May 16—June 11, 2017

Time & Place:
Part 1. Algernon Moncrieff's flat in London, 1895
Part 2. The Garden & Morning Room at the Manor House, Woolton.

Run Time: 2 hours with a 15 minute intermission

Study Guide

Spoilers ahead!
Study guide prepared by Maddie Odegaard, Marketing & PR Department Intern
Cast

Lane/Merriman ................................................................. Sarah Lucht+^
Algernon Moncrieff ......................................................... Ayanna Berkshire+^
Jack Worthing ............................................................... Jamie M. Rea+
Lady Bracknell .............................................................. Linda Alper+^
Gwendolyn Fairfax ............................................................. Kailey Rhodes
Miss Prism ................................................................................ Vana O’Brien+^
Cecily Cardew ........................................................................... Crystal Ann Muñoz+
Rev. Chasuble ........................................................................... JoAnn Johnson+^

+ Member of Actors Equity Association, the union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States. Actors Equity Association, founded in 1913, represents more than 49,000 actors and stage managers in the U.S. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions, providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans. Equity seeks to foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of our society. www.actorsequity.org

^ Artists Repertory Theatre Resident Artist
Creative Team

Director .............................................................................................................. Michael Mendelson+^
Scenic Designer ................................................................................................. Megan Wilkerson#^
Costume Designer ............................................................................................... Bobby Brewer-Wallin^
Lighting Designer ............................................................................................... Kristeen Willis-Crosser#
Composer/Sound Designer .................................................................................. Jen Raynak
Dramaturg ............................................................................................................ Luan Schooler
Dialect Coach ...................................................................................................... Mary McDonald-Lewis^
Props Master ....................................................................................................... Arianne Melton
Stage Manager .................................................................................................... Carol Ann Wohlmut+^
Production Assistant ......................................................................................... Karen Hill±
Production Assistant .......................................................................................... Megan Moll
Assistant Scenic Designer .................................................................................... Trevor Sargent
Board Operator .................................................................................................... Alan Cline

Member of Actors Equity Association, the union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States. Actors Equity Association, founded in 1913, represents more than 49,000 actors and stage managers in the U.S. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions, providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans. Equity seeks to foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of our society. www.actorsequity.org

^ Artists Repertory Theatre Resident Artist
# The scenic, costume, lighting, projection and sound designers are represented by United Scenic Artists
± Equity membership candidate
Artists Repertory Theatre’s mission is to produce intimate, provocative theatre and provide a home for artists of varied backgrounds to take creative risks. Artists Rep is Portland’s premiere mid-size regional theatre company and is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodríguez and Managing Director Sarah Horton. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artist Rep became the 72nd member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in May 2016 and is an Associate Member of the National New Play Network (NNPN).
Show Description

An all-female, all-star Portland cast leads this production of Oscar Wilde’s magnificent 19th Century comedy of manners and social status. Lovely Gwendolyn and adorable Cecily don’t care who they marry as long as his name is Earnest (so manly and respectable!). Jack and Algernon are utterly smitten and only too happy to ditch their given names to bamboozle their way into the ladies’ hearts. Imperious Lady Bracknell is aghast, agog and practically apoplectic, but her efforts to impose propriety prove useless against Cupid’s earnest truth. High jinx, bon mots and cucumber sandwiches are served.

Follow us on Social Media!

Twitter, Snapchat & Instagram: @ArtistsRep
Facebook: www.facebook.com/artistsrep/
YouTube: www.youtube.com/artistsrep/
Vimeo: vimeo.com/artistsrep

Critics’ Corner

"A daring take on a WILDE play." - The New York Times

"THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST is the rare work of art that achieves perfection on its own terms." - The New York Times

"Wilde's masterpiece is so legendarily evergreen, it practically performs itself." - Vulture
Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Anglo-Irish poet, author and playwright. His poetry was first published in 1881. He contributed to publications such as Pall Mall Gazette and he wrote the novel, The Novel of Dorian Gray (1891).

Perhaps most recognizable for his work as a playwright, Wilde wrote comedies such as Lady Windermere’s Fan, An Ideal Husband, Salome, and The Importance of Being Earnest. Shortly after The Importance of Being Earnest was written, Wilde was imprisoned for two years. He was arrested after losing a libel case against the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde had had an ongoing affair with Marquess’ son. While in prison, he wrote a well-known 55,000-word letter to his love called De Profundis. After his release from prison, he published portions of the letter, including The Ballad of Reading Gaol. He died shortly after he was freed at the age of 46. He lived his life extravagantly, but he suffered greatly.
More on Wilde

Born in Dublin, Ireland in 1854, Oscar Wilde was the son of a well to do physician father and accomplished poet mother. He attended Trinity College in Dublin, and Magdalen College in Oxford, studying the classics and writing poetry. While at Oxford, he became immersed in the philosophy of Aestheticism, which promoted the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ in contrast to the contemporary view that art and literature existed to teach self-improvement and encourage good works.

After leaving university in 1878, Wilde moved easily in fashionable social and cultural circles, where he was well known for his sparkling wit, flamboyant dress, and bright, amusing conversation. He moved to London to establish his literary career, publishing his poetry and working variously as a journalist, art critic, essayist and lecturer.

In 1884, Wilde married Constance Lloyd, daughter of wealthy Queen's Counsel Horace Lloyd, and was soon the father of two boys. He published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, written for his young sons, in 1888.

He followed these fairy tales with his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. His Faustian novel was swiftly rejected by Victorian society, largely due to its homoerotic overtones and lack of condemnation for the immoral attitudes of the primary character. During this same period, Wilde fell in love with the much younger man, Lord Alfred Douglas (“Bosie”), and began leading a double life.

In his writing, he turned to the theatre and swiftly had a string of extraordinary hits: *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *The Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). After being roundly castigated for disregarding social norms in *Dorian Grey*, he was now celebrated for his witty social comedies that challenged the assumptions of Victorian Society. Whereas one of the foundational beliefs of the Victorian Era was that ‘sincerity is its own reward’, Wilde’s characters (particularly in *Earnest*) pursue their own self interests with scrupulous disregard for sincerity or morality. Even the title *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a punning retort to the era’s moralistic regard for sincerity. Wilde responded to the very serious dominant aesthetic with playfulness and irreverence, highlighting the emptiness of the era’s platitudes and celebrating pleasure, sensuality and witty repartee.

A concurrent social trend was the emergence of the New Woman: while the Victorian era emphasized rigid roles for men and women, the fin de siècle 19th Century gave birth to a newfound independence for women. Educated, free spirited, interested in sex and sensuality, and uninterested in marriage or children, the New Woman challenged the status quo and threatened to upend the social contract. Women were behaving in unfeminine ways – riding bicycles, smoking cigarettes, having careers that relied on their intelligence rather than their wombs. For men, there was a parallel trend: Dandies, men who rejected the seriousness of masculinity, and instead relished fashion, society and frivolousness. Wilde wholeheartedly embraced the New Woman and Dandyism in both his plays and lifestyle.
During this period of tremendous success, Wilde’s double life as a married man and a homosexual began to cause problems. His beloved Bosie, a spoilt upper class dandy with a reckless streak and a penchant for provoking his father, introduced Wilde to a world of gay prostitutes and flagrant risk taking. At the time, homosexuality was a punishable offence, potentially eliciting sentences up to life in prison for ‘gross indecency’. Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, frequently argued with his son over his presumed homosexuality, and confronted Wilde and his son several times about the nature of their relationship. Each time, Wilde was able to deflect or mollify the Marquess, and avoid public exposure.

The Importance of Earnest opened on February 14, 1895 at the Saint James Theatre – an overwhelming success that solidified Wilde’s reputation as a brilliant playwright. Ticket sales were brisk and the production promised to make a fortune for both Wilde and the Saint James. Reviews were almost grudgingly ecstatic, reflecting the divide between the presumptive necessity of morality and the buoyant charms of its absence:

> It is delightful to see it, it sends wave after wave of laughter curling and foaming round the theatre; but as a text for criticism it is barren and delusive. It is like a mirage-oasis in the desert, grateful and comforting to the weary eye - but when you come close up to it, behold! it is intangible, it eludes your grasp. What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?

(William Archer, *The World*, 20 February 1895)

A few days later, the Marquess showed up at Wilde’s club and left his calling card inscribed, "For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite" [sic]. Egged on by Bosie – and against the advice of his colleagues – Wilde sued the Marquess for libel. The case went to court in April 1895, captivating all of London society with its promise of salacious details about Wilde’s life. The charge of libel could be disproved if the underlying accusation of homosexuality were proven true, and the Marquess’ lawyers threatened to bring forth male prostitutes as witnesses. Wilde’s lawyers advised him to drop the suit, which he did. Unfortunately, public and legal sentiment had turned against him, and he was soon arrested and tried for ‘gross indecency’ and sentenced to two years of hard labor.

Ticket sales for *Earnest* dried up, and although the Saint James Theater attempted to distance themselves and removed Wilde’s name from all publicity, the play closed on May 8, 1895 after only 83 performances. The social embrace of the New Woman and dandies was also withdrawn, collateral damage of Wilde’s fall from fashion.

Oscar Wilde spent two years in prison, most of it in Reading Gaol, where he was addressed exclusively as ‘C33’, his cell number. After his release, he went to France to live out his days in poverty and ill health. His poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” – which was originally published citing “C33” as author – exposed the brutality and inhumanity of the prison. It was an instant commercial success and reprinted multiple times in two years, but it was not until after the seventh printing that Wilde’s name was finally attached.
He died in exile on November 30, 1900, and is buried today in Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. On January 31, 2017, Oscar Wilde was posthumously pardoned (along with 50,000 others who had been swept up in Britain’s anti-homosexual laws) with the adoption of the new Turing Law that revokes all statutes criminalizing consensual homosexuality.

Today, Oscar Wilde is acknowledged as one of the greatest writers of the Victorian era, and The Importance of Being Earnest is one of the most produced plays of all time.

Oscar Wilde’s original notebook of Lady Lancing, the play that would become The Importance of Being Earnest.
MICHAEL MENDELSON is a Resident Artist here at Artists Rep and the Artistic Director of Portland Shakespeare Project. Well known in Portland as an actor, director and teacher, he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Wayne State University and a Master of Fine Arts from University of Washington’s Professional Actors Training Program. While in New York City, he studied with Tanya Berezin. Recently, Michael directed The Understudy, Intimate Apparel and both directed and starred in Mistakes Were Made for Artists Rep. Other directing credits include The Tempest, The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It and Lear’s Follies for Portland Shakespeare Project, Love’s Labour’s Lost (Northwest Classical Theatre Company), Stones In His Pockets (Public House Theatre), As Is (Key Productions), The Meaning of Prayer (Verbatim Productions) and staged readings of Botticelli (Profile Theatre) and Dinner With Friends (Mt. Hood Repertory Theatre). His acting credits at Artists Rep include Jon in Marjorie Prime, Oliver in Trevor, Walter in The Price, also roles in Tribes, Blithe Spirit, The Quality of Life, Ten Chimneys, Andrei Borchevsky in Red Herring and Sherlock in Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Christmas Carol, also God of Carnage, The Cherry Orchard, Superior Donuts, Othello, Design for Living, Holidazed, Becky’s New Car, Three Sisters, Eurydice, House, Garden, Orson’s Shadow, Mr. Marmalade and Theater District. Other local credits include work with Oregon Shakespeare Festival/Portland, Profile Theatre, Miracle Theatre, Northwest Classical Theatre Company, triangle productions!, Tygres Heart Shakespeare, Portland Center Stage, A Contemporary Theatre, Reader’s Theatre Repertory and New Rose Theatre. New York credits include Revolving Shakespeare Company, Theatre 1010, The Normal Heart (Lincoln Center/Clark Studio Theatre), Genesius Guild and The Barrow Group. Regional credits include work at PCPA Theatrefest, Paper Mill Playhouse, A Contemporary Theatre, Saint Michael's Playhouse, Penobscot Theatre Company, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, First Stage Milwaukee, Idaho Rep, Attic Theater and Wisconsin, Utah and Berkeley Shakespeare Festivals. Michael is a proud member of SDC.
I am grateful to be directing *The Importance of Being Earnest* for Artists Rep. I’m tickled Dámaso chose this classic, humbled I was asked to direct, frightened I said yes, and thrilled with the amazing team of artists assembled to bring this show to life, on, off and behind the stage. I almost felt as if my work was done ...but not really.

It's a unique experience to direct this play with a cast of all women. It's become common practice to cast Lady Bracknell as a man and there have been a few productions with all-male casts, most notably the Abby Theatre's 2005 production. Though I have searched, I was hard pressed to find another professional production with an all female cast. I believe our conventional sense of comedy is that it's funny to see men dressed as women but not women dressed as men. But, times have changed, and continue to change rapidly, and I would like to believe that we're changing with them.

As a director, I’m always looking for the why. Why are we doing this? What are we gaining and/or what do we lose? When I was invited to direct this play, we lived in a tangibly different world. For me, the election happened ... and then life felt different. The atmosphere became heavy, I became weary, and it felt trivial to produce *The Importance of Being Earnest*. How can we do a play that’s fluff, satire and that doesn’t tackle serious social and political issues when I know we, artists, and the art we do are such powerful instruments for change?

Deciding on a design took some time. We took a circuitous route. I dragged our design team from its original period in 1895 to the 1920s to the mid-30s and we even looked at exploring a present-day setting. This route produced very robust design conversations again and again. Our designers returned to their research again and again feeling a bit whiplashed, only to find ourselves back where we started ... but with fresh eyes and a way into the show that excited us all.

In the 1920s the case for 1890s costumes was established; as one critic put it, "Thirty years on, one begins to feel that Wilde should be done in the costume of his period — that his wit today needs the backing of the atmosphere that gave it life and truth." I also believe too much concept and the story can get lost, an all-women cast is concept enough.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is fluff, it is satire. And, that's ok, that's great! Not everything needs to be political and it may be just what we need right now. It's about societal "norms" and poking fun at them. The lies we live and the masks we wear. HG Wells called *Earnest* one of the freshest comedies of the year, saying "More humorous dealing with theatrical conventions it would be difficult to imagine."

Enjoy,

Michael Mendelson
Full Synopsis

Spoilers ahead!

The play begins in the flat of wealthy Algernon Moncrieff (Algy) in London's fashionable West End. Algernon's aunt (Lady Bracknell) and her daughter (Gwendolen Fairfax) are coming for a visit, but Mr. Jack Worthing (a friend of Algy's) arrives first. Algernon finds it curious that Jack has announced himself as "Earnest." When Jack explains that he plans to propose marriage to Gwendolen, Algy demands to know why Jack has a cigarette case with the inscription, "From little Cecily with her fondest love." Jack explains that his real name is Jack Worthing, squire, in the country, but he assumes the name "Earnest" when he ventures to the city for fun. Cecily is his ward. While devouring all the cucumber sandwiches, Algernon confesses that he, too, employs deception when it's convenient. He visits an imaginary invalid friend named Bunbury when he needs an excuse to leave the city.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. Algernon explains that he cannot attend Lady Bracknell's reception because he must visit his invalid friend, Bunbury, but he offers to arrange the music for her party. While Algernon distracts Lady Bracknell in another room, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. Unfortunately, she explains that she really wants to marry someone named Earnest because it sounds so solidly aristocratic. However, she accepts his proposal, and he makes a mental note to be rechristened Earnest. Lady Bracknell returns and refutes the engagement. She interrogates Jack and finds him lacking in social status. On her way out, Lady Bracknell tells Jack that he must find some acceptable parents. Gwendolen returns for Jack's address in the country. Algernon overhears and writes the address on his shirt cuff. He is curious about Cecily and decides to go "bunburying" in the country.
In the second act, the scene shifts to Jack Worthing's country estate where Miss Prism, Cecily Cardew's governess, is teaching Cecily in the garden. Miss Prism sings Jack's praises as a sensible and responsible man, unlike his brother Earnest, who is wicked and has a weak character. She teaches Cecily that good people end happily, and bad people end unhappily, according to the romantic novel Miss Prism wrote when she was young. The local vicar, Canon Chasuble, arrives and, sensing an opportunity for romance, takes Miss Prism for a walk in the garden. While they are gone, Algy shows up pretending to be Jack's wicked brother Earnest. He is overcome by Cecily's beauty. Determined to learn more about Cecily while Jack is absent, Algernon plans to stay for the weekend, then make a fast getaway before Jack arrives on Monday. However, Jack returns early in mourning clothes claiming that his brother Earnest has died in Paris. He is shocked to find Algy there posing as Earnest. He orders a dogcart—a small horse-drawn carriage—to send Algy back to London, but it is too late. Algernon is in love with Cecily and plans to stay there. When Jack goes out, Algernon proposes to Cecily, who gets out a diary and letters that she has already written, explaining that she had already imagined their engagement. She has always wanted to marry someone named Earnest, so Algy, like Jack, needs to arrange a rechristening.

Just when it seems that Jack and Algernon couldn't get into worse trouble, Gwendolen arrives, pursuing Jack, and discovers that his ward, Cecily, is unpleasantly beautiful. In conversation, they discover that they are both engaged to Earnest Worthing. A battle follows, cleverly carried out during the British tea ceremony. The situation is tense. Jack and Algernon arrive, and, in attempting to straighten out the Earnest problem, they alienate both women. The two men follow, explaining that they are going to be rechristened Earnest, and the women relent and agree to stay engaged.

Lady Bracknell shows up demanding an explanation for the couples' plans. When she discovers the extent of Cecily's fortune, she gives her consent to her engagement to Algernon; however, Jack's parentage is still a stumbling block to her blessings. Jack tells Lady Bracknell that he will not agree to Cecily's engagement until she is of age (35) unless he can marry Gwendolen. Dr. Chasuble arrives and announces that all is ready for the christenings. Jack explains that the christenings will no longer be necessary. Noting that Jack's present concerns are secular, the minister states that he will return to the church where Miss Prism is waiting to see him. Shocked at hearing the name "Prism," Lady Bracknell immediately calls for Prism and reveals her as the governess who lost Lady Bracknell's nephew 28 years earlier on a walk with the baby carriage. She demands to know where the baby is. Miss Prism explains that in a moment of distraction she placed the baby in her handbag and left him in Victoria Station, confusing him with her three-volume novel, which was placed in the baby carriage. After Jack asks for details, he quickly runs to his room and retrieves the handbag. Miss Prism identifies it, and Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is Algernon's older brother, son of Earnest John Moncrieff, who died years ago in India. Jack now truly is Earnest, and Algernon/Cecily, Jack/Gwendolen, and Chasuble/Prism fall into each others' arms as Jack realizes the importance of being earnest.
Discussion Questions

Did seeing an all-female cast playing all the roles regardless of gender impact how you experienced the play?

By the end of the play, has Jack really learned the importance of being earnest? Why or why not?

What are the four main characters' relationships to reality? How do they cope, romanticize, or escape from it?

What is the girls’ fascination with the name "Earnest"? What does it have to do with their romantic idealizations? How are names used to indicate character (or not) in the play?

What does the aristocracy in Earnest value? How does Wilde show that Jack and Cecily have the same kinds of values?

Judging by the tone in Earnest, what is Wilde’s opinion of the aristocracy? Does he approve or disapprove of them?

How do the aristocrats’ values clash directly with a more standard concept of respectability?

*Discussion questions courtesy of Shmoop*