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Family Plays



Oscar Wilde's

The Importance of Being Earnest

Comedy adapted into a one-act play by

I.E. Clark



"We think your cutting of this play is terrific!"

—Suzanne Ratchford, Burton, Tex., high school

The Importance of Being Earnest

Oscar Wilde is a master of sophisticated comedy, and *The Importance of Being Earnest* is his masterpiece. But like all the composers of classics, Wilde injected timeless messages into his plays. Although the play was written near the end of the 19th century, what it says is still valid. That is, a person's name and heritage mean little; it's what he makes of himself that counts.

"May I say that your most excellent version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was well received by all concerned."

—Castro Valley, Calif.

Comedy. Adapted by I.E. Clark from Oscar Wilde's masterpiece. Cast: 5m., 4w. Wilde wraps up his message into a delightful package. Two charming young ladies—sophisticated Gwendolen from the city and naive Cecily from the country—are in love with Earnest Worthing. But there is no such person as Earnest Worthing. Gwendolen thinks Jack is Earnest, and Cecily thinks Algy is Earnest. And each girl swears that she could never love a man who wasn't named Earnest. In the midst of all this confusion comes Lady Bracknell, who doesn't like the idea of anybody's loving anybody. It sounds like a big mess. But Oscar Wilde unwinds this knotty affair into one of the favorite comedies of English literature. The two sets needed for this play have been the downfall of other one-act versions. **A consistent contest winner,** this adaptation combines the three acts into one and provides for the necessary set change without a break in the action. *The director's script gives detailed instructions for the set change and contains full directions for all movement and business necessary to stage an outstanding production. Set in Victorian England in the 1890s. Approximate running time: 35 minutes. Code: ICA.*

Family Plays

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(THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST)

ISBN: 978-0-88680-089-5

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Characters

Algernon Moncrieff

Lane

Jack Worthing

Lady Bracknell

Gwendolen

Miss Prism

Cecily Cardew

The Rev. Dr. Chasuble

Merriman

Scene 1: Algernon's London drawing room

Scene 2: Jack's country garden

Time: The Victorian '90's

NOTES ON THE PLAY

Oscar Wilde is a master of sophisticated comedy, and **THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST** is his masterpiece. But like all the composers of classics, Wilde injected timeless messages into his plays. Although **EARNEST** was written near the end of the nineteenth century, what it says is still valid as we approach the end of the twentieth century. That is, a person's name and heritage mean little; it's what he makes of himself that counts.

Wilde wraps up his message into a delightful package: Two charming young ladies—sophisticated Gwendolen from the city and naive Cecily from the country—are in love with Ernest Worthing. But there is no such person as Ernest Worthing. Gwendolen thinks Jack is Ernest, and Cecily thinks Algy is Ernest. And each girl swears that she could never love a man who wasn't named Ernest. In the midst of all this confusion comes Lady Bracknell, who doesn't like the idea of anybody's loving anybody. It sounds like a big mess. But Oscar Wilde unwinds this knotty affair into one of the favorite comedies of English literature.

This adaptation combines the three acts into one and provides for the necessary set change without a break in the action. The director's production script (see below) gives detailed instructions for the set change and contains full directions for all movement and business necessary to stage an outstanding production.



A Director's Production Script is available for this play

Stage directions in this acting script have been kept to a minimum because actors are more likely to create their own business if they are forced to use their imagination. However, full stage directions are given in the Director's Production Script (prompt book).

In addition, the director's script contains drawings of costumes and set, full discussion of characterization and other aspects of production, a discussion of the play and its background, and other information helpful to the experienced and inexperienced director alike. The director's script is available from:

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Adapted by I. E. Clark

[The set represents Algernon's quarters in London. At left is a loveseat; at right a table with a chair upstage of the table and another downstage. As the curtain opens, ALGERNON is seated on upstage chair reading a newspaper and munching on a cucumber sandwich from a tray on the table beside him. LANE, a very proper Victorian butler, enters from Right.]

LANE. The audience have arrived, sir.

ALGERNON. Eh, what? Oh yes—thank you, Lane.

LANE. Thank you, sir. *[Exit R.]*

ALGY. *[Rises, addressing Audience]* Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Algernon Moncrieff—for the moment at any rate—and these are my bachelor quarters in London. The little drama you are about to witness began one afternoon about tea time when....

LANE. *[Enters R, announcing:]* Mr. Ernest Worthing. *[Exit R.]*

ALGY. *[XR to greet JACK, who enters R.]* How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK. Oh, pleasure, pleasure.

ALGY. *[To Audience.]* That is my very good friend, Ernest Worthing. Only, what do you suppose I discovered? His name isn't Ernest at all—it is Jack. From the inscription on his cigarette case *[shows case to Audience]* I also discovered that—at his home in the country—my friend has a young and charming ward named Cecily, who addresses him as *[reading inscription on case]* “Uncle Jack.” *[To JACK]* But just why, my dear fellow, do you have one name in town and another in the country?

JACK. My dear Algy, when one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone. It's one's duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one's health or one's happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth, pure and simple.

ALGY. [*To Audience*] I could understand this very well. Jack had invented a most useful younger brother called Ernest in order to come up to town as often as he liked—and I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury in order to go down into the country whenever I choose. Of course, the principal reason why my dear friend Ernest—or Jack—wants to come to town is to flirt disgracefully with my cousin Gwendolen. While I find Bunbury particularly helpful in breaking dinner engagements with...Aunt Augusta....

LANE. [*Enters R, announcing:*] Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax. [*LANE exits R.*]

LADY BRACKNELL. [*Enters rapidly, XC, head and voice high, bustle bustling, followed by GWENDOLEN, who looks coquettishly over her shoulder at JACK*] Good afternoon, dear Algernon, I hope you are behaving very well. [*She nods to JACK with icy coldness.*]

ALGY. I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY B. That's not quite the same thing. In fact, the two things rarely go together. [*Sits stiffly on upstage chair, which ALGY holds for her. GWENDOLEN sits on downstage end of loveseat. GWENDOLEN and JACK blink at each other. LADY BRACKNELL notes the mutual interest and motions GWENDOLEN to sit in the downstage chair.*] Won't you come and sit here, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN. Thanks, mamma, I'm quite comfortable where I am.

ALGY. [*To Audience*] I was usually able to occupy Aunt Augusta upon one pretext or another so that my

friend and his beloved Gwendolen might be alone together.
[ALGY guides LADY BRACKNELL out L.]

JACK. Miss Fairfax—ever since I met you I have admired you—more than any girl—I have ever met—since—I met you....

GWEN. Yes, I am quite aware of the fact. And for me you have always had an irresistible fascination. We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

JACK. But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWEN. But your name is Ernest.

JACK. Yes, I know it is. But personally, darling, I don't much care about the name of Ernest...I don't think that name suits me at all.

GWEN. It suits you perfectly. It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations.

JACK. Well, really Gwendolen, I must say that I think there are lots of other much nicer names. I think—*Jack*, for instance, a charming name.

GWEN. Jack?...No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all, indeed. The only really safe name is...[*it becomes a love song on her lips*] *Ernest*.

JACK. Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once.

GWEN. Married, Mr. Worthing?

JACK. Well...surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

GWEN. I adore you. [JACK attempts to embrace her; she rejects him] But you haven't proposed to me yet.

JACK. [*Nervously, impatiently, he kneels and takes her hand*] Gwendolen, will you marry me?

GWEN. Of course I will, darling. How long you have been

about it. I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

LADY B. [*Entering L, with ALGY right behind her. She sees the romantic tableau and ruffles her feathers in Victorian indignation*] Mr. Worthing! [*JACK jumps to his feet and stands at rigid attention.*] Gwendolen, you will wait for me below, in the carriage. [*GWENDOLEN, mumbling "yes, mamma," rises and fades out R, blowing a clandestine kiss to JACK.*]

ALGY. [*To Audience*] Aunt Augusta was not at all inclined to consent to this engagement. But at least she was willing to consider him as a suitor for her daughter's hand until she discovered that Jack had no idea who his parents were—that he was, indeed, *found!*—in a handbag in the cloak-room at Victoria Station.

LADY B. You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter to marry into a *cloakroom*—and form an alliance with a *handbag*? [*She sweeps out R in majestic indignation.*] Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

JACK. Mmm—she is a monster—without being a myth! You don't think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

ALGY. By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country?

JACK. My dear fellow, the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined girl. What extraordinary ideas you have about the way to behave to a woman!

ALGY. And—uh—what about your brother? What about the profligate Ernest?

JACK. Oh, before the end of the week I shall have disposed of him. I'll say he died—in Paris—of a severe chill. That gets rid of him.

CURTAIN

ALGY. [*Steps to apron as curtain closes behind him*]
And that is the way our story began. I remember that Jack had said that his ward, Cecily, was a little too much interested in his poor brother Ernest. This interested me greatly. Jack was determined that I would never meet Cecily. But learning his country address was relatively simple for a confirmed Bunburyist. And [*drawing a calling card from his vest pocket*] I had wisely saved one of my dear friend's town cards—[*reading*] “Mr. Ernest Worthing, B-4, The Albany, W.” [*Rings imaginary bell cord at L*] I expect it is going to be quite useful. [*To LANE, who appears on apron at R*] Tomorrow, Lane, I am going Bunburying. You may lay out my traveling clothes.

LANE. [*Bowing*] Yes, sir. [*LANE exits R and ALGY exits L as:*]