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The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde

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John Carroll University
presents

The Original Four-Act Version of

**The
Importance
of
Being
Earnest**

by
Oscar Wilde

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Jack: It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.

--The Importance of Being Earnest

I confess that, early in this production, I felt something akin to the shock Jack experiences at the end of the play. It did not occur immediately. First, there was the business of getting settled in a new school and theatre. There were people to meet and decisions to make. And then there was the whirlwind of choosing a show and selecting a cast. Somewhere in the middle of this, Ruth Berggren entered, carrying the final draft of the four-act version of **The Importance of Being Earnest** which had never been produced. Opportunities like this are rare in the theatre. (I imagine they are rare elsewhere as well.) At any rate, we decided to produce the four-act version rather than the standard three-act text.

The decision was made only after various practical issues had been considered. Both versions are entertaining and present good challenges for the actors. There are two additional characters in the four-act text, so we had to find money for extra costumes and props. With Dr. Schmidt's help and the administration's support, this problem was soon solved. But, in all this worry about the practicalities of opening a show--any show--I hadn't had the time to consider the implications of opening **this** show. Here was a play, considered by some scholars to be the second greatest comedy in the English language (Shakespeare's **Twelfth Night** being the first), that had been read, studied, and produced for close to a century. And yet, we had the opportunity to present the world premiere of the original version. It comes as a shock when you first think of it. And it can boggle the mind if you continue to think of it.

Wilde referred to **Earnest** as «A trivial comedy for serious people.» He poked fun at just about everything, but I think he most enjoyed observing the people of his time as they got caught up in so many details of living. I think he would have enjoyed observing the people of our time as well. I know he would have poked fun at a certain director at a certain university in Cleveland. It is very easy to get caught up in the details of producing a show. And, in this case, there is the first production of the four-act text to consider. And these things have their places. But the **important** thing, for me, is--I have had the opportunity to work on a brilliant piece of playwrighting with some very gifted and creative people. And it has been fun. Now we'd like to share it with you.

Enjoy!
William B. Kennedy

The Little Theatre Society is pleased to present **The Importance of Being Earnest** as the first production in the Marinello Little Theatre. The renovation of the theatre is still in progress. We hope that you enjoy this evening's performance and that you will return for our theatre productions next semester as we celebrate the centennial of John Carroll University.

On opening night of **The Importance of Being Earnest**, the Marquis of Queensbury went to the theatre intending to create a disturbance, but he was refused admission. Queensbury's next plan of attack was more successful: he left his card at the Albemarle Club, «For Oscar Wilde posing as a somdomite» (creating one of the most famous misspellings in literary history). Egged on by Douglas, Wilde sued Queensbury for criminal libel.

Queensbury's defense in court was to prove the truth of his accusation. The case opened to public view Wilde's private life. While Wilde's unorthodox public behavior could be accepted by Victorian society, the detailed exposure of his private life in the tabloids made it impossible for Victorians to countenance him. Within months of the openings of **An Ideal Husband** and **The Importance of Being Earnest**, both plays closed because of the scandal. (George Alexander managed to extend the run of **Earnest** by a few weeks by removing Wilde's name from the playbill.)

At that time, homosexual behavior was against the law in England. When Queensbury won the case, Wilde had a day to leave the country, before he would be arrested and tried on criminal charges. The authorities expected him to leave; his friends (except Douglas) begged him to leave. Wilde, stoic or reckless, remained to face trial.

"It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case."

Wilde's entire life, literary and private, went on trial. He had to defend **The Picture of Dorian Gray** against charges of immorality. Even «private cigarette cases» which Wilde gave to male prostitutes were used as evidence. The first jury was unable to reach a verdict. In a retrial, Wilde was convicted of immoral practices and sentenced to two years' hard labor, the maximum punishment.

Even in prison, Wilde was not safe from the malice of the Marquis. Queensbury bought up Wilde's debts and foreclosed on them, forcing him into bankruptcy. Constance Wilde was unable to save personal possessions from the indiscriminate looting and disorganized auctioning of the Tite Street «House Beautiful.» She eventually divorced Wilde and changed the family's name to Holland.

Prison life broke Wilde's health and spirit. After serving the full two-year sentence, he went into self-imposed exile on the continent. He struck up again with Douglas and begged money of his friends. He wrote **The Ballad of Reading Gaol**, a powerful poem about his prison experiences, and published two of his plays, **An Ideal Husband** and **The Importance of Being Earnest**. Even in 1899, the stigma of his conviction was apparent. Wilde's name does not appear on the title pages of any of these works.

Oscar Wilde died on 30 November 1900 with a final observation: «I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means.» He, like Ernest Worthing, expressed a wish to be buried in Paris.

OSCAR WILDE

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

—The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854. His father, Sir William Wilde, was knighted for his contribution to medicine; his mother was a minor poet, who wrote under the name «Speranza.»

Wilde began making a reputation for himself while in college at Oxford. He was witty and charming. He cultivated eccentricities. When asked about his future, he said, «I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious.»

After graduating from Oxford with honors, Wilde gave lectures on art and the Aesthetic movement. He toured America and lectured in England on «The House Beautiful» and «Personal Impressions of America.» In 1884, he married Constance Mary Lloyd. Settling down at 16 Tite Street, London, he created a showpiece «House Beautiful» and had two sons, Cyril and Vyvyan. In 1890, he began publishing--two books of fairy tales, **The Happy Prince** and **The House of Pomegranates**, a book of essays, **Intentions**, and a novel, **The Picture of Dorian Gray**.

In 1892, Wilde's first comedy, **Lady Windermere's Fan**, opened in London at the St. James's Theatre, and proved to be a great success. A year later, **A Woman of No Importance** was produced. In January, 1895, **An Ideal Husband** began playing in London, only a month before the opening of **The Importance of Being Earnest**. When **Earnest** opened, Wilde's comedies were playing to packed houses at two of the most important theatres in London.

"If I am sometimes a little overdressed, I atone for it by being always absolutely over-educated."

Wilde led a reckless and extravagant life. He lived consistently beyond his means. He became romantically involved with Lord Alfred Douglas, the third son of the Marquis of Queensbury. (Queensbury is responsible for the Queensbury Rules of Boxing.) The Marquis was a violent man--especially in his family life--and he was outraged by his son's homosexual activities. Douglas, on the other hand, flaunted his relationship with Wilde to irritate his father. Wilde became a pawn in the battle between father and son. Eventually, he became its casualty.

Production Staff

Director
Stage Manager
Technical Director
Company Manager
House Manager
Dramaturg
Scene Designer
Lighting Designer

William Kennedy
Cindy Lee Hopper
Sandie Cottrill
Marcia Hettlinger
Holly Chandler
Ruth Berggren
William Kennedy
Mark Johnson

Production Crew

Joe Borghese
Holly Chandler
Sandie Cottrill
Teresa Durbin
Petra Glazer
Cindy Hopper
Mark Johnson
Kevin Kapel

Dave Kusila
Jim Lordin
Dave Mahoney
Brian McCann
Jim O'Boyle
Rosemary Snow
Brian Stiltner

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

A Trivial Comedy for Serious People
by
Oscar Wilde

The Persons of the Play

John Worthing, J.P., of the Manor House,
Woolton, Hertfordshire

Algernon Montford, his friend

Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D., Rector of
Woolton

Mr. Gribsby, a solicitor

Lane, Mr. Montford's manservant

Moulton, a gardener

Lady Brancaster

Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax, her daughter

Cecily Cardew, John Worthing's ward

Miss Prism, her governess

Merriman, maid to Mr. Worthing

Brian G. McCann

Brian Stiltner

Brien Farley

Kevin M. Kapel

Tim Monaghan

Tim Monaghan

Deborah O'Donnell

Lisa Gordon

Marcia Hettlinger

Ruth Berggren

Meg McCann

The Scenes of the Play

Act I

Act II

Act III

Act IV

Algernon Montford's Flat in Half Moon Street, W.

The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.

Morning-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.

The Same.

Time -- Summer, 1895

**There will be one ten-minute intermission between
Act II and Act III.**

On opening night, after Wilde saw the three-act play, he commented, «My dear Aleck, it was charming, quite charming. And do you know, from time to time I was reminded of a play I once wrote myself, called **The Importance of Being Earnest**»

“The manuscript, unfortunately, was abandoned. I use the word in the sense of lost or mislaid.”

When the play was cut, Wilde sent the three-act version to Charles Frohman in New York. (The New York production closed after one week, because of the scandal connected with Wilde's trial.) Frohman put the four-act typescript on his shelf and forgot about it.

Frohman's four-act typescript found its way into a collection of theatre materials belonging to R. H. Burnside, who had an entire attic full of typescripts, promptbooks, props, and costumes in his house in Connecticut. In 1956, the New York Public Library acquired the materials. Just a month before the demolition of the house, they hauled away six moving vans full of material. It took twelve years to catalog it all. It wasn't until 1968 that anyone knew about Frohman's copies of **Earnest**. And even then, no one knew just what place one of the typescripts held in the history of the play.

A NOTE FROM THE DRAMATURG

One must be serious about something, if one wants to have any amusement in life.

—The Importance of Being Earnest

In 1977, I was studying the texts of **Earnest** for a separate research project in collaboration with Professor Joseph Donohue of the University of Massachusetts, when I came across this typescript, along with the other **Earnest** texts in the New York Public Library. I examined it, took notes on it, compared it to the other typescripts, and after many months working with it, I realized what I had found. I had «discovered» the final draft of Wilde's brilliant comedy, completely intact and completely overlooked by all other scholars, sitting undisturbed in the New York Public Library!

Other four-act «versions» have been published. The first draft--in Wilde's handwriting--was published in 1956. Vyvyan Holland, Wilde's son, compiled a four-act version in 1957. (The Holland text has been staged.) But here was the four-act play, polished by Wilde, ready for production, untouched by Alexander, just as Wilde originally wrote it.

Its historical and literary value is significant. As late as 1980, an earlier typescript which Wilde had edited (and which was advertised as the only complete four-act typescript in existence) fetched \$90,000 in an auction. This typescript is clearly more important than that one!

The final draft of the four-act **Earnest** became the subject of my doctoral dissertation. It is now being presented on stage, for the first time ever on any stage, here at John Carroll University.

Ruth Berggren

THE FOUR-ACT TYPESCRIPT

In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.

—The Importance of Being Earnest

"Worthing is a place in Sussex. It is a seaside resort."

Some time in the summer of 1894, Oscar Wilde got the idea for **The Importance of Being Earnest**. In August, Wilde escaped his hectic social life by taking his family to Worthing in order to work on the play. He wrote to a friend that his play «as it is quite nonsensical and has no serious interest, will I hope bring me in a lot of red gold.»

By the end of October, the play was finished. Mrs. Marshall's Typing Office prepared two copies of the play, one for the New York producer Charles Frohman, and one for George Alexander of the St. James's Theatre, one of the most prestigious theatres in London. After extensive negotiations, Alexander and Wilde reached an impasse. Another London producer, Charles Wyndham, purchased the rights.

A few months later, Alexander was desperate for Wilde's play. In January, 1895, he produced Henry James's last attempt at drama, a thoroughly forgettable play called **Guy Domville**. Opening night was a complete disaster. Alexander needed a replacement immediately. He bought the rights to **Earnest** from Wyndham and with great effort convinced Wilde to cut the play from four to three acts.

Alexander wanted to cut **Earnest** for several reasons. He wanted a three-act play because he was used to having a «curtain-raiser,» a one-act play to start the evening and allow theatre-goers to be fashionably late. Alexander also wanted a play he could star in. He was a Romantic Leading Man, and wanted his character, John Worthing, to fit this role. Wilde's original Jack was too much like Wilde. Alexander «tamed» him, making him more earnest, and more Victorian. He made the play focus on Jack by cutting the roles of Algernon, Aunt Augusta, Miss Prism, and Canon Chasuble.

Wilde objected to the cutting. At one point, he exploded: «This scene that you feel is superfluous cost me terrible exhausting labour and heart-rending nerve-racking strain. You may not believe me, but I assure you on my honour that it must have taken fully five minutes to write.» (That scene, by the way, is in Act 2 tonight.)

Even though Alexander banished him from the rehearsals, Wilde was not concerned. He knew that the play was good. Before it opened, he told a journalist, «The play is a success. The only question is whether the first night's audience will be one.»

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF OSCAR WILDE

Jack: Is that clever?

Algy: It is perfectly phrased and quite as true as anything in modern life should be.

--The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde's work is read, enjoyed, and remembered for its beauty, its wisdom, and its wit. Below are some examples from his works.

Most modern calendars mar the sweet simplicity of our lives by reminding us that each day that passes is the anniversary of some perfectly uninteresting event.

--A Poetic Calendar

To be natural is a very difficult pose to keep up.

--An Ideal Husband

Experience is the name everyone gives to his mistakes.

--Lady Windermere's Fan

In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

--Lady Windermere's Fan

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

--Lady Windermere's Fan

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each 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!

--The Ballad of Reading Gaol

As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.

--The Critic as Artist

All art is quite useless.

--The Picture of Dorian Gray

There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.

--The Picture of Dorian Gray

The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it.

--The Picture of Dorian Gray

I love acting. It is so much more real than life.

--The Picture of Dorian Gray

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING LADY LANCING

Gwendolen: We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals.

—The Importance of Being Earnest

Lady Brancaster: We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces.

—The Importance of Being Earnest

The Importance of Being Earnest is, as the subtitle states, «A Trivial Comedy for Serious People.» It is based on a pun about people wanting to be earnest and people wanting to be Ernest. In the play, people are constantly confusing virtues and names, confusing sincerity and style, confusing ideals and surfaces, confusing the serious and the trivial. Absurd statements—and absurd situations—are treated with absolute seriousness. «The Importance of Being Earnest» is what it is all about.

“A man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him after all.”

In 1895, Oscar Wilde was one of London's most popular and successful playwrights. He used a typing service to prepare his plays, but he was concerned that his best jokes would be revealed to the press and public before the play opened. In **Earnest**, the title and subtitle are crucial to its joke, so Wilde kept them a secret. In the four-act typescript, Wilde called it **Lady Lancing: A Serious Comedy for Trivial People**. (Lady Lancing actually figures in the play. Can you find her?)

When Wilde sent the typescript to producer George Alexander, he explained, «It is called **Lady Lancing** on the cover, but the real title is **The Importance of Being Earnest**. When you read the play, you will see the punning title's meaning.»

Wilde also protected the last lines of the comedy by keeping them from the typist. The typescript entitled **Lady Lancing** ends with Lady Brancaster exclaiming, «I missed the last train! Oh!» When you see the play, you will see how Wilde actually intended it to end.

Algy: And what shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?
Jack: Oh no! I loathe listening.





