The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

Adapted by Ken Womble

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DEDICATION

It required an enormous group effort to mount our production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the California State Thespian Festival. So, I dedicate this adaptation to the cast and crew, my fellow theatre teacher, our parent volunteers and the school administrators at St. Margaret's Episcopal School. Without your commitment *Earnest* would not have sparkled like it did.

STORY OF THE PLAY

The Importance of Being Earnest is Oscar Wilde's most perfect, and most popular, play. Since its premiere at London's St. James Theatre in 1895, it has given joy to generations of theatregoers, who, according to Wilde editor Stanley Appelbaum, "savor its brilliant lines like familiar music." The play is often called a "comedy of manners," because in the world Wilde knew and wrote about, late 19th century British high society, manners were everything. In this play, young Jack Worthing and his good friend Algernon find themselves in a ridiculous situation after their fiancées learn they are coincidentally engaged to the same man. A glorious rendition of mistaken identity, Wilde's play is sure to get people of all ages and social class grinning, if not realizing themselves the importance of being earnest. This adaptation is leaner than the original, making the action continuous and fast paced while preserving the major plot points and journeys of the hilarious characters. It runs about ninety minutes, not including intermissions, and can be presented as either a long one act or full length. All of the dialogue is Wilde's. We hope this condensed version of Wilde's classic will leave your audience exhilarated and wanting more!

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

This adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first presented at the California State Thespian Festival as the winner of its Mainstage Competition, in February, 2003. It was produced by St. Margaret's Episcopal School and directed by the playwright Ken Womble.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF: First cousin of Gwendolen. Bachelor. Nephew of Lady Bracknell.

JACK WORTHING: In love with Gwendolen. Bachelor. Adopted when very young by Thomas Cardew.

LANE: A manservant. (Role may be doubled with Merriman.)

LADY BRACKNELL: (Augusta Fairfax)

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX: Daughter of Lady Bracknell.

MISS PRISM: Governess to Cecily.

CECILY CARDEW: Ward of Jack Worthing.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE: Rector of the church near Jack's country house.

MERRIMAN: A butler. (Role may be doubled with Lane.)

FOOTMAN: (Non-speaking role.)

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I: Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street.
ACT II: The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.
ACT III: Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

During our production I divided each act into French scenes (a scene that begins and ends with an actor's entrance or exit), and have included the list in this script. French scenes are divided in this way only for character identification purposes, not to indicate pauses in the action.

Have a great show!
Ken Womble

FRENCH SCENES

ACT I
Scene 1: Algernon, Lane, Jack
Scene 2: Algernon, Lane, Jack, Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen
Scene 3: Jack, Lady Bracknell
Scene 4: Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, Lane

ACT II
Scene 1: Miss Prism, Cecily, Chasuble, Algernon, Merriman
Scene 2: Miss Prism, Cecily, Chasuble, Algernon, Merriman, Jack
Scene 3: Cecily, Algernon, Merriman, Jack
Scene 4: Cecily, Gwendolyn, Merriman, Footman
Scene 5: Cecily, Gwendolyn, Jack, Algernon

ACT III
Scene 1: Cecily, Gwendolyn, Jack, Algernon, Lady Bracknell, Merriman
Scene 2: Cecily, Gwendolyn, Jack, Algernon, Lady Bracknell, Chasuble, Miss Prism

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room. LANE is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, ALGERNON enters.)

ALGERNON: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately - any one can play accurately - but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

LANE: Yes, sir. *(Hands them on a salver.)*

ALGERNON: *(Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.)* Oh!... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE: Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON: Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE: I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON: Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

LANE: I believe it IS a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON: *(Languidly.)* I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE: No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON: Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE: Thank you, sir. *(Goes out.)*

ALGERNON: Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

(Enter LANE.)

LANE: Mr. Ernest Worthing.

(Enter JACK. LANE goes out.)

ALGERNON: How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK: Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON: *(Stiffly.)* I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK: *(Sitting down on the sofa.)* In the country.

ALGERNON: What on earth do you do there?

JACK: *(Pulling off his gloves.)* When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON: And who are the people you amuse?

JACK: *(Airily.)* Oh, neighbors, neighbors.

ALGERNON: Got nice neighbors in your part of Shropshire?

JACK: Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON: How immensely you must amuse them! *(Goes over and takes sandwich.)* By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

End of Freeview

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