

CURVE

A CURVE & BIRMINGHAM
REPERTORY THEATRE PRODUCTION

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REPERTORY
THEATRE

OSCAR WILDE'S THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



“THE TRUTH IS RARELY PURE
AND NEVER SIMPLE.”



CATHY TYSON | **SHARAN PHULL** | **MARTHA MACKINTOSH** | **EDWARD FRANKLIN** | **FELA LUFADJU** | **ANGELA CLERKIN** | **DOMINIC GATELY** | **DARREN BENNETT**
LADY BRACKNELL | CECILY CARDEW | GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX | ALGERNON MONCRIEFF | JOHN WORTHING | MISS PRISM | REV. CANON CHASUBLE | LANE & MERRIMAN

DIRECTOR **NIKOLAI FOSTER** | DESIGNER **ISLA SHAW** | COMPOSER **DOUGAL IRVINE** | LIGHTING DESIGNER **BEN CRACKNELL** | SOUND DESIGNER **DAN HOOLE** | CASTING DIRECTOR **KAY MAGSON**

INSPIRE PACK

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

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INTRODUCTION

FROM DIRECTOR NIKOLAI FOSTER

Welcome to our educational resource for Wilde's masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest*. We hope you enjoy using it as much as we have enjoyed working on this production.

We have developed this resource pack with the same inside out, accessible ethos that Curve is built on. We hope the information will offer a practical understanding of how we make our productions and the skills and techniques designers, actors, directors, voice coaches, composers and production teams use when creating a production.

There are sections we hope will aid your exploration of the play, such as character breakdowns, a timeline and family tree, as well as a glossary of references. These things were all incredibly helpful to us in rehearsals, especially as our understanding of the complexity of the characters deepened, and a straightforward plot suddenly felt more complicated than it really is. We hope you enjoy the fly-on-the-wall audio links, video, classroom activity ideas and photographs to support your understanding of our process.

Please let us know your thoughts and feedback; it really is helpful to us.

To kick it all off, here is an interview our Designer, Isla Shaw and I took part in during rehearsals, which I hope serves as a good introduction to the production overall.



THEATRE AS A MIRROR

The final production trailer.



FINAL PRODUCTION TRAILER



CHARACTERS

Find out about the characters in the play and check out our Insights into what the actors have been doing to bring them to life.

JACK WORTHING, J.P.

Jack Worthing is the play's protagonist. As a baby Jack was found by an old man, Thomas Cardew, in a handbag in a cloakroom at Victoria Station and adopted by him. After the death of Thomas Cardew Jack became the guardian of his granddaughter Cecily Cardew. In order to be an appropriate role model to Cecily, Jack has created a double life. In Hertfordshire, where Cecily lives on his country estate, he is responsible and respectable and goes by the name Jack, whereas in London where he indulges love of high society and the pleasures of the city, he goes by the name of Ernest. He has told Cecily that Ernest is his wayward brother. Jack is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax, the cousin of his friend Algernon. The initials JP after his name are to show that Jack is a Justice of the Peace.



HEAR WHAT FELA LEFADEJU SAYS ABOUT JACK

INSIGHT • A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ACTOR

Ernest versus Earnest? Playing the title role in this production actor Fela Lefadeju says, "Playing a role requires the actor to transform, but in this production I've had to think about the two sides to Ernest, the sensible and playful, and have enjoyed the challenge immensely."



ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

Algernon is Jack Worthing's best friend. He is charming, witty and satirical but also idle and self absorbed. Algernon is the nephew of Lady Bracknell and the cousin of Gwendolen Fairfax. In order to avoid boring social obligations Algernon has invented a friend 'Bunbury' whose tendency to fall ill offers him a convenient excuse to escape to the country for a while. He has always known Jack by the name of Ernest. To further complicate Jack's situation he pretends to be Ernest in the second half of the play.

INSIGHT • BUILDING A CHARACTER PROFILE

Algernon is opinionated and his ideas are shared at every occasion. An exercise that actors use to help build a character profile are to search the text for:

What do I say about myself?

e.g. *I don't play accurately – anyone can play accurately – but I play with wonderful expression.*

What do I say about other characters?

e.g. *Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax?*

What do other characters say about me?

e.g. *You never talk anything but nonsense. (Jack)*

CHARACTERS continued

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

Gwendolen is the daughter of Lady Bracknell, cousin of Algernon and object of Jack's affections. A member of high society she is self-confident, sophisticated and pretentious. Gwendolen is in love with Jack but knows him as Ernest and declares that she could not marry a man by any other name. She has a quick temper but is equally as quick to forgive.



CECILY CARDEW

Cecily is the granddaughter of Jack's adopted father Thomas Cardew and Jack's ward. Intrigued by the idea of Jack's 'brother' Ernest, she has invented a courtship and engagement with him and desires to 'cure' him of his wickedness. She is regarded by some as one of the more realistic of the characters in the play but she could also be seen as another outrageous romantic.



HEAR WHAT SHARAN PHULL SAYS ABOUT CECILY

LADY BRACKNELL

Lady Bracknell is mother to Gwendolyn and Aunt of Algernon. She represents the Victorian upper-classes and Wilde's critique of their conservative values. Lady Bracknell married into the upper-classes and wants her daughter to make a 'suitable' marriage as well. She is the antagonist of the play, blocking the marriages of the main characters. She also provides much of the humour of the play although unlike Algernon, she does not intend for her comments to be humorous.



INSIGHT – PREPARING THE VOICE

Lady Bracknell is known for her quick wit and lengthy speeches. But how do actors prepare to get their tongue around all of the words that Oscar Wilde writes for them?



**HERE'S SOME ADVICE FROM TIM CHARRINGTON
ONE OF OUR VOICE COACHES**

CHARACTERS continued

MISS PRISM

Miss Prism is Cecily's governess. She has romantic feelings towards Dr Chausable but his position as a priest prohibits her from telling him her feelings directly. She demonstrates puritanical values which are sometimes so over the top they invite laughter. Miss Prism also wrote a novel in her youth which has been since lost.



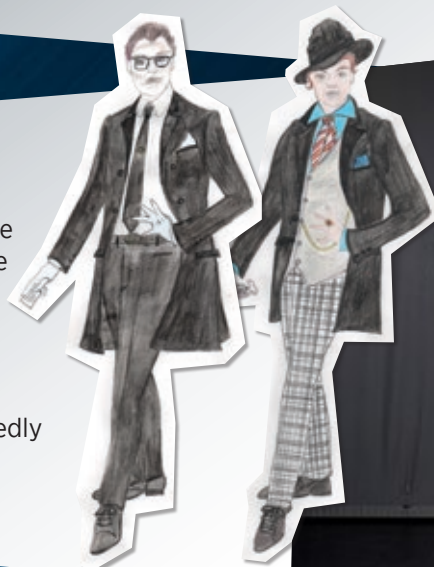
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.

The Reverend is the rector on Jack's estate. If he was not a priest he would be a perfect match for Miss Prism. He is approached by both Jack and Algernon who request that he christen them 'Ernest'. The initials after his name stand for "Doctor of Divinity."

LANE AND MERRIMAN

Lane is Algernon's manservant. He demonstrates that he is more than a passive servant by his delivery of droll statements. At the beginning of the play he is the sole character who is aware of Algernon's practice of "Bunburying."

Merriman is the butler at the Manor House, Jack's estate in the country. His presence, along with another servant, force the quarrelling between Gwendolen and Cecily to maintain supposedly polite conversation.



INSIGHT A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A REAL BUTLER

Darren Bennet spent the day with experienced Butler Rick Fink at an estate in Oxfordshire to prepare for his roles. Take a look at what he learnt and how this informed his approach to the characters.

"Spending the day with Rick gave me a wonderful insight into a life in service. Rick explained that he's always thinking one step ahead of his employer, and thinks about making sure everything is on hand to make life as seamless as possible. Rick showed me around the estate and I got very excited when we entered his storeroom of equipment that he uses to train future generations of Butlers at his school.

This room was a real treasure trove of objects. I hadn't realised that there were so many things invented for dining and it really opened my eyes to the ritual of this. The Butler is crucial in the running of each day and he had every implement in his pantry to help facilitate that.

Rick was a true gentleman with a great sense of humour, he has a wonderful sense of pride in carrying out his work. I really took on board his pride and readiness and also his sense of humour in preparing for the roles."



CHARACTER LEARNING RESOURCES

INSIGHT • CHARACTER CHARACTERISTICS



How would you describe the characters in the play?

Pick a character and click on what the actor has to say about them in the 1-minute interview.

What word do the actors use to describe the character and where in the play is there evidence of this?

Use the example below to start you off and build a characteristic profile of the characters.

CHARACTER
GWENDOLEN

WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE THE CHARACTER
Judgemental, bright, educated, strong...



CHARACTERISTIC
EXAMPLE: Judgemental

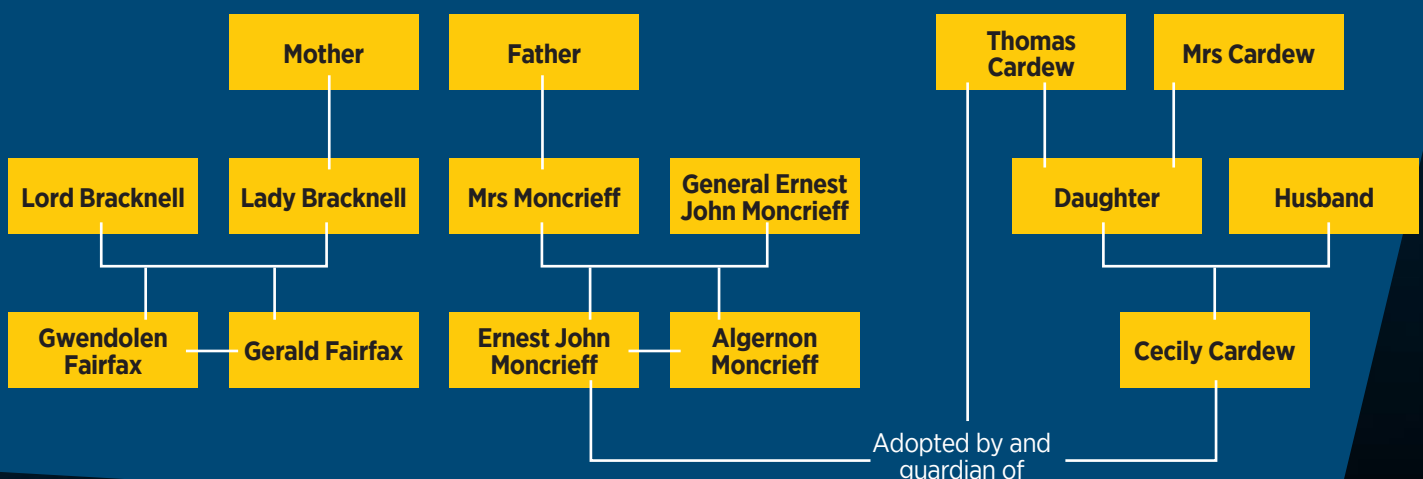
EVIDENCE IN THE TEXT
“I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.”

INSIGHT • ACT ONE SCRIPT PEEK



Take a look at this scene from the play. What do you notice about the notes made by the actor?

Here is a quick guide to who is related to who in the play.



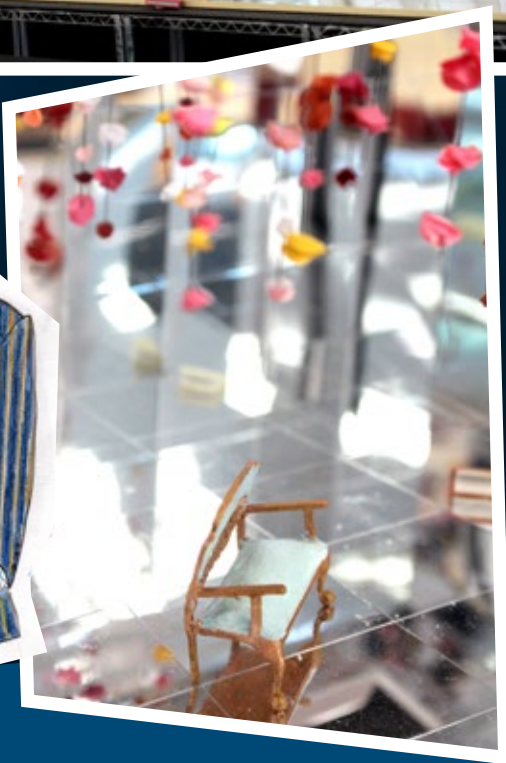
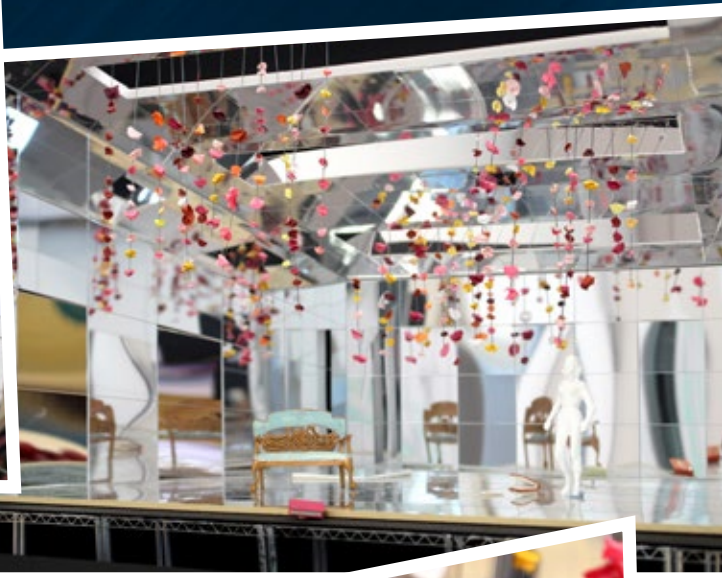
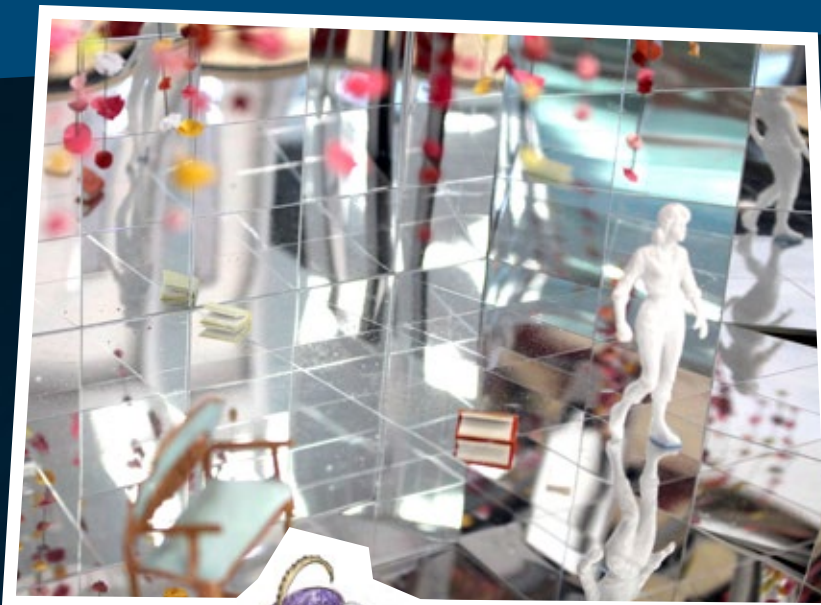
CONTEXT

This production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is a fusion of traditional and contemporary influences. Find out more about the process of creating the world of the play from page to stage.

The themes of the play can be a good starting point for a director and designer. One of the first moments of a rehearsal process is the model sharing, where the director and designer share their vision for the production with the company through the use of a to scale model.



**NIKOLAI FOSTER AND ISLA SHAW
WELCOME VIDEO**



MARRIAGE

Throughout the play Wilde explores the idea of marriage, especially as a social tool. Lady Bracknell has married into high society and wishes for her daughter Gwendolen to have an equally 'suitable' marriage. The involvement of parental approval and the social standing and parentage of potential suitors is an obstacle in the marriages of the play as Lady Bracknell says:

"An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she could be allowed to arrange for herself..."

Wilde is showing the Victorian notion of marrying for political and social reasons rather than love and affection: *"To speak frankly, I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable."* (Lady Bracknell)

Algernon is very sceptical of marriage until he meets Cecily:

Jack: *"I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her."*

Algernon: *"I thought you had come up for pleasure? ...I call that business."*

Jack: *"How utterly unromantic you are!"*

Through Algernon Wilde explores the Victorian hypocrisy around marriages for social standing, where those within the marriage may seek genuine affection and entertainment elsewhere, whilst keeping up appearances:

Algernon: *"Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it."*

Jack: *"That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury."*

Algernon: *"Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none."* (1.94-96)

Cecily and Gwendolen have highly romantic notions of marriage which are based on their 'idea' of what it should entail. However both women go against the Victorian ideal of being a woman by taking charge in matters of their own engagements. Cecily has played the role of herself and 'Ernest' in their courtship and engagement:

Cecily: *"It would hardly have been a really serious engagement if it hadn't been broken off at least once. But I forgave you before the week was out."*

Gwendolen takes over from the stammering Jack to make sure the proposal goes smoothly:

Gwendolen: *"And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing. I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly before-hand that I am fully determined to accept you."*

Both women have fixated on the importance of marrying someone called Ernest. The fact that the name is more important than anything else demonstrates Wilde's attitude to the superficiality of Victorian morals around marriage. This is enhanced by the use of the joke around the name Ernest, when the two men pretending to be called Ernest are not being earnest.



THEMES

continued

CLASS

Lady Bracknell epitomises what Wilde sees as the hypocrisy and shallowness of Victorian upper-class society. She is concerned with the family background and wealth of any potential marriage partner for her daughter Gwendoline. It is significant that she is herself of a 'lower' class background, having married 'well'.

Algernon and his servant Lane show the class divides of the time with Algernon having no interests in Lane's personal life and Lane covering for Algernon's indiscretions. However this relationship is also used for satire with Lane unashamedly stealing champagne from Algernon and Algernon stating: *"Really if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them."*

The importance of class and social standing in the marriages of the main characters plays with and also adheres to the class conventions of the time.

DUAL IDENTITIES

The dual identities taken on by Jack and Algernon are linked to Wilde's critique of Victorian morality and sincerity. Both men assume a different identity to get what they want and then continue the lie when in fear of being found out. Jack could be seen as less moral than Algernon as he lies to his ward and the woman he loves, whereas Algernon lies to a woman (Cecily) whom he has only just met. Jack's deception also suggests he has a darker side, and it demonstrates the separation between private and public life in upper-middle-class Victorian England.

It has also been interpreted that the use of dual identities 'Jack in the Country, Ernest in the city' is both linked to marital infidelity and homosexuality. Homosexuality was not approved of in Wilde's time and was to be kept as a secret dual identity. Wilde even married a woman to maintain the illusion of heterosexuality himself.



The Design for the production is drawn from the idea of what we see when we look in the Mirror. Can we really give a true reflection of who we are? Take a look at the MODEL BOX images to see how this could be used onstage.

MORALITY

Wilde critiques Victorian morality by exposing the hypocrisy that underpins it.

For example Lady Bracknell pertains to be morally upright whilst showing a harsh disregard for the life of 'Bunbury' and a cruel indifference to the loss of Jack's parents, other than that it is socially unacceptable. Both Jack and Algernon demonstrate the hypocrisy of Victorian morality in that they are able to live the life that they wish to as long as appearances are preserved.

See Dougal Irvine, the Composer talk about how the theme of Morality has influenced his music for the production.



THEMES

continued

MANNERS AND SINCERITY

The play uses Victorian manners as a basis for humour. When Cecily and Gwendolen are forced to behave politely to one another because the servants are present they continue to serve tea and cake but their anger is only very thinly veiled and they show their displeasure by serving the 'wrong' items.

Lady Bracknell speaks in what would seem to be very highly mannered ways but her disregard for people's feelings and her prioritising of the trivial over serious matters shows her true colours. The fact that she suddenly warms to Cecily on discovering her fortune shows Wilde's cynicism at the sincerity of the manners in Victorian society.

The pivotal action of the play centres around the name Ernest and the pun that this has with the idea of someone being earnest. Both Gwendolen and Cecily are devoted to the idea of loving someone with this name. The irony being that both men have lied about their names, so are not in fact 'earnest' at all. Then it turns out that Jack has actually been telling the truth when he thought he was lying and is in fact called Ernest. This muddling of truth and lie serves to show how muddled Wilde considered Victorian morals around honesty and sincerity. Worthing's apology to Gwendolen because is "*a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth*" is a characteristic inversion of conventional morality by Wilde and also a final dig at the hypocrisy of Victorian society.



OUR VOICE COACH CAROLINE FITZPATRICK TELLS US ABOUT HOW OUR ACTORS APPROACH MANNERS AND SINCERITY IN THEIR PREPARATION FOR THE ROLES.

IDLENESS OF THE LEISURE CLASS AND THE AESTHETE

Wilde himself indulged in the lifestyle of triviality which Algernon does and as such he mocks it in good spirit. Wilde was an Aesthete (a philosophy of Walter Pater) which calls for art to be about beauty and not reality. Algernon's interest in trivial things such as cucumber sandwiches can thus be seen to show him as a character who successfully cultivates aesthetic uselessness.

FARCE AND EPIGRAMS

Wilde uses compact witty maxims known as Epigrams which use paradox to expose the absurdities of society. For example he may take an established cliché and twist it about so that it could be seen to make more sense than the original, for example "*in married life three is company and two is none*" captures the monotony of monogamy by subverting the commonplace "*two is company, three's a crowd.*"

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde also uses Farce, known as 'low' comedy by using comic reversals, repetitions of dialogue and actions and absurdity. These would have been familiar devices for his Victorian audience but what elevates the device is the combination of Wilde's wit through Epigram and the ridiculousness of the fast paced farce.



RESEARCH

Once you have identified themes you can start to put together a research list of events, images, stories and from the time the play was written or is set to use as inspiration. Here is Nikolai's research list for our production.

1. Oscar's life in jail
2. The role of women in society
3. The British Establishment
4. Train services / timetable – London to Hertfordshire
5. British monarchy at time
6. Fashionable restaurants, clubs, etc of the day.
What were the fashionable things to eat?
7. "Day in the life" stories of debutantes, young suitors, et al
8. Stories of daily London life for the elite. Where did they shop?
How did they get about town?
9. What was on at the theatre / West End in 1890s?
Who were the famous actors of the day?
10. Stories about daily Victorian life / society, with a special focus on the upper classes
11. What happens during the "Season" would be very helpful. Victorian values, marriage
12. Information to understand the full machinations of afternoon tea



HERE ARE SOME OF OUR RESEARCH FINDINGS



INSPIRATION

Now that you have considered some of the themes of the play and had an insight into the research element of the production, take a look behind the scenes at the production in development.



BEHIND THE SCENES

Another way of getting your imagination tuned into the design of the play is to make a note of the environmental facts of the play. This is anything that tells us about time, place, sensory elements, or physical objects that are necessary for the action. Once you have done this task, the imagination can take over as you start to think about the detail. Here is a SNEAK PEEK of Isla's script for the start of Act Two.

Take a look at the environmental facts that she has identified and let your imaginations do the rest.



Garden at the **Manor House**. A flight of grey stone **steps** leads up to the house. The garden, an old-fashioned one, full of **roses**. Time of year, **July**. **Basket chairs**, and a **table** covered with **books**, are set under a **large yew-tree**.

[Miss Prism discovered seated at the table. Cecily is at the back **watering flowers**.]

Miss Prism. [Calling.] Cecily, Cecily! Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the **watering of flowers** is rather Moulton's duty than yours? Especially at a moment when intellectual pleasures await you. Your German grammar is on the table. Pray open it at page fifteen. We will repeat yesterday's lesson.

Cecily. [Coming over very slowly.] But I don't like German. It isn't at all a becoming language. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my German lesson.

Miss Prism. Child, you know how anxious your guardian is that you should improve yourself in every way. He laid particular stress on your German, as he was **leaving for town** yesterday. Indeed, he always lays stress on your German when he is leaving for town.

Cecily. Dear Uncle Jack is so very serious! Sometimes he is so serious that I think he cannot be quite well.

Miss Prism. [Drawing herself up.] Your guardian enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility.

Cecily. I suppose that is why he often looks a little bored when we three are together.

Miss Prism. Cecily! I am surprised at you. Mr. Worthing has many troubles in his life. Idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man his brother.

Cecily. I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down **here** sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism. I am sure you certainly would. You know German, and geology, and things of that kind influence a man very much. [Cecily begins to **write** in her **diary**.]

LEARNING RESOURCES

INSIGHT • ENVIRONMENTAL FACTS



Look at the environmental facts that Isla has identified at the start of Act Two and complete the scribble pad:

List of facts that give an indication of time, place, sensory elements, furniture, props.

A garden at the manor house - July

List the facts that you think are essential for the scene

Books

Watering can

Describe each element that you have identified as essential (colour, texture, scale).

Old and dusty looking books

The watering can is bright and dainty and not heavy

Looking at your description, what atmosphere are you building through the environmental elements of the play. How does this impact on time and place?

Calm and lazy sunny day

Bright, should be outdoors

After researching the ritual of afternoon tea, we had to perfect the art of laying it with technical precision so that the physical action was in sync with the dialogue. Have a look at Darren Bennet's notes on the timing of this.

INSIGHT • SNEAK PEEK AFTERNOON TEA



What would you do differently?



The Importance of Being Earnest is over 120 years old and an challenge for the director and designer is to make it just as engaging and relevant for audiences today as it was in 1895.

Drawing upon the themes, research, inspiration and imagination, take a look at Nikolai's ideas about how to achieve this.

NIKOLAI TALKS ABOUT THE PLAY



SYNOPSIS

ACT 1 • SCENE 1

The play opens in Algernon's "luxuriously and artistically furnished" flat with a short conversation between Algernon and his manservant Lane. Mr Worthing arrives and Algernon explains that he is expecting his Aunt Lady Bracknell and his cousin Gwendolen soon and that Worthing should leave as his aunt doesn't approve of his conduct towards Gwendolen. However, Worthing explains that he has come to town with the intention of proposing to Gwendolen and the two men discuss marriage. Algernon has found Mr Worthing's cigarette case and has discovered a message in it for someone by the name of Jack from someone called Cecily. This forces Worthing to reveal that despite being known as Ernest in town he goes by the name Jack in the country and pretends to have a brother by the name of Ernest that he uses as an excuse to leave the country for town. Furthermore, Worthing reveals that he is the guardian of a girl called Cecily who lives with him in the country. Algernon then explains that he used a similar excuse to the leave town; he has invented a comparable lie about a fictitious friend called Bunbury who is regularly unwell.



ACT 1 • SCENE 2

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive and Algernon tells his aunt that he is unable to dine with her that night because his friend Bunbury is sick and needs his attention. Algernon and his aunt retire to another room to discuss music; leaving Worthing and Gwendolen alone. Worthing attempts to propose to Gwendolen but his stammering attempt means that she takes charge of the situation and declares her love for him also. To Worthing's discomfort Gwendolen reveals that she has always fantasised about being with a man named Ernest and could not love a man of any other name.

Lady Bracknell interrupts the couple and is unhappy to discover their engagement and questions Worthing about his suitability, finances, habits and property. All is going well until Mr Worthing reveals that he was found as baby in a handbag at Victoria station and is unaware of his parentage. Lady Bracknell therefore, denies his proposal and tells him to attempt to find a parents as soon as possible and exits.

Gwendolen re-enters to ask Worthing for his country address and Algernon secretly writes it down. The act ends with Algernon telling his manservant Lane that he is about to spend the weekend Bunburying.

ACT 2 • SCENE 1

The second act is set in the garden of Worthing's country house where Cecily is being taught by Miss Prism. The two women discuss Jack's brother Ernest and how Cecily wishes to set him a good example. Canon Chasuble enters, he and Miss Prism are clearly attracted to each other and Cecily manages to convince them to take a walk together.

Algernon arrives pretending to be Jack's brother Ernest and after flirting they enter the house. Miss Prism and Chasuble return from their walk and meet Worthing who informs them that his brother has died. Jack asks Chasuble to christen him later on that day so that he can change his name to Ernest. Cecily then re-enters and announces that Jack's brother Ernest has arrived and is therefore not dead.

Worthing is furious that Algernon is there and impersonating his non-existent brother and he tells Algernon that he must leave.



ACT 2 • SCENE 2

Algernon disobeys Worthing and proposes to Cecily who reveals that she has always dreamed about being in love with a man by the name of Ernest and has in fact created a romance with Ernest over the last few months, including writing herself letters from him and creating an imaginary engagement between them. This incites Algernon to go in search of Chasuble to christen him Ernest.

Gwendolen arrives and meets Cecily and they argue because they both believe themselves to be engaged to Ernest Worthing. Their row is settled by the arrival of both Algernon and Worthing who reveal the truth. The two women are furious with the revelation and go inside the house to get away from the men. The men eat muffins whilst rowing about each other's behaviour.



ACT 3 • SCENE 1

The final act of the play is set in the Manor House where Cecily and Gwendolen are watching the two men outside as they eat muffins. The men approach and explain that their behaviour was in the pursuit of gaining the girls love and the women are satisfied with their explanations. However, they feel that the men's Christian names are "insuperable" barriers in their relationships but the men appeal by explaining that they plan to be christened that afternoon and all is well.

Lady Bracknell arrives abruptly and is deeply unhappy with Gwendolen's behaviour. On enquiring if this is the house where Bunbury lives, Algernon 'kills off' Bunbury. She is still not happy with Gwendolen's intention to marry Worthing but is also distressed to discover Algernon is now engaged to Cecily. Lady Bracknell questions Worthing about Cecily much in the same way that she quizzed him earlier to ensure that she is worthy to be her nephew's wife and is satisfied. However, Worthing will not give permission for Cecily to be married unless Lady Bracknell will give permission for him to marry Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell will not change her mind.

Chasuble enters and is ready for the baptism and is disappointed to find out the christening may not be going ahead. He mentions that Miss Prism is waiting in the vestry and suddenly Lady Bracknell is struck by the name Prism and calls for her immediately.

ACT 3 • SCENE 2

Miss Prism enters and it emerges that she used to work for Bracknell and almost thirty years previously had mixed up her novel with a baby, placing the novel in the baby carriage and the baby in the handbag which she then lost. Worthing is struck by this news and runs off the stage. Jack returns with the handbag that he was found in and it is revealed that he was the child lost by Miss Prism. Therefore, Worthing is Algernon's brother and his real name is in fact Ernest. Which means he was actually telling the truth when he thought he was lying. This also means that the couples can all get married and the play ends.



CREATING A TIMELINE

When the director and actors work through the play they may find the need to put a timeline together to understand the time span of the play. This helps with making sure it all makes sense and can also inform decisions about costume, set and props. The time line starts at the very first event that we know about, even if this happened 29 years before the action in the play begins.

Take a look at the timeline we created for this production. The year is 1894.

BEFORE THE PLAY BEGINS

29 years ago (1865)

28 years ago (1866)

- Miss Prism, Nanny to the Moncrieff family leaves a baby boy in a handbag in Victoria Station. She flees.

25 years ago (1869)

- Thomas Cardew adopts the boy and calls him Jack Worthing.
- Algernon Moncrieff is born.

21 years ago (1873)

- Gwendolen Fairfax is born.

18 years ago (1876)

- Cecily Cardew is born. On the death of her parents and then her grandfather, Jack becomes her guardian – possibly in the last 3 or 4 years. (perhaps her parents died when she was young and her grandfather more recently).

3 years ago (1891)

- Jack Worthing makes up a brother called Ernest in order to escape his guardian duties and go to town.
- Miss Prism becomes Cecily's governess.

February 14th this year 1894

- Cecily decides that she is engaged to Ernest Worthing

March 22nd this year 1894

- Cecily breaks off the engagement to Ernest Worthing – this is rekindled.

Wednesday in July/early august 1894

- Jack tells Gwendolen that his brother Ernest is either for this world, the next or Australia.

DURING THE PLAY

Thursday in July/early august 1894 5pm

- The next day Jack visits Algernon at his London apartment and is joined by Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen and he proposes to Gwendolen who accepts. ACT ONE

Friday in July/early august 1894

- Algernon poses as Ernest and visits Jack's Hertfordshire estate, meets Cecily and proposes.
- ACT TWO and THREE.



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854 in Dublin. Wilde was an Irish writer/poet writing over 25 works including one novel entitled *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He was one of the first people to earn the status 'celebrity'.

Wilde was part of the Aesthetic Art movement which emphasised the aesthetic values of art and literature over socio-political ones. He dressed in a flamboyant style which was mocked by the critics of the aesthetic movement.

Wilde married Constance Lloyd in 1884 but had an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas nicknamed 'Bosie'. After suing 'Bosie's' father for libel and losing he was sentenced for gross indecency and spent 2 years doing hard labour in Wandsworth.

His wife then took their children to Switzerland and adopted the name 'Holland'. After a long stretch in hard labour Wilde had become ill and moved to Paris where he wrote his last work 'The ballad of reading goal' a poem about the harshness of prison life. He died on 30th November 1900 and is buried in Paris.

OSCAR WILDE'S LIFE IN DATES

- 1854** Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on the 16th October to Sir William Wilde and Jane Francesca Wilde in Dublin.
- 1871-1874** Wilde read Classics at Trinity College, Dublin where he achieved highly
- 1874-1878** Wilde read Greats at Magdalen College, Oxford
- 1881** Published his first collection of poetry simply titled *Poems*
- 1882** Sailed to America and travelled around for almost a year delivering lectures
- 1884** Back in England, Wilde married Constance Lloyd. The couple had two boys Cyril (1885) and Vyvyan (1886)
- 1887-1889** Became the editor of magazine *The Lady's World* and renamed it *The Woman's World*
- 1891** *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Novel) was published.
Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas and they soon became lovers
- 1892** *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Play) opened to critical and financial success
- 1893** *A Woman of No Importance* (Play) first performed
- 1895** First Performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- 1895** On the 3rd April Wilde was embroiled in a libel court case with Alfred Douglas's father the Marquis of Queensberry for publicly accusing him of homosexuality. The Marquis was acquitted and evidence that came to light in the trial led to Wilde's arrest and eventual conviction for gross indecency
- 1897** After two years hard labour Wilde was released on 19th May
- 1900** Oscar Wilde died at the age of forty-six on the 30th November of Meningitis



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

continued

Oscar Wilde uses satirical references from the time to reflect the society who would be watching the play. We have put together some of the people and places that feature in the play. What would their contemporary equivalent be?

Half Moon Street – a street in the City of Westminster, London, known for its genteel lodgings and apartments

Willis's – A popular restaurant on King Street, St. James's. The play originally opened at the St. James Theatre nearby

The Albany – a long established block of superior bachelor apartments

Mary Farquhar – Wife of Sir Walter Farquhar; daughter of 6th Duke of Beaufort. A member of the aristocratic Ladies Diocesan Association established to organise charitable work in the poorer parishes of London

Lady Harbury – Harbury is a village and civil parish in the Stratford-upon-Avon district of Warwickshire

Duchess of Bolton – Ernest Boulton was arrested in drag in front of the Strand Theatre in London in 1871. The Case of Regina Vs Boulton was considered a scandal at the time

Lady Bloxham – Francis John Bloxham edited an Oxford undergraduate periodical *The Chameleon* that was cited in Wilde's trial as it featured the poems *In Praise of Shame* and *Two Loves* written by Lord Alfred Douglas

Liberal Unionists – was formed in 1886 by a faction of the Liberal party, led by Lord Hartington, which opposed Irish home rule. In 1895, it entered into a coalition government with the Conservative party

The Purple of Commerce – A reference to the changing attitudes to wealth and affluence. To be 'born in the Purple' meant that your parents were royalty and later this extended to aristocratic families

Apoplexy – unconsciousness or incapacity resulting from a cerebral hemorrhage or stroke

The Empire – The Empire of India Exhibition opened the Earls Court Exhibition site in 1895, and was the first of a series of annual exhibitions held there

NB - There is also the Empire Cinema – but this feels more topical and interesting?

Woolton, Hertfordshire – Woolton is not in Hertfordshire, it was a village outside of Liverpool that is now a suburb of Liverpool

The three volume novel – Also known as the triple decker was a form of publishing for popular British fiction in the 19th century that allowed the publisher to spread the printing costs and ceased to be published in this format in 1894. They would often contain complicated plots about marriage and property that unravelled over three books

Mudie – A private lending library that would circulate books for a fee

Egeria – Was a nymph and divine consort and counselor of the second king of Rome, it is an eponym for a female advisor or counselor

Lady Lancing – Lancing was a seaside resort in West Sussex. Lancing was visited by Oscar Wilde in the 1890s when he stayed at nearby Worthing. The working title for his masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* was 'Lady Lancing'

Lady Dumbleton – Dumbleton is a village and estate in the Cotswolds. The Marchioness of Dumbleton features in *The Canterville Ghost* by Wilde.

STORY LEARNING RESOURCES

Transcripts from Oscar Wilde's trial give us a rare insight into the writer's mind and can enlighten us on his relationship with the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Take a look at the following court transcript. What might it tell us about his reasons for writing the play?

INSIGHT • IN DEFENCE OF ART



INSIGHT • ACT THREE SCRIPT PEEK

Take a Sneak Peek at Act Three, and using the notes found in the script think about a current day equivalent for each reference. Remember that Wilde was holding up a mirror to society and wanted to amuse and provoke in equal measure.

The Importance of Being Earnest was being performed during his trial, in fact his name was taken off the billing in an attempt to ensure its popularity.

Oscar's life change dramatically after his prison sentence, take a look at the excerpt from his poem written about this experience. If he had written *The Importance of Being Earnest* after being incarcerated what do you think that he would have changed?

*In Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In a burning winding-sheet he lies,
And his grave has got no name.*

*And there, till Christ call forth the dead,
In silence let him lie:
No need to waste the foolish tear,
Or heave the windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
And so he had to die.*

*And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*



FOR THE TEACHER

You can use this Inspire resource to support learning on the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* or other texts by the same author. It can also be used as a case study for text in performance, production design and contextual studies. It can be used as a source of inspiration to actively support drama, theatre and performance students in building their understanding of producing live theatre.

We have devised three workshop plans that integrate the exercises and insights into a 90-minute practical session. The workshops are:

1. **CHARACTER – TEXT IN PERFORMANCE**
2. **CONTEXT – THE WORLD OF THE PLAY**
3. **STORY – THE WRITER IN FOCUS**

Each workshop is created using a TIER structure

TRIGGER

The question that gets participants actively interested

INSPIRE

Further development of the Trigger to enhance interest

EXPERIENCE

A process of doing to support learning

REFLECT

Evaluating the experience and recognising that this has changed understanding and developed knowledge.

Each element of the workshop can stand alone as an activity for the classroom, or it can build through the TIER structure to form a full workshop.

The Inspire resource has downloadable PDF documents that you can print and links to video files that can be shared. The resources that you will need for each workshop are detailed in the workshop preparation.



CHARACTER WORKSHOP

TEXT IN PERFORMANCE

WORKSHOP PREPARATION

How do actors prepare for a role?

Where do actors get their understanding of the character from and how does this impact on their vocal and physical choices for the role?

This workshop will explore how actors look to the text for facts and evidence to start building the role and will focus on identifying characteristics. The workshop requires whole group, small group and pair work. The aim is to build upon an understanding of the characters with a specific emphasis on the choices that the actors have made for this production.

Resources you will need

- 1-minute character interview video
- Character Insight – Characteristics PDF
- Sneak Peak Act One – PDF

Follow on activities

- Character Biography – write the story so far based on finding evidence in the text
- Character Profile – A way of collating facts about the character.
- Character visualisation board. Creating quotes/images/photos/drawings/fabrics/materials/scents/ start to build a visual collage of the character and link this to evidence found in the text.
- Compare your initial ideas about the character and the actor's interpretation of the role.



CHARACTER WORKSHOP continued

TEXT IN PERFORMANCE

Character Workshop Activities

TRIGGER

15 minutes

Earnest Tag

After a quick go of the Name Game where participants say their name and add a physical gesture or pose that expresses how they are feeling.

Ask the group to create a gesture for each of the characters in the play and a word that they use.

The aim is then that someone is 'on' and has to tag as many people as possible in a minute. When they tag they declare what character they are going to be trapped in. If a participant is tagged they must adopt the pose and word of the character they have been appointed by the tagger.

They are only released by fellow players who must touch them on the shoulder and say 'I've now realised the vital importance of being Earnest' before the tagger gets to them.

INSPIRE

20 minutes

Share one of the **1-minute character interviews** where the actors only have 60 seconds to describe their idea of the character to us.

In a circle each participant offers a characteristic to the rest of the group and they give an example of how they would introduce themselves in the style of that characteristic. Everyone else then takes their turn. At the end of each one note any vocal and physical choices that are unanimously associated with that characteristic.

Put any notes about character in the **Characteristics chart**.

EXPERIENCE

40 minutes

Divide the group into smaller groups of 3 with **15 minutes** find 3 examples of evidence in the text that backs up the actor's ideas of the character.

Each group can work on a different character.

Put these findings into the Characteristics chart.

Check in with the group to see that they have all found evidence in the text to back up the actor's ideas of the character before moving onto the next task.

In pairs, for **10 minutes** choose one of the characteristics and take it in turns to mould one another into the physical form that encapsulates this. Where do characters' lead from, hold tension? Are they open or closed? How does it affect their habits and movement? How do they walk?

Using the **Sneak Peek Act One Script** for the character you are working on, ask the group to work in pairs on this piece of text for **15 minutes**.

They must follow the instructions given by the actor and add in the characteristic that they have been developing in the moulding exercise. They should take it in turns to play Jack.

REFLECT

15 minutes

Pairs will be asked to share their version of the annotated text and the group will reflect upon which characteristics were realised and how. This will link to the challenge of creating detailed characters.

CONTEXT WORKSHOP

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

How does a director work with a designer to create the environment of the play? How do they consider context, imagination and environment?

This workshop offers an insight into how directors and designers use the text to create the environment in the play, it focuses on contextual research and imaginative interpretation of the sensory elements of that the playwright offers.

It starts with introducing the element of using our senses and imaginations as a springboard for creativity. We may not have been to Victorian England but we can imagine what it is like. Acknowledging what has inspired the designer and the relationship that the director has with the designer will be key in understanding how stage design works.

As well as the preparation of identifying research and highlighting the environmental facts that the author gives us there is also the opportunity to experience the actor's response to working with objects in the afternoon tea scene. Iconic sequences such as this can often influence the style of the production and can be an exciting design challenge (if the designer and director had decided to work entirely without objects).

Resources you will need

- Insight – The Environmental Facts PDF
- Act Two Sneak Peek PDF
- Isla Shaw PDF
- Images of the set PDF
- Research PDF
- Video link of director Nikolai Foster and his vision for the play

Follow on activities

- Using your contextual research and environmental facts, design a set for a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. What textures and colours would you use? Where do the audience fit in? What props objects are essential?
- Looking at the timeline of the play, what environmental factors should we consider when designing?
- In the same way a director or designer has a mission statement about the ethos of this specific production, create a statement that reflects your vision for the play, how do you want the audience to feel? What themes do you want to be present in the design?



CONTEXT WORKSHOP continued

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Character Workshop Activities

TRIGGER

15 minutes

Game

A sensory journey – Ask participants to work in pairs, one A and the other B. A must decide on an environment that is mentioned in the play, such as Victorian London, Willis's, a bachelor pad in London, the garden of the manor house, Lady Bracknell's banquet hall.

B must close their eyes and walk with A as they describe this place using all of the senses. Basic instructions can be follow my voice, stop is a tap on the back, turn left is a tap on left shoulder etc. The pair then switch so that B leads with a different environment.

The whole group then gather to talk about what they have seen and how the places in the play made them feel.

INSPIRE

10 minutes

Show participants' **images of the set model PDF** and ask them to describe the set in three words that are then shared with the group verbally or on paper.

Next ask the question 'What has inspired the designer?' before looking at the article **Theatre As A Mirror** – and the images of where the ideas came from.

You can tie this in with how to make plays feel relevant to an audience to stimulate a lively discussion on traditional versus contemporary.

EXPERIENCE

50 minutes

Research – 15 minutes

Ask participants to work in groups of 4-6 and give them a topic each from the research list. Looking at the **research collage PDF**, what did the company find out about it and how may this have informed their decisions? Feed this back to the group.

Environmental Facts – 15 minutes

Ask participants to look at the highlighted information the writer gives us about place, time, objects, atmosphere, touch, taste, smell, audio or visual stimulus at the start of Act Two.

Looking at the list describe the scene to your partner using all of your senses.

Complete the Environmental facts chart PDF.

Afternoon Tea Scene – essential objects to tell the story – 20 minutes

Using the Act Two Sneak Peak ask participants to work in groups of 3, each taking a turn to play Merriman. Follow the actors instructions with either real or mimed objects. Each time ask the participants to try something different. How does this impact on the timing of the scene? Is there another way pf achieving this scene? Getting participants to step into the shoe of the actors will give them a starting point to explore fresh ways of approaching a well-established scene.

REFLECT

10 minutes

Looking at **the interview video** with the director Nikolai Foster, how has he used the contextual and environmental facts of the play to support creating a brand new production?

Discuss and use as a stimulus for follow on activities.

STORY WORKSHOP

THE WRITER IN FOCUS

Who was Oscar Wilde and what inspired him to write this play? Why is it important to understand the place and circumstances of the time the playwright was working in? How does this impact on our understanding of the play?

This workshop will investigate the life of Oscar Wilde with a particular focus on the time that he was writing *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The activities will support understanding of why the play continues to be popular with audiences and its' relevance to today.

Sources such as a transcript from Oscar Wilde's trial and an excerpt from the poem that Wilde wrote about his experience of prison can be used to examine the author's ideology and beliefs and acknowledges that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed at a pivotal time in Oscar Wilde's life.

The workshop also recognises our obligation to the writer to fulfil their original intentions for the play whilst also understanding why the play should be produced for a present day audience. This is explored through the use of satire and social commentary.

Resources you will need

- In Defence Of Art PDF
- Sneak Peek Act Three PDF

Follow on activities

- Participants could create and perform a monologue from Wilde's perspective about why he has written the play and what reaction he would like from the audience.
- Further research on the history of the play – and Wilde's omission from the credits after he is sentenced could be used as a stimulus for discussion and give an insight into the time the play was written in. What would be the equivalent today?



STORY WORKSHOP

continued

THE WRITER IN FOCUS

Character Workshop Activities

TRIGGER

15 minutes

The really Wilde game

Using the letters O S C A R W I L D E in two teams of 10 the participants have 5 minutes to find as many words as possible to describe Oscar Wilde starting with those letters, each participant gets given a letter to represent. They must then go head to head with a member of the other team and offer their words one at a time until someone dries or runs out of words. A point is given for that letter. Once all ten letters have been done, one of the teams is awarded the wordy award.

INSPIRE

15 minutes

After reading the section on Oscar Wilde, ask participants to work in a small group of 3/4 to share what they know collectively about Oscar Wilde. They must then nominate a spokesperson who must speak for 1 minute on behalf of the group about Wilde.

EXPERIENCE

50 minutes

Stepping into Wilde's shoes – 25 minutes

Looking at the Trial transcript, set the room up in the style of a court room, appoint roles and ask for two volunteers to read the transcript as if they were in court. Think about the reactions of the witnesses and the jury. What do we learn about Oscar Wilde from this?

Have I got news for you Lady Bracknell Style – 25 minutes

Focusing on the satirical nature of the play, ask the participants to work in small groups to read **ACT THREE SNEAK PEEK** when Lady Bracknell enters. Use the glossary to understand the references from the time. Imagine Lady Bracknell was the host of a satirical style TV show; what references would she make today?

Ask the groups to think of contemporary equivalents and to improvise around the scene adding the references in.

REFLECT

10 minutes

Ask for a volunteer to read the Verse from The Ballad Of Reading Gaol. Reflect on what changed for Wilde and why *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written at a pivotal time for him.



*“Nikolai Foster has created a party feel throughout,
everyone is having fun”*

THE TIMES



“A refreshing revival of Oscar Wilde’s classic comedy”

THE STAGE



“Lively, fun and hugely amusing”

WHATSONSTAGE



“Fast paced, witty dialogue... outstanding performances”

STAGE TALK



*“Light as a soufflé and never Earnest,
Wilde would be delighted”*

THE TIMES

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