The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

a Comedy

by Oscar Wilde

Premiere on 21 February, 2013
Preview Performances at reduced prices on 18, 19 and 20 February
Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours
Matinee Performances at 11.00 Hours on Tuesdays and Fridays beginning 26 February

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST by Oscar Wilde on 21 February, 2013, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 18, 19 and 20 February. Bookings for this classic comedy have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be ordered from Samuel French, 52 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5JR, England. theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1854. By 1895, the year that saw the first production of THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST in London, the author was already widely famous. He had distinguished himself at Oxford University as a student of the classics and become a prominent personality in social and literary circles. He had already written THE HAPPY PRINCE AND OTHER TALES as well as the novel THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GREY, which shocked and enraged most of the critics at the time. It was not until he turned to the writing of plays in 1892 that Oscar Wilde won over the critics as well as general public. His society dramas, LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN, A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE and AN IDEAL HUSBAND were all great successes on the stage. They were followed by his comic masterpiece, THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST, which confirmed the author's theatrical genius. In 1895 Wilde was tried and sentenced to two years of imprisonment for homosexual acts. While in prison he wrote the long and moving letter, DE PROFUNDIS, to his former friend and lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. Upon his release from prison, the author settled in France, where he finished his most powerful and enduring poem, THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL. Oscar Wilde died in poverty in Paris in 1900.

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST is generally considered to be the finest comedy of its kind in the English language. Of all of Oscar Wilde's plays, it is the most timeless and universal. There is certainly very little in the play one could call dated. With the substitution or elimination of just a handful of references, the play could be produced in almost any period. Perhaps this is because it is almost pure comedy. And unlike Wilde's earlier society dramas, EARNEST has no melodramatic speeches full of 19th century morality which would tend to tie the play to its time. The plot is as improbable today as it was in 1895, and only very few people, then or now, have ever really talked in that consistently brilliant manner. The play is, as Wilde himself said, a “fanciful absurd comedy”. That is not to say that the play is not filled with comment on important matters, such as love and marriage, education, class relationships, etc. But the author never permits us to take these themes very seriously. In fact, one is left wondering how “earnest” the playwright really was about the things he said so brilliantly. Perhaps we should let Wilde clarify the matter in his own words: “We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”
Summary of
Oscar Wilde's
THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

ACT I
Algernon Moncrieff's flat in London.
Algernon (a young man in his twenties) is expecting his aunt, Lady Bracknell, and her daughter, Gwendolen, to arrive at any moment for tea. He is therefore surprised when his servant announces instead the arrival of a young friend of his, Mr Ernest Worthing. Ernest is ecstatic when he learns that Gwendolen is coming to tea, for he is in love with Gwendolen and has come to London from the country to ask her to marry him. Algernon, who is Gwendolen's cousin, refuses to approve of the marriage unless Ernest clears up the question of “Cecily”. He has found her name in an inscription on a cigarette case that Ernest left behind on his last visit; and he is curious as to why the inscription refers to Ernest as “Uncle Jack”. Algernon had always believed that his friend's name was Ernest, not Jack. The young visitor is forced to confess that his real name is Jack, not Ernest, as he has led Algernon and Gwendolen to believe. He only calls himself Ernest when he is in town. The cigarette case, he explains, was given to him by his young ward Cecily Cardew, who lives with him and her middle-aged governess on his country estate. In order to get away from the country from time to time, he has invented a troublesome younger brother named Ernest who lives in London and who often needs Jack's attention. Algernon, amused by the double life his friend leads, says that Jack is a Bunburyist just like him. For Algernon, in order to have an excuse for his frequent visits to the country, has also invented a fictitious person, an invalid by the name of Bunbury, who often requires Algernon's presence at his bedside. Returning to the question of Cecily, Algernon asks Jack to invite him to the country so that he can meet the young lady. Jack refuses, claiming that it is his responsibility to protect her moral values from the influence of young men such as Algernon.

When Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive for tea, Gwendolen is thrilled to see Jack there. Her mother, however, views the young man with icy suspicion. Over tea, Algernon informs his aunt that he has to cancel their dinner engagement for that evening. His friend Bunbury, he explains, is desperately ill again and requires his attention in the country. Lady Bracknell, annoyed by the cancellation, remarks that it is high time for Mr Bunbury to decide whether he wants to live or die. Aware that Jack wishes to speak to Gwendolen in private, Algernon takes his aunt to the music room to discuss a musical programme he is planning for one of her future dinner parties.

Alone with Gwendolen now, Jack is nervous about how to propose marriage to her, so he begins talking about the weather. She, however, is impatient with this line of conversation. Having already made up her mind to accept the proposal, she urges him to get on with it before her mother returns. Her ideal, she tells him, has always been to marry someone by the name of Ernest. Taken aback by this, Jack wants to know if she would consider marrying someone with another name – Jack, for instance. Absolutely not, she answers, only the name Ernest will do. Realizing that he will have to get christened with the name Ernest as soon as possible, Jack asks Gwendolen to marry him.

Lady Bracknell returns from the music room and discovers Jack on his knees in front of her daughter. When Gwendolen explains that she is engaged to Mr Worthing, her mother informs her that she will be told by her parents when she is engaged. Lady Bracknell sends her daughter from the room and then, in a very business-like manner, sets about interviewing Jack as a possible husband for Gwendolen. All goes well until she learns that Jack never knew either of his parents and was, in fact, found as a baby in a handbag in the cloakroom of Victoria Train Station. Lady Bracknell is shocked. She and her husband, she maintains, could never allow their daughter to marry someone with that sort of background. She goes, leaving Jack angry and frustrated. But he is still determined to marry Gwendolen despite her mother's objections. First, he plans to get rid of his fictitious brother Ernest by having him die of a sudden illness. Then, he intends to get himself christened with the name of Ernest so that Gwendolen will marry him. Algernon once more expresses his wish to meet Jack's young ward, Cecily, in the country. Jack again refuses.

Gwendolen suddenly comes back into the room. Having been told by Lady Bracknell that she and Ernest cannot be married, Gwendolen is distraught. Determined not to be ruled by her mother, however, she wants to join him in the country as soon as possible. As Jack tells her his address, Algernon secretly writes it down. After Jack and Gwendolen have left, Algernon happily tells his servant that he is going to the country tomorrow and will therefore need his Bunbury clothes.
ACT II
The following day in the garden of Jack Worthing's country estate.

Jack's young ward, Cecily, is watering flowers to avoid doing her German lesson. Her middle-aged governess, Miss Prism, insists that she concentrate on her studies as her guardian Mr Worthing instructed before he left for London yesterday. Cecily believes that her Uncle Jack is much too serious; and she wonders why he never invites his younger brother Ernest to the country. Miss Prism, who has written a three-volume novel and therefore presumes to know something about the world, believes it is due to the brother's questionable moral character.

The Reverend Dr. Chasuble enters the garden. After inquiring about Mr Worthing and being told that he has not yet returned from London, Dr Chasuble praises Jack's strong moral character, which, he points out, is so different from that of his younger brother. Cecily, still keen on avoiding her studies, suggests that Miss Prism accompany Dr. Chasuble on his afternoon stroll. Since the governess is secretly enamoured of the clergyman, she is easily persuaded. They exit, leaving Cecily alone in the garden.

The servant announces the arrival of a Mr Ernest Worthing from London. Cecily is excited to be meeting Jack's mysterious brother at last, and she instructs the servant to show the young man into the garden. Algernon enters. Cecily informs him that her guardian is not expected back from London until tomorrow, but that does not seem to bother the young man at all. He loses no time in starting to flirt with Cecily. When she tells him that she has heard of his bad reputation, he encourages her to try to reform him. She replies that she has no time for that at the moment and invites him into the house for something to eat. He accepts the invitation on the condition that she put a flower in his buttonhole beforehand. Cecily obliges and they exit into the house, but not before he calls her the prettiest girl he has ever seen.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble return to the garden from their stroll. She is advising the clergyman to get married. A single man, she says, is too much of a temptation for any woman. She also points out that older women are much more dependable as wives than younger ones. During their conversation, Jack enters, dressed in black. He is in mourning, he says, for his brother Ernest who died quite suddenly of a severe chill. After the governess and clergyman express their condolences, Jack informs Dr. Chasuble that he must be christened at once. Unable to believe that Jack was not christened in younger years, the clergyman nevertheless agrees to perform the ceremony later that afternoon.

Cecily enters from the house. After commenting on the dark, depressing clothes that Jack is wearing, she tells him that his brother Ernest is waiting for him in the dining room. Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble marvel at the dead brother's sudden return to life. Embarrassed, Jack insists that he no longer has a brother, and is furious when Algernon appears and calls him Brother Jack. Sensing that the brothers need time alone to deal with this new development, Cecily and the others go off to the house. Jack immediately orders Algernon to stop masquerading as his brother and to go back to London at once. He then exits to the house to change his clothes for the christening.

When Cecily returns to the garden, Algernon declares his love for her and asks her to marry him. He is baffled that she accepts right away. She explains that she fell in love with him as soon as she heard about him from Jack. She shows Algernon her diary in which she has written down the details of their entire romance, including the date when they became engaged. Algernon is overwhelmed that Cecily imagined all of this before ever meeting him. He is taken aback, however, when she reveals that she has always wanted to love someone whose name is Ernest. Realizing that he must get christened with that name right away, Algernon says he has to see the local clergyman on some important business. He then runs off, leaving Cecily alone in the garden.

The servant announces that a Miss Fairfax has arrived from London to see Mr Worthing. Since Jack is nowhere to be found, Cecily tells the servant to show Miss Fairfax into the garden and to bring them tea. Gwendolen enters. She is somewhat alarmed to see that such a pretty girl as Cecily is living with the man who proposed to her (Gwendolen) the day before. They soon get into an argument as to which of them is engaged to be married to Ernest. Gwendolen claims that she became engaged to him yesterday. Cecily insists that Gwendolen must be mistaken because Ernest proposed to her just ten minutes ago. The confusion is cleared up by the arrival of Jack, followed almost immediately by Algernon. With the two young men in front of them, Gwendolen and Cecily soon discover who Jack and Algernon really are. Realizing that they have both been deceived, and that neither of them is engaged to a man named Ernest, the women exit together into the house. Jack once more demands that Algernon return to London immediately; and Algernon again refuses, explaining that he has arranged with Dr. Chasuble to be christened with the name of Ernest later that afternoon. Jack is beside himself. They cannot both be christened on the same day with the same name, he shouts.
ACT III

A few moments later Jack and Algernon join the girls inside the house. Gwendolen and Cecily demand that the young men explain why they pretended to be someone else. Jack and Algernon reply that it was to meet and to be near them as much as possible. This seems a reasonable explanation to the girls, and they are completely won over when told that both young men are to be christened with the name of Ernest that very afternoon. As the couples happily embrace, the servant announces the arrival of Lady Bracknell, who in the meantime has learned from her maid where Gwendolen has gone. Lady Bracknell sternly reminds her daughter that she is not engaged to Mr Worthing, and she is surprised to see her nephew Algernon there. When he informs his aunt that he is engaged to Mr Worthing’s ward, Cecily Cardew, Lady Bracknell views the young lady with suspicion. She wonders if Miss Cardew (like her guardian) was also found in a handbag. However, when told by Jack who Cecily’s parents were and that she will inherit a large fortune, Lady Bracknell finds the young lady a suitable match for Algernon and gives her consent to their marriage. But Jack, as Cecily’s guardian, refuses to give his consent unless Lady Bracknell first agrees to his marriage to Gwendolen. Outraged by Jack’s demand, Lady Bracknell prepares to leave.

At that moment, Dr. Chasuble enters. He wants to know if the two young gentlemen are ready for their christenings. Lady Bracknell is shocked that Algernon and Jack want to be christened again at their age. When Dr. Chasuble is told that the christenings are no longer necessary, he takes his leave, mentioning that he must get back to Miss Prism who is waiting for him in the garden. Upon hearing the name Prism, Lady Bracknell insists that the person with that name be sent for immediately. Miss Prism is quickly brought in. Lady Bracknell recognizes her at once and demands to know where “that baby” is. Twenty eight years ago, she says, Prism left the Bracknell home in charge of a perambulator containing a baby of the male sex. She never returned. A few weeks later, the police found the perambulator. It contained the manuscript of a novel, but the baby was not there. Lady Bracknell insists that Prism tell her what happened to the baby. Overcome with shame, Miss Prism recounts what occurred. On the day she prepared to take the baby out in the perambulator, she had an old handbag in which she intended to place the manuscript of the novel she had written. Instead, in a moment of mental confusion, she put the manuscript in the perambulator and placed the baby in the handbag.

Jack, who has been listening to everything very closely, asks Miss Prism what she did with the handbag. After being told that she foolishly deposited it in the cloakroom of Victoria Station, Jack rushes to his bedroom. He soon returns with a handbag, which Miss Prism identifies as the one she left at the railway station. Jack happily tells the governess that he was the baby she placed in the bag and mistakenly concludes that she is his mother. Flustered when he tries to embrace her, Miss Prism denies that the baby was hers. She points to Lady Bracknell, saying that she is the person who can tell Jack who he is. Lady Bracknell reveals that Jack is the son of her deceased sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon’s older brother. Jack is overjoyed. He always said he had a brother, he reminds them. There is now just one more matter to be cleared up, Jack says. He wants Lady Bracknell to tell him the Christian name he was given. She replies that, being the eldest son, he was naturally given the Christian name of his father, the General, but she cannot remember what the General’s name was. Jack gets an old military directory in which he discovers that his father’s Christian name was Ernest. He triumphantly turns to Gwendolen. She calls him her own dear Ernest. Caught up in the excitement, Dr. Chasuble embraces Miss Prism, and Algernon and Cecily hug as well. When Jack takes Gwendolen in his arms, Lady Bracknell warns him about behaving in a trivial manner. On the contrary, he tells her, he now realizes for the first time in his life The Importance of Being Earnest.
**Multiple Choice Exercise**

1. At the beginning of the play, Algernon is expecting his aunt and cousin for (a. breakfast, b. tea, c. dinner).
2. Jack has come from the country to London to (a. visit Lady Bracknell, b. go to his club, c. propose marriage to Gwendolen).
3. Lady Bracknell will not allow her daughter to marry Jack because he (a. smokes, b. does not have enough money, c. was found as a baby in a handbag).
4. Algernon wishes to meet Cecily who is (a. Gwendolen's sister, b. Jack's ward, c. Miss Prism's daughter).
5. Both Gwendolen and Cecily have always wanted to marry someone with the name (a. Ernest, b. Henry, c. Oscar).
6. Miss Prism is enamoured of (a. Jack's servant, b. Dr. Chasuble, c. Mr Bunbury).
7. Jack was left as a baby in Victoria Station by (a. his parents, b. Miss Prism, c. Lord Bracknell).
8. Lady Bracknell consents to Algernon's marriage to Cecily because the young lady is (a. in love with Algernon, b. a good friend to Gwendolen, c. heiress to a large fortune).
9. Jack learns from Lady Bracknell that his mother was (a. Miss Prism, b. a prostitute, c. Lady Bracknell's deceased sister).
10. Jack discovers that his father's Christian name was Ernest in a (a. diary, b. military directory, c. family Bible)

**Answer Key:**
1. b, 2. c, 3. c, 4. b, 5. a, 6. b, 7. b, 8. c, 9. c, 10. b

**Interpretative Exercise**

1. Describe your favourite scene in the play and explain why you think it is funny.
2. What behaviour by the characters seems as true today as it was in 1895?
3. Why do you think both Jack and Algernon found it necessary to lead double lives?
4. Describe how the customs surrounding courtship and marriage have changed since the time of Oscar Wilde. Do you think they have improved or got worse? Explain.