount that can be contained

*I had also with me a somewhat old, but **capacious** hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours.*

Satire: Satire is the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter in order to embarrass, humble, or discredit its targets.

Victorian era: spanning the duration of Queen Victoria's rule from 1837 – 1901, is characterized by the expanding horizons of education and literacy, as well as by an increased desire of the people to question religion and politics.

Hypocritical: characterized by behavior that contradicts what one claims to believe or feel.

Society: an enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another.

Earnestness: sincere and intense conviction.

Paradox: something (such as a situation) that is made up of two opposite things and that seems impossible but is actually true or possible.

Melodrama: Melodrama is a dramatic work in which events, plot, and characters are sensationalized to elicit strong emotional reactions from the audience.

Aestheticism: An approach to art that promotes an "art for art's sake" philosophy, celebrating beauty as free of moral or utilitarian considerations.

THEMES

THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

“When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. But I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way.” –Lady Bracknell, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The Importance of Being Earnest explores the ideas of marriage and social expectations by using **satire** to indicate how shallow people are for marrying on the basis of money or class. As the story progresses, it is evident that people marry based on social position, wealth, and character. Lady Bracknell opposes mercenary marriages, yet she married her husband solely for money. She also tells Jack that she has a list of eligible young men and asks him a series of questions to decide whether he is a good match for her daughter, Gwendolen. Wilde also gave women in the story more power and dominance when it came to the idea of matrimony. During the **Victorian era**, women did not have this kind of authority because their male elders had tight control over the men they came in contact with and were considered inferior to them; however, Gwendolen and Cecily seemed to have had great control over Jack and Algernon. Wilde uses satire to ridicule the mindset of the English upper class on marriage and social position, revealing how shallow and **hypocritical** they are during the Victorian era. He exposes the triviality of **society** and portrays his targets of ideas as nonsensical to bring attention and change.



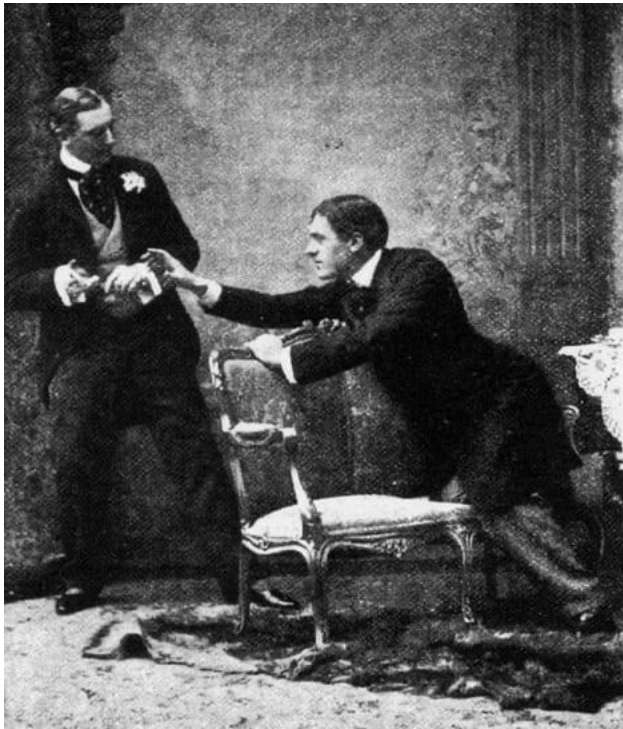
The Importance of Being Earnest at the St. James Theatre
Image credit: Grainger 1885

Marriage is of paramount importance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both as a primary force motivating the plot and as a subject for philosophical speculation and debate. The question of the nature of marriage appears for the first time in the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane, and from this point on the subject never disappears for very long. Algernon and Jack discuss the nature of marriage when they dispute briefly about whether a marriage proposal is a matter of “business” or “pleasure,” and Lady Bracknell touches on the issue when she states, “An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be.” Even Lady Bracknell’s list of bachelors and the prepared interview to which she subjects Jack are based on a set of assumptions about the nature and purpose of marriage. In general, these assumptions reflect the conventional preoccupations of Victorian respectability—social position, income, and character.

The play is actually an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage and whether it is “pleasant or unpleasant.” Lane remarks casually that he believes it to be “a very pleasant state,” before admitting that his own marriage, now presumably ended, was the result of “a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.” Algernon regards Lane’s views on marriage as “somewhat lax.” His own views are relentlessly cynical until he meets and falls in love with Cecily. Jack, by contrast, speaks in the voice of the true romantic. He tells Algernon, however, that the truth “isn’t quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl.” At the end of the play, Jack apologizes to Gwendolen when he realizes he had been telling the truth all his life. She forgives him, she says, on the grounds that she thinks he’s sure to change, which suggests Gwendolen’s own rather cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

THE CONSTRAINTS OF MORALITY

“As a man sows, let him reap.” –Miss Prism, *The Importance of Being Earnest*



Algernon and Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Image credit: Unknown

Morality and the constraints it imposes on society is a favorite topic of conversation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes. Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is “ungentlemanly.” “More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read,” Algernon points out. These restrictions and assumptions suggest a strict code of morals that exists in Victorian society, but Wilde isn’t concerned with questions of what is and isn’t moral. Instead, he makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn’t do. The very title of the play is a double-edged comment on the phenomenon. The play’s central plot—the man who both is and isn’t Ernest/earnest—presents a moral paradox. **Earnestness**, which refers to both the quality of being serious and the quality of being sincere, is the play’s primary object of satire. Characters such as Jack, Gwendolen, Miss Prism, and Dr. Chasuble, who put a premium on sobriety and honesty, are either

hypocrites or else have the rug pulled out from under them. What Wilde wants us to see as truly moral is really the opposite of earnestness: irreverence.

Earnestness, which implies seriousness or sincerity, is the great enemy of morality in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character. When characters in the play use the word *serious*, they tend to mean “trivial,” and vice versa. For example, Algernon thinks it “shallow” for people not to be “serious” about meals, and Gwendolen believes, “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.”

For Wilde, the word *earnest* comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism. The moralism of Victorian society—its smugness and pomposity—impels Algernon and Jack to invent fictitious alter egos so as to be able to escape the strictures of propriety and decency. However, what one member of society considers decent or indecent doesn’t always reflect what decency really is. One of the play’s **paradoxes** is the impossibility of actually being either earnest (meaning “serious” or “sincere”) or moral while claiming to be so. The characters who embrace triviality and wickedness are the ones who may have the greatest chance of attaining seriousness and virtue.

PERFORMANCE AND ARTIFICIALITY

"It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind." – Jack, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Performance and artificiality are central themes in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Both of Wilde's main characters, Jack and Algernon, lead double lives, which means that they are each pretending to be someone they are not, or performing. Jack creates a younger, troublesome brother for himself, named Ernest, whom he pretends to be in the city. After discovering Jack's secret, Algernon also takes on the role of Ernest, though he is no stranger to the double life. (Algernon had already invented an invalid friend named Bunbury, whom he pretended to visit frequently.) Essentially, both Jack and Algernon become actors in their own lives and have to craft separate performances for these additional roles. When they do become these alternative characters, however, they do not completely abandon their old selves. Jack and Algernon retain many of the key aspects of their original personalities within their performances.

Performance, or pretending to be something that one is not, is a type of artificiality. Therefore, though Jack and Algernon are two very different characters, each is artificial as they both pretend to be someone they are not— Ernest. Furthermore, we tend to view artificiality as a negative attribute, even deeming it as "immoral" since it requires one to be dishonest. Under these constraints, both the disreputable Algernon and the respectable Jack would be immoral characters.

Therefore, Jack and Algernon must be judged for what lies beneath their artificialities— their personalities. Jack possesses all the traits of a moral figure. He is sensible, responsible, and sincere. On the other hand, Algernon is the immoral figure. He is idle, indulgent, playful and selfish. Wilde solidifies Jack's morality by having all of his lies become truths at the end of the play. He finds out that he is actually Algernon's older brother and that his name was meant to have been Ernest. Therefore, his two major lies, the creation of a brother and his role-playing as that brother, become the truth. This revelation proves that the acts of being artificial and truthful are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as Jack ends up being honest despite his artificiality. In a classically Wildean fashion, the play leaves us with the paradoxical understanding that the only way to be natural is to be artificial.



The 1895 premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at St. James Theatre
Image credit: Unknown

The Importance of Being Earnest was an early experiment in Victorian **melodrama**. Part satire, part comedy of manners, and part intellectual farce, this play seems to have nothing at stake because the world it presents is so blatantly and ostentatiously artificial. Below the surface of the light, brittle comedy, however, is a serious subtext that takes aim at self-righteous moralism and hypocrisy, the very aspects of Victorian society that would, in part, bring about Wilde's downfall in his own life.

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

THRUST STAGE

The thrust stage configuration is one of the oldest in theatre history. It refers to a stage (or performance space) that extends forward into the audience. A thrust stage is especially effective for drawing in the audience and actively connecting them with the action onstage.

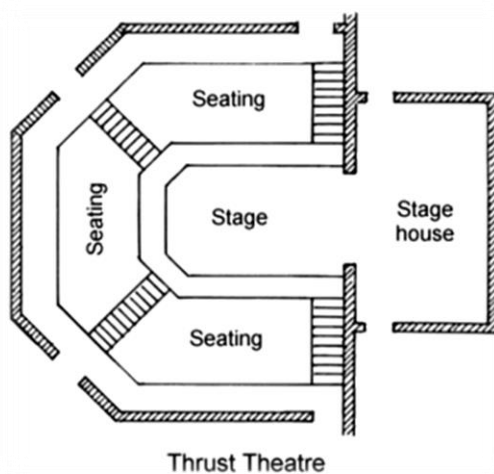
The Maclab Theatre at the Citadel is a classic example of a thrust stage. This type of stage is used to extend the playing space out into the audience, and enables actors to enter and exit through vomitoriums (voms) and onto the stage.

Thrust stages were used in Spain's Golden Age of theatre (which started in 1570), and were called *corrales*, as well as in the traditional Noh theatre of Japan. This design was also popular in London during the Elizabethan era, and is the layout of the famous Globe Theatre where

many of Shakespeare's plays were performed.

Between the 17th and 20th century's proscenium stages (which only expose the front of the stage to the audience) dominated theatre across the world, as the popular movement of staging focused on creating and maintaining illusion.

However, in the 20th century theatre started moving back to performances that focused on actor-audience contact, which brought the thrust stage back to popularity. Still, thrust stages are most often used for concert-style performances, rather than traditional theatre.



The layout of the Maclab Theatre at the Citadel

THE PROMO IMAGE FOR *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST* BY KRISTEN HIEMSTRA

*Did you know?! All of the season images that you see on the posters and playbills were designed in-house by the Citadel's Creative Director, Kristen Hiemstra! Here's what Kristen had to say about the image for *The Importance of Being Earnest*:*

The Importance of Being Earnest is a fantastically fun show about mistaken identities. Two men are both using the same alias name, and this causes considerable confusion for the people around them. I chose to create an image of an early Victorian era gentleman with his face/head missing to create a visual interpretation of this confusion. This image is also surprising and catches the attention of the viewer so that the Marketing team and I can use it to advertise the show. While the script is usually set in the Victorian era our version of it this season is set in the 1950's, but that decision hadn't been made yet when I created the images for the season.



WELCOME TO THE 50's (WITH AN EDWARDIAN TWIST)!

The Citadel Theatre's 2023 production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is set in the 1950's. Director, Jackie Maxwell, is interested in how in the 1950's, similarly to 1890's, there is a return to a more binary and structured world: The war is over and the men are going back to work and the women are staying home. Everything seems... constrained. Constrained and yet bursting at the seams. You'll notice in Deanna H. Choi's sound design that there are 1950's jazz standards set to strings (think *Bridgerton* with a jazzy flair). You'll see in Michael Gianfrancesco's costume design a more corseted look (popular in both the 1950's and the 1890's).

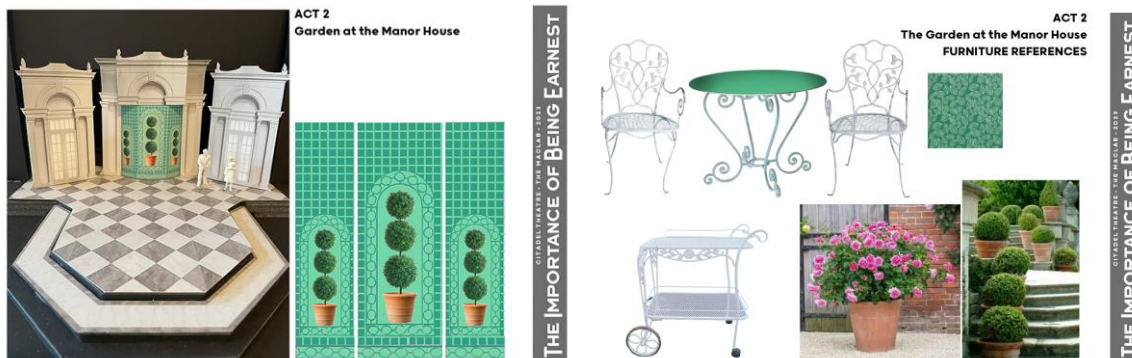
We sat down with Set and Costume Designer, Michael Gianfrancesco, to chat about the concept for his design and how setting the play in the 1950's informs his design.

In your design concept, the furniture and set decor for The Importance of Being Earnest has its own distinct colour for each Act. Can you tell us about how you came to that concept and what each colour represents?

MICHAEL: In Act One, which is set in Algernon's apartment, the colour palette is accented with black and yellow and is meant to create the sense of a smart and slightly quirky city apartment (or flat as it would be called in London, England). It has a bookshelf filled with interesting objects and quite modern, stylish furniture.



Act Two is set in the garden terrace in a country house and is filled with pots of pink roses and has a bright green trellis with ivy and climbing roses to create a sense of summer romance.



Act Three is in the morning room of the country house, and has bright red accents that reflect the intensity that the plot of the story reaches in this section of the play. The background of the set stays the same throughout and functions as both an interior and an exterior, which is essential in a theatre such as the Maclab where a big part of the set has to stay in place for the duration of the show.



*How do you envision maintaining the Edwardian structure of *The Importance of Being Earnest* within the “Welcome to the 50’s/mid-century” setting of this production within your design?*

MICHAEL: What works with setting this play in the 1950's in England, is that there is still a lot of formality and social structure in England at this time. The clothing of the period is also very tailored and structured, so it feels like a more modern version of the original period, and connected to that time in many ways. The formal architecture of the set could exist in the 1890's and the 1950's as architecture in England is very old, and these people would inhabit buildings that have been around since the 19th century and are most likely still there today.

HISTORY & CONTEXT

OSCAR WILDE: HIS LIFE AND WORK

Oscar Wilde, celebrated playwright and literary provocateur, was born in Dublin on October 16, 1854. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford before settling in London. During his days at Dublin and Oxford, he developed a set of attitudes and postures for which he would eventually become famous. Chief among these were his flamboyant style of dress, his contempt for conventional values, and his belief in **aestheticism**—a movement that embraced the principle of art for the sake of beauty and beauty alone. After a stunning performance in college, Wilde settled in London in 1878, where he moved in circles that included Lillie Langtry, the novelists Henry James and George Moore, and the young William Butler Yeats.



Oscar Wilde in 1889
Image credit: Unknown

Literary and artistic acclaim were slow in coming to Wilde. In 1884, when he married Constance Lloyd, Wilde's writing career was still a work in progress. He had gone on a lecture tour of North America and been lampooned in the 1881 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* as the self-consciously idiosyncratic philosopher-poet Reginald Bunthorne, but he was celebrated chiefly as a well-known personality and a wit. He may have been the first person ever to become famous for being famous (pre-Kardashian or Paris Hilton!).

During the late 1880s, Wilde wrote reviews, edited a women's magazine, and published a volume of poetry and one of children's stories. In 1891, his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, appeared and was attacked as scandalous and immoral. In that same year, he met Lord Alfred Douglas, who would eventually become his lover, and Wilde finally hit his literary stride. Over the next few years, he wrote four plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

During 1895, however, a series of catastrophes stemming from Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred, also a poet, led to personal humiliation and social, professional, and financial ruin. On February 28, 1895, two weeks after *The Importance of Being Earnest's* opening night, Lord Alfred's belligerent, homophobic father, the Marquess of Queensberry, publicly accused Wilde of "posing as a sodomite." The nobleman meant "sodomite," of course, an insulting and potentially defamatory term for a homosexual. Queensberry had, for some time, been harassing Wilde with insulting letters, notes, and confrontations and had hoped to disrupt the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a public demonstration, which never took place. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde sued for libel and lost. Wilde probably should have fled the country, as the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had made homosexual acts punishable by up to two years' imprisonment. However, Wilde chose to stay and was arrested. Despite information about Wilde's private life and writings that emerged at the trial, the prosecution initially proved unsuccessful. However, Wilde was tried a second time, convicted, and sentenced to prison for two years.

Wilde served his full sentence under conditions of utmost hardship and cruelty. Following his release from prison, his health and spirit broken, he sought exile in France, where he lived out the last two years of his life in poverty and obscurity under an assumed name. He died in Paris in 1900.

THE VICTORIAN ERA

Victorian era, in British history, the period between approximately 1820 and 1914, corresponding roughly but not exactly to the period of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901) and characterized by a class-based society, a growing number of people able to vote, a growing state and economy, and Britain's status as the most powerful empire in the world.

During the Victorian period, Britain was a powerful nation with a rich culture. It had a stable government, a growing state, and an expanding franchise. It also controlled a large empire, and it was wealthy, in part because of its degree of industrialization and its imperial holdings and in spite of the fact that three-fourths or more of its population was working-class. Late in the period, Britain began to decline as a global political and economic power relative to other major powers, particularly the United States, but this decline was not acutely noticeable until after World War II.



Queen Victoria in 1883
Image credit: Julia Abercromby

Victorian society was organized hierarchically. While race, religion, region, and occupation were all meaningful aspects of identity and status, the main organizing principles of Victorian society were gender and class. As is suggested by the sexual double standard, gender was considered to be biologically based and to be determinative of almost every aspect of an individual's potential and character. Victorian gender ideology was premised on the "doctrine of separate spheres." This stated that men and women were different and meant for different things. Men were physically strong, while women were weak. For men sex was central, and for women reproduction was central. Men were independent, while women were dependent. Men belonged in the public sphere, while women belonged in the private sphere. Men were meant to participate in politics and in paid work, while women were meant to run households and raise families. Women were also thought to be naturally more religious and morally finer than men (who were distracted by sexual passions by which women supposedly were untroubled). While most working-class families could not live out the doctrine of separate spheres, because they could not survive on a single male wage, the ideology was influential across all classes.

Class was both economic and cultural and encompassed income, occupation, education, family structure, sexual behaviour, politics, and leisure activities. The working class, about 70 to 80 percent of the population, got its income from wages, with family incomes usually under £100 per annum. Many middle-class observers thought that working-class people imitated middle-class people as much as they could, but they were mistaken; working-class cultures (which varied by locality and other factors) were strong, specific, and premised on their own values. The middle class, which got its income (of £100 to £1,000 per annum) from salaries and profit, grew rapidly during the 19th century, from 15 to over 25 percent of the population. During the 19th century, members of the middle class were the moral leaders of society (they also achieved some political power). The very small and very wealthy upper class got its income (of £1,000 per annum or often much more) from property, rent, and interest. The upper class had titles, wealth, land, or all three; owned most of the land in Britain; and controlled local, national, and imperial politics.

COMEDY OF MANNERS

The Importance of Being Earnest is a comedy of manners, a type of play popularized in the late 17th and 18th centuries. A comedy of manners is a witty, satirical play which mocks aristocratic society. Wilde revived the comedy of manners, which had its zenith in the Restoration comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith, to write an immensely popular, funny criticism of Victorian aristocracy. In the play, Wilde attacks Victorian complacency by displaying the foibles of society for ridicule and for his audience's amusement.

A comedy of manners is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet certain social standards. Often the governing social standard is morally trivial but exacting. The plot of such a comedy, usually concerned with an illicit love affair or similarly scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play's brittle atmosphere, witty dialogue, and pungent commentary on human foibles.

The comedy of manners, which was usually written by sophisticated authors for members of their own coterie or social class, has historically thrived in periods and societies that combined material prosperity and moral latitude.

One of the greatest exponents of the comedy of manners was Molière, who satirized the hypocrisy and pretension of 17th-century French society in such plays as *L'École des femmes* (1662; *The School for Wives*) and *Le Misanthrope* (1666; *The Misanthrope*).

In England the comedy of manners had its great day during the Restoration period. Although influenced by Ben Jonson's comedy of humours, the Restoration comedy of manners was lighter, defter, and more vivacious in tone. Playwrights declared themselves against affected wit and acquired follies and satirized these qualities in caricature characters with label-like names such as Sir Fopling Flutter (in Sir George Etherege's *Man of Mode*, 1676) and Tattle (in William Congreve's *The Old Batchelour*, 1693). The masterpieces of the genre were the witty, cynical, and epigrammatic plays of William Wycherley (*The Country-Wife*, 1675) and William Congreve (*The Way of the World*, 1700). In the late 18th century Oliver Goldsmith (*She Stoops to Conquer*, 1773) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*The Rivals*, 1775; *The School for Scandal*, 1777) revived the form.

The tradition of elaborate, artificial plotting and epigrammatic dialogue was carried on by the Anglo-Irish playwright Oscar Wilde in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In the 20th century the comedy of manners reappeared in the witty, sophisticated drawing-room plays of the British dramatists Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham and the Americans Philip Barry and S.N. Behrman.



Oscar Wilde Cartoon
Image credit: London Charivari, March 5, 1892

CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

Participation as an audience member at the Citadel Theatre aligns with the Alberta Education Curriculum.

Drama (Junior High)

GOAL I- To acquire knowledge of self and others through participation in and reflection on dramatic experience.

Objectives- The Student will:

- Strengthen their powers of concentration.
- Extend the ability to think imaginatively and creatively.
- Extend the ability to explore, control and express emotions.
- Extend the ability to explore meaning through abstract concepts.
- Develop the ability to offer and accept constructive criticism.

GOAL III- To develop an appreciation for drama and theatre as a process and art form.

Objectives- The Student will:

- Develop awareness of various conventions of theatre.
- Develop awareness of drama and theatre by viewing as great a variety of theatrical presentations as possible.
- Develop the ability to analyze and assess the process and the art.
- Develop recognition of and respect for excellence in drama and theatre.

Drama (10-20-30)

GOAL I- To acquire knowledge of self and others through participation in and reflection on dramatic experience.

Objectives- The Student will:

- Extend their ability to concentrate.
- Extend understanding of, acceptance of, and empathy for others.
- Demonstrate respect for others — their rights, ideas, abilities and differences.
- Demonstrate the ability to offer, accept, and reflect upon constructive criticism.

GOAL II- To develop competency in communication skills through participation in and exploration of various dramatic disciplines.

Objectives- The Student will:

- Demonstrate understanding of integration of disciplines to enrich a theatrical presentation.

GOAL III- To develop an appreciation of drama and theatre as a process and art form.

Objectives- The Student will:

- Explore various conventions and traditions of theatre.
- Broaden knowledge of theatre by viewing as great a variety of theatrical presentations as possible.
- Demonstrate the ability to critically assess the process of art.
- Demonstrate recognition of and respect for excellence in drama and theatre.
- Develop an awareness of aesthetics in visual and performing arts.

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FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

[Modern Re-Cap of *The Importance of Being Earnest*](#)
[Oscar Wilde Quotes](#)
[How Oscar Wilde Paved the Way for Gay Rights in the Arts](#)
[Oscar Wilde's Plays](#)
[Fabulous Monsters cross-gender *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde](#)

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