

ARTS CLUB THEATRE COMPANY
TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE
2011/2012 Season



Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage
March 15, 2012 – April 15, 2012

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WELCOME

This guide was created for teachers and students. It contains an overview of the play's story and production, as well as informative essays. The guide aims to provide background knowledge and critical ways of approaching the play that will yield fruitful discussion and foster an understanding and appreciation of the theatre arts.

If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 ext. 253, or by e-mail at groups@artsclub.com.

The guide was written by Daniel Ralston, 2011 Marketing Intern.

ABOUT THE COMPANY

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors. It became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage in a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 48th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates three theatres, the Granville Island Stage, the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, and the Revue Stage. Its popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics.

SYNOPSIS

Act I

The play opens to the strains of piano music in a handsome and artistically decorated London flat. Expecting the company of his aunt Lady Bracknell, Algernon Moncrieff is having an afternoon tea set out when his friend Ernest Worthing calls. Ernest, after lamenting the boredom he faces at his country house, announces that he has come to London to propose to Algernon's cousin, Gwendolen. Algernon declares that Ernest stands no chance of marrying her unless he can explain the inscription in a cigarette case that Ernest mistakenly left in his flat. It reads: "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack."

Buckling under Algernon's questioning, Ernest admits that his real name is, and always has been, Jack, and that Cecily is his ward, the grand-daughter of his late guardian, Thomas Cardew. Algernon quickly accepts this, mischievously saying that he always did suspect Jack of being a secret Bunburyist, but refusing to tell him what that means. Jack recounts his creation of a wayward brother (Ernest) who lives in London and requires constant care and attention to ensure he does no further wrongs. Delighted, Algernon says that Jack is then a confirmed Bunburyist, and describes his own creation of a dear, but always ill, friend (a Mr. Bunbury) who lives in the country. Thus, Algernon goes on, they have both created personas that allow them to come and go as they please, exchanging country for city as often as they like, and avoiding undesirable social commitments.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive. While Algernon and his aunt are in the next room, Gwendolen very straightforwardly tells Jack that she is deeply infatuated with him and his entirely becoming, extremely fitting name, Ernest. Taken aback, Jack asks whether she would love him if he had another name. She thinks it quite impossible. He determines that he will get christened Ernest the very next day, and then proposes to her.

Lady Bracknell re-enters the room, and is perturbed to find they have been engaged without her permission. She sends Gwendolen down to the carriage and quizzes Jack, bent on deciding whether or not he could be a suitable husband. She pointedly enquires after his age, income, property, politics, and parents. Only at the last of these does he stumble, for he was, he reveals to her, found by his late guardian Thomas Cardew in a Victoria Station cloakroom in a handbag. Consternated, the Lady refuses her daughter's hand in marriage; her family, she sniffs before leaving, would never dream of forming "an alliance with a parcel."

Algernon comes back in, and Jack vows to him that he will get rid of the Ernest character. Unexpectedly, Gwendolen returns without her mother, and says that the story of his origin only served to endear him more to her. She asks for his country address—Algernon notes it down secretly as Jack tells her—and they walk down to the carriage together. Algernon calls his butler and asks him to prepare his Bunburying attire for the next day.

Act II

At Jack's country house Cecily and her tutor, Miss Prism, sit outside, beginning a lesson. Cecily praises Miss Prism's intelligence, mentioning a three-volume novel she once wrote that was somehow lost long ago. Shortly afterwards the parish priest Reverend Chasuble stops by, and he and Miss Prism go for a stroll.

When they are gone, Ernest Worthing arrives at the house to meet Cecily. Excited to finally meet the wicked man Jack always has to go to London to deal with, she welcomes him. Algernon, presenting himself as Ernest, becomes quickly enamoured of her, and they withdraw indoors.

Jack appears in the garden, dressed in mourning black, and explains to Chasuble and Miss Prism—who have just returned—that his errant brother Ernest has died of a severe chill in Paris. He then asks Chasuble if he might be able to perform a christening in the afternoon. Cecily comes out into the garden; she is confused by Jack's mourning dress, and exhorts him to come inside for a happy surprise: his brother Ernest.

Once they have been left alone Jack, furious, attempts to compel Algernon to leave, but is in turn forced by Algernon to change out of his unbecoming mourning clothes. In an aside Algernon confesses to his love for Cecily, who soon returns. He asks her to marry him, and is astounded to hear that he already has; she has invented a fictitious relationship between them already. Cecily elaborates, saying that the tales her uncle Jack told about his brother Ernest had inspired her to fall in love with him. Algernon, amazed and ecstatic, asks her if she would love him were his name not Ernest, but she says she could not. Algernon promptly plans to have himself christened by the afternoon, and rushes out.

Cecily soon receives another guest; Gwendolen arrives. Suspicious of Cecily's good looks and youth, Gwendolen is happy to find out that she is only Mr. Worthing's ward. A short while later Gwendolen mentions the name Ernest, and Cecily is quick to clarify that her guardian is Jack, not Ernest. Relieved, though finding it odd that Ernest never mentioned his brother Jack, she presses Cecily to be sure they are not the same person. Cecily says they certainly could not be, as she is engaged to Ernest. Gwendolen is shocked and a well-mannered war ensues.

Moments later Jack enters, and Gwendolen goes to him, delighted to see her Ernest. She then has him assure her that he is not engaged to Cecily. Cecily interjects, telling Gwendolen that his name is Jack; he is Ernest's elder brother. Put out by his true name—nowhere near as fitting as Ernest, Gwendolen retreats from him. Algernon now enters, and the confusion repeats itself. Cecily feels secure again after hearing that he is not engaged to Gwendolen, but is equally put out by his real name, Algernon. Both women feel horribly deceived, and leave in a huff together, dismayed that Ernest does not exist.

Act III

The four would-be lovers are reunited in the house. Cecily asks Algernon why he pretended he was Ernest; he replies that he did so to meet her. Gwendolen then asks Jack the same: he says that he impersonated Ernest to be able to see her. Together, the two women say that the men's Christian names are the barrier that keeps them from love. The men reply that they are being christened in the afternoon. Overjoyed, the lovers fall into their partner's arms.

Lady Bracknell appears at this indecorous moment. Algernon explains that he is engaged to Cecily. On hearing this, Lady Bracknell launches into an enquiry about Cecily, and is about to leave without giving her consent, but the small matter of a large inheritance stops her in her tracks, and she gives her blessing to the engagement. However, in retaliation for the Lady's rejection of him as suitor, Jack does not give his consent as Cecily's legal guardian, creating an impasse.

Chasuble enters, expecting to perform the christenings, and mentions that Miss Prism has been waiting for him. Lady Bracknell is startled by the name, and demands that she be brought to her. Upon seeing her, the Lady describes how, twenty-eight years ago Miss Prism left the house with a baby in a stroller, and all that was found in the abandoned stroller was a revoltingly sentimental three-volume book (the one Miss Prism herself wrote). Miss Prism replies that she was absent-minded that day, and put the baby in her handbag, and the book in the bassinet. Jack, listening intently, asks her where she left the handbag. She responds that she left it in a cloakroom in Victoria Station.

Jack rushes upstairs, and after some rummaging, reappears with a handbag. It is the very one, confirms Ms. Prism, that she left in Victoria Station. Lady Bracknell informs Jack that he is Algernon's elder brother, the daughter of Mrs. Moncrieff, her sister. Gwendolen asks what his Christian name had been, and finds out to her elation that his name was and truly is Ernest.

The couples embrace, and so do Ms. Prism and Chasuble. Lady Bracknell remarks to Ernest that he seems given to triviality; he responds that he is learning "the vital importance of being earnest."

CHARACTERS

John Worthing (Jack)

Found in a handbag in a Victoria Station cloakroom, Jack is the adopted son of the late Thomas Cardew and the guardian of his daughter Cecily Cardew. He lives in the country as Jack, but has created a false younger brother living in London who requires constant visits. With this as his excuse to leave the country, he frequents raffish London society in the guise of this fictitious brother, named Ernest. As the play progresses, the confusion between his real and false identity deepens, especially as his beloved Gwendolen will only truly love him if his name is Ernest. Fortunately, by the end of the play he learns not only that he was born as Ernest, but also that Algernon is his younger brother. In the course of all these things he learns “the vital importance of being earnest.”

Algernon Moncrieff

A dandyish and irreverent figure in London society, Algernon is the nephew of Lady Bracknell and cousin of Gwendolen. Bored with city life, he has invented a sickly friend (a Mr. Bunbury) who gives him occasion to escape social commitments and the city at will. To meet Cecily Cardew he masquerades as Ernest Worthing; the two fall in love, though Cecily says it will be hard for her to love him if he is not named Ernest. His ruse unravels in tandem with Jack’s, and after sorting out the reality of their identities he and Cecily reaffirm their love.

Canon Chasuble

He is the country rector in Hertfordshire, where Jack’s country house is located. Given to incessant classical references, obscure metaphors, and propounding the great wisdom of his own unpublished sermons, Chasuble is a laughable caricature. He has great affection for Miss Prism; by the end of the play they admit to their shared love, despite his former devotion to priestly celibacy.

Lady Bracknell

The mother of Gwendolen and aunt of Algernon, the Lady is formidable authority on all matters related to fashionable society. Ever mindful of any suitor’s appropriateness for her daughter, she maintains a detailed record of eligible young men. Her preoccupation with aristocratic ideals of wealth, family grandeur, and property are mocked as she investigates the suitability of Jack for Gwendolen and, later, Cecily for Algernon.

Gwendolen Fairfax

The daughter of Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen is a strong-minded woman who has determined to marry Jack (who is in disguise as Ernest), despite the wishes of her mother. She is deeply

attached to the name Ernest; she finds it disarmingly attractive, and would not be able to love her betrothed if he had any other name. Though many obstacles have to be waded through, once it is discovered that Jack was indeed born as Ernest, she happily reiterates her love for him.

Cecily Cardew

The beautiful young ward of Jack, Cecily lives in the country with her tutor Miss Prism. Jack's stories about his ne'er-do-well brother Ernest excite her imagination, and she falls in love with her idea of the rakish Ernest. When Algernon, pretending to be Ernest, arrives in the country and becomes enamoured of her, they decide to get engaged. Though she does love the name Ernest, she is able in the end to accept Algernon for his rakish nature, despite the revelation of his true identity and a thorough inspection by Lady Bracknell, who is swayed by her substantial inheritance.

Miss Prism

Cecily's tutor and governess, Miss Prism provides crucial and revelatory information when she is recognized by Lady Bracknell at the end of the play. She has an exaggeratedly puritan nature and an awkward but affectionate relationship with the rector Chasuble, with whom she falls in love by the end of the play.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Oscar Wilde was an eminent writer of the late Victorian age. His diverse publications include works of children’s fiction, short stories, poetry, essays, a novel, and several plays. Known best for his epigrammatic witticisms and infamous 1895 trial for gross indecency, Wilde casts a shadow over most of the 1880s and 1890s: very few plays other than his continue to be performed from these decades. Their sparkling, aphoristic dialogue and humorous plots—often tinged with social critique—attest to Wilde’s intelligence and skill as a playwright.

Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin, to William and Jane Wilde. His father was a highly respected surgeon who also wrote books on Irish cultural history, and his mother contributed poetry to a periodical. Wilde attended Trinity College in Dublin before moving on to Magdalen College at Oxford. He studied classical civilization and the Greco-Roman authors, graduating with excellent grades in 1878. In the same year

he won the Newdigate Prize for his poem “Ravenna.”

Throughout the 1880s Wilde grew in public prominence, publishing his first book of poetry in 1881, engaging in lecture tours in Canada and the United States to promote Gilbert and Sullivan’s work *Patience*, and writing for, as well as editing, journals and periodicals. In 1884 Wilde married Constance Lloyd, and the couple had two children: Cyril (1885) and Vyvyan (1886). He became a controversial figure—wearing his hair long and dressing exuberantly—and a representative of the Aesthetic movement.

He began to write plays about English society in the early 1890s—his first was *Lady Windermere’s Fan*—and enjoyed immense popular success, though they were panned by upper-class critics for their flippancy. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the work from his oeuvre most often performed today, was a hit when it premiered in 1895. Shortly after its first performance he became embroiled in the lawsuit and subsequent trials that would see him serve two years in Reading Gaol.

The Marquess of Queensbury, convinced that Wilde and his son Alfred were carrying on indecently, accused Wilde of being a sodomite—then a criminal offence. Against the advice of

his friends Wilde sued the Marquess for libel; the Marquess could only defend himself by proving what he had said was true. Over the course of a very public trial, in which Wilde's affairs with lower-class men assumed to be prostitutes were exposed, Wilde was first humiliated and then defeated. In the subsequent trial he was found guilty of gross indecency and sentenced to two years in prison. After his release he left for France, where he died in 1900.

Wilde's biography is a matter of much dispute. Though the essential events are not disputed, what Wilde really thought and meant is masked by his own ambiguous statements and the sharp divide he created in contemporaneous public opinion. Perhaps Wilde put it well, as he so often did, when he wrote in *The Critic as Artist* that biographers "are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach."

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



David Mackay has been a fixture of the Vancouver theatre scene—as an actor, director, and playwright—for many years. He recently directed *As You Like It* at Bard on the Beach, and has directed and acted there for over a decade. In addition to his theatre roles, Mackay has worked in film and television, recently taking roles in *Watchmen* and *Eureka*. He is currently completing his MFA in Directing at Temple University in Philadelphia.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

WILDE'S WITTICISMS

Oscar Wilde is often touted as a master of the English epigram; his pithy remarks—in speech and writing—are often quoted as examples of intelligent and incisive wit. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is full of just such quotable turns of phrase. As light-hearted and humorous as they can sometimes be, some of his witty comments conceal a cutting edge. Although not all of his epigrams are social critiques, some certainly are (Wilde himself noted that farce was way of concealing subversion), particularly those that mock the received wisdom and accepted truths of conservative aristocratic society.

The nature of truth is often debated with Wildean epigrams in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The most representative example occurs during an exchange between Jack and Algernon:

JACK: You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

ALGERNON: All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

JACK: Is that clever?

ALGERNON: It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be.

Wilde closely relates the way in which something is said with its truth, and wraps the whole observation in absurdity. Style takes priority over easy intelligibility in Algernon's phrase; its brevity and all-knowing ring lend a questionable statement an air of truth. In this way, Wilde emphasizes the subjectivity of truth and its relation to beauty, holding that things ought to be said for their inherent beauty alone (art for art's sake), not because they are dictated by society's reverence for long-held beliefs.

In its typical form, the Wildean epigram begins with the statement of a momentarily unassailable principle (usually one drawn from tradition) that is turned on its head by the second part of the phrase. A classic example (from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*): "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about." The reader imagines Wilde's pause on "about," which draws attention to the abrupt reversal to come. Though he was criticized for what some perceived as simplistic mechanical reversals—by contemporaries and in a Monty Python sketch—his wry paradoxes were often revealing, and he was celebrated for them and often quoted.

So renowned was Wilde as a wit during the 1880s and 1890s that many phrases which are purportedly his were likely only attributed to him. Hearing a particularly flippant quotation whose source was unknown, many were quick to assume that it was Wilde's. He also borrowed liberally from his friends and acquaintances. One famous story recounts that, after his friend—the painter James McNeill Whistler—made a witty remark, Wilde said that he wished he had said it; to which Whistler replied: "You will, Oscar, you will."

Though some of his phrases may have been borrowed, Wilde was a wit in his own right. His biting comments—and subtle social critiques—pervade *The Importance of Being Earnest* and his other plays. Here are some of his witticisms:

Oh! It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 1

The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 1

I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train.

The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 2

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.

The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 2

Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

The Importance of Being Earnest, Act 3

Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.

Lady Windermere's Fan, Act 3

What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing.

Lady Windermere's Fan, Act 3

THE LATE VICTORIAN AGE AND WILDE

Wilde's late Victorian England was a society in flux. The burgeoning industrial economy had given rise to the beginnings of a broad consumer culture, though societal tastes and manners were still inflected by the aristocracy. Old and new intellectual currents flowed together, as resurgent interest in classical antiquity mixed with the Romanticism of the earlier half of the century spawned a new movement, called Aestheticism. Wilde's writings arose from the society they depicted, and were indelibly affected by it.

Spurred by the proliferation of neoclassical economic theory, the late nineteenth century was capitalistic in its outlook. As levels of production increased across Europe, the availability of consumer goods and improved standards of living drove society to a pursuit for leisure and diversion in never before seen numbers. The general scarcity of goods that had dominated economic life for centuries was gone, replaced by a desire for a varied selection of goods and leisure time.

The public underwent a transformation as the economy grew. In 1870, the government passed the Education Act, ensuring that virtually every citizen would receive an elementary education. The consequences for book production and sales were enormous; the market expanded exponentially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. More literate members of the middle class drove theatre attendance—as did their higher disposable income and increased leisure time—creating a fertile environment for Wilde to satirize high culture and meld it with low.



A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881, Oscar Wilde at right, with onlookers
William Powell Frith, 1883.

Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

The intellectual climate of the late Victorian age was similarly dynamic. Incorporating both old and new ideas, thinkers like Wilde and those of his circle reveled in the heightened artistic sensibility propounded by the Oxford professor W.S. Pater in the conclusion of his 1873 book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. It was interpreted as a calling for young men to

pursue true beauty in their actions by seeking pleasure and sensation above all else (Pater himself denied this, and later rewrote the conclusion to be less suggestive). However, the ideas, as they were first expressed, took hold of a group of young students, and though it seemed to some a call to feckless hedonism, to others it was an inspirational incitement to live artfully, in a way far removed from stodgy tradition.

Those influenced by Pater's writings formed an intellectual group, loosely defined as the Aesthetic movement. Their pronouncements on decoration, art, speech, and dress underscored the importance of beauty and style above all other considerations. The aesthetes cultivated senses of taste and moral conduct that were beyond the conception of the majority of Victorians. Although the movement never took hold with the broader public, it had a great influence on Wilde, who was a prominent representative of the aesthetes, touring in the United States and Canada to lecture on the subject.

While Wilde himself is representative of a certain, very distinct section of late Victorian society, his plays and other writings offer a panoramic synthesis of low and high culture, and contribute greatly to our understanding of the social mores of England at the *fin-de-siècle*.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Consider the role of artifice in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. How could it be related to the ideals of the aesthetic movement?
2. The play's depiction of Lady Bracknell is clearly satirical. Why was the aristocracy a subject of social critique at the end of the nineteenth century?
3. What role does the seemingly nonsensical and paradoxical dialogue play?
4. How do Wilde's epigrams embody the aesthetic idea of "art for art's sake?"

SOURCES AND WEBSITES TO EXPLORE

Books and Articles

Beck, Emily Morison, ed. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. 14th Edition. Toronto: Little, Brown & Company, 1968.

Fortunato, Paul L. *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

This tight account addresses Wilde's interaction with the consumer society of his day. Its introduction to the social circles that Wilde moved in—and their relation to the changing London theatre scene—are invaluable.

Morson, Gary Saul. "Bakhtin, the Genres of Quotation, and the Aphoristic Consciousness." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 213-227.

The article theorizes the aphorism, with some discussion of notable practitioners, including Wilde.

Raby, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

This excellent volume contains chapters on nearly every aspect of Wilde's career. Particularly useful are the comprehensive reviews of his biography and the late Victorian context. The opening essay was written by Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson.

Siegel, Sandra. "Wilde's Use and Abuse of Aphorisms." *Newsletter of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 16-26.

An overview of the Wildean epigram, this article provides analysis of its typical form, and an investigation of its use in Wilde's work.

Smith, Philip E., ed. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008.

This informative book is divided into sections by genre: Wilde's prose, plays, and criticism are treated separately. Each part has several essays detailing differing ways to teach Wilde's work. The section that deals with his comedies—including *The Importance of Being Earnest*—is a useful resource.

Websites

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxXW6tfl2Yo>

A topical Monty Python sketch. A group of friends mock Wilde's epigrams, but soon the verbal sparring descends into silliness.

<http://www.oscarwildecollection.com/>

A broad array of Wilde's plays, criticism, and stories in PDF format.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/index.html>

A site with many links to other informative pages on Wilde. Thoughtfully divided into numerous categories, including ones that draw attention to Wilde's position in relation to the visual arts and cultural mores of his day.

ATTENDING THE SHOW

Arriving at the Theatre

Please arrive at the theatre with 30 minutes before the show to pick up and distribute tickets. Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. They will have to find alternate parking for the duration of the show.

Theatre Etiquette

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please share these general theatre etiquette guidelines with students.

- Please turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and they will alert you.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance you will be seated again at the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance.
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. They will be happy to address your concerns.