

THE  
IMPORTANCE  
OF BEING  
EARNEST

Teacher's Education Pack

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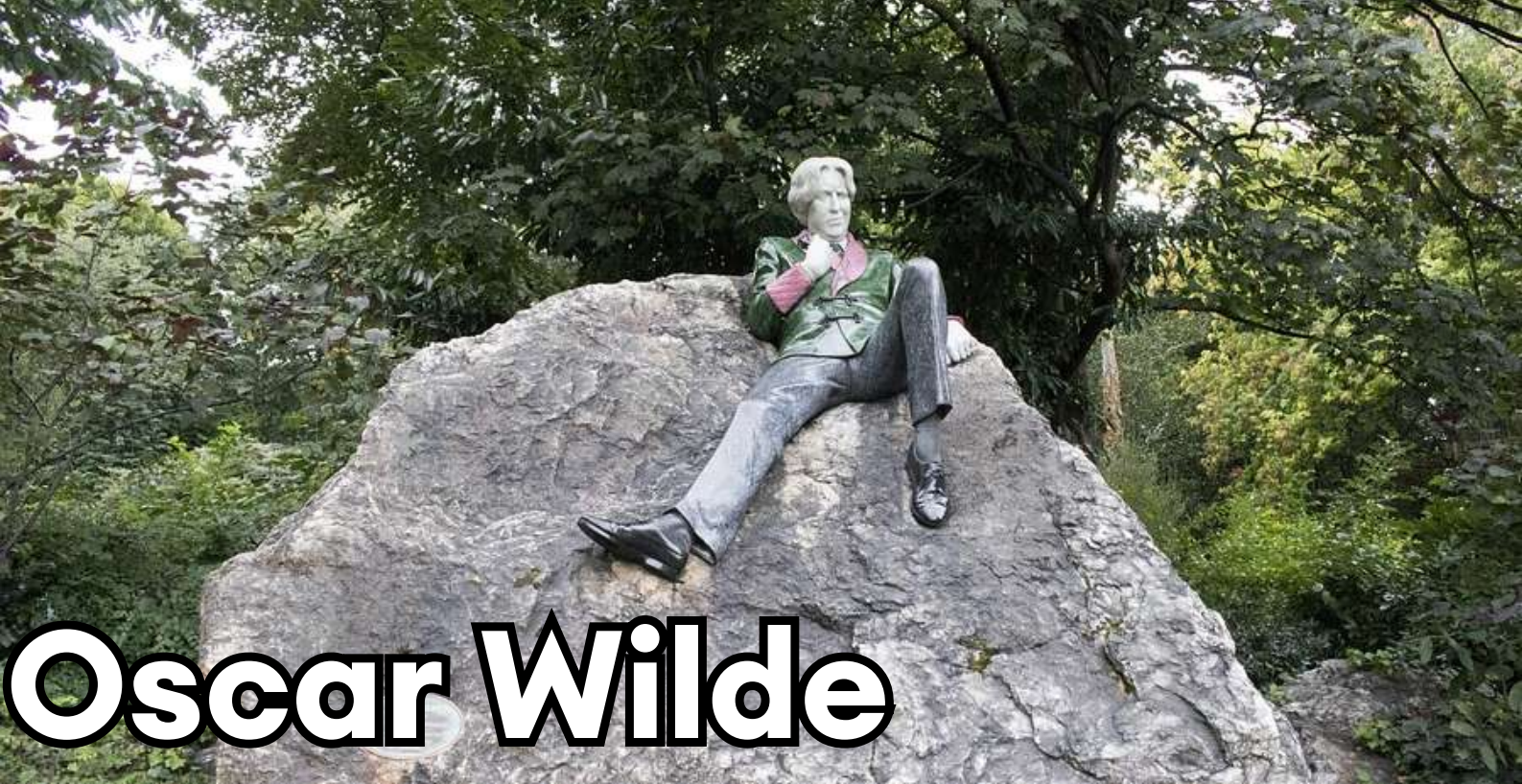


# Oscar Wilde

## WHO WAS OSCAR WILDE?

### Five Wilde Facts

1. Oscar's mother was 6 feet tall and seen as less feminine than other women at the time, she desperately wanted a girl and would dress and treat Oscar as a girl for the first decade of his life.
2. Oscar went to boarding school aged 9, and was one of the youngest students. By the time his older brother Willie was leaving school, Oscar had overtaken him academically. He was excelling in all of his studies.
3. He won one of three scholarships to Trinity College and then another prestigious scholarship later, to study at Oxford University, achieving the highest mark in the test.
4. Despite having a reputation for being a writer, Oscar Wilde only published one novel throughout his life. The Picture of Dorian Gray. Today, the novel is widely taught in schools.
5. Wilde, despite being ill with cerebral meningitis, spoke his infamous last words which were just as witty as his many remarks he made when he was well. His last words are reported to be: 'my wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has got to go.'



## **OSCAR THE WRITER**

Oscar Wilde was born 16th October 1854 in Dublin, Ireland. His father was an acclaimed doctor, and his mother was a renowned poet. From an early age Wilde was extremely intelligent. He was often the top student in his classes, and went on to win a scholarship to Oxford University. It was at Oxford where he began writing.

Wilde graduated and moved to London, working as a poet and lecturer. He established himself as a leader of the aesthetic movement, believing that art should exist to be beautiful, rather than to promote any political viewpoint.

In 1891, he published his first and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Though the novel is now seen as a great classic, at the time critics were outraged by the book's themes. Wilde defended himself against the critics and went on to write his first play *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The play gained widespread popularity and critical acclaim, encouraging Wilde to write more.

Wilde went on to produce several great plays—witty, highly satirical comedies that also contained dark and serious undertones. His most famous play was *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Oscar Wilde's writing is often described as expressive, satirical and true to Wilde's belief in aesthetics. In his work, you are likely to find irony, imagery and symbolism.

Wilde died aged 46 on November 30, 1900. His novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are considered among the great literary masterpieces of the late Victorian period.



# Oscar Wilde

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING EARNEST

Oscar Wilde, at the time of writing *Earnest* had a wife and two children, however he had multiple affairs with men. He felt copious amounts of pressure living this double life and portrayed this turmoil in the story of *The Importance of being Earnest*.

When writing the play, Wilde was largely influenced by melodrama, social drama, and farce. Although farcical, the play has important and clear themes such as social class, the value of marriage, Victorian culture and society and the importance of appearances.

*The Importance of being Earnest* opened to great applause on February 14th 1895. The upper class, who were presumed to feel anger at the clear attack on their way of life, enjoyed the farcical elements. Whereas the middle-classes appreciated the social commentary and satirical tones of the play.

At the height of Wilde's success and due to homosexuality being illegal, his long term affair with lover, Lord Alfred Douglas ended. Alfred had a very important and influential father, who caught wind of the affair, he 'outed' Wilde. Wilde was furious and tried to sue Alfred's father...this decision would ruin Wilde's life.

During the trial, Wilde's writing was used and witnesses spoke out against him. He was sentenced for 'gross indecency' to two years hard labour in prison. He was released in 1897 exhausted and broke. He died just a few years later.



# Synopsis

The Importance of Being Earnest is set in England in the 1890s and follows a 28 year old bachelor, living a double life. He is Ernest when in town and Jack Worthing when in the country. His best friend Algernon lives in a very plush, London flat and is due to be visited by his aunt Lady Bracknell, and her daughter, Gwendolyn Fairfax at the start of the play. Ernest has big plans to propose to Gwendolyn. However, Algernon refuses to give his consent, after finding Ernest's cigarette case with a curious engraving from a woman called Cecily. Under pressure, Ernest explains that Cecily is his ward and admits to his friend he maintains two identities.

We enter into a whirlwind of lies as the play proceeds. After a proposal from Ernest, we discover that he was adopted as a baby and has no direct family, as a result Lady Bracknell rejects the proposal for her daughter. Later, at Jack's country home Cecily, his ward and her governess Ms. Prism receives a visitor. Algernon has arrived pretending to be Jack's brother 'Ernest' and Cecily. With another proposal thrown into the mix, both men are now engaged to women who think they are called Ernest. Things come to a head in a fast-paced, witty and farcical manner, putting into question the secret lives people hold, morality, marriage and the social classes of the Victorian period.

A photograph of a man and a woman smiling and holding hands. The man is on the left, wearing a brown sweater, and the woman is on the right, wearing a white t-shirt. They are both looking at each other and smiling. The background is a bright, modern interior with large windows and a green wall.

# Key Themes

“His sharp social observation coupled with his elegant writing style assured him popular success both in Britain and the USA.” Simon Callow writes in his book; Oscar Wilde and his circle. Appearance, style, and keeping extravagant social circles played a huge role in Wilde’s life. As well as keeping up his more stable family life and writing career. The themes he explores in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, can be found intertwined in Wilde’s own life.

Wilde uses the format of a melodramatic farcical play to tell his story. The ridiculousness of the men and their false identities in the play subverts the expectations of them as gentlemen at the time. The social classes of the characters, Victorian culture and the institution of marriage are all themes that Wilde explores in the play.

Other themes include:

- Marriage ( Marriage is presented as a legal contract, love, and happiness have little to do with it.)
- Morality (the farce and fun of the play happens when characters are forced to push the boundaries of their sense of wrong and right)
- Hypocrisy (The name Ernest does not reflect Jack Worthing's actions and Lady Bracknell’s sudden change of heart to her Nephew’s betrothed after she finds out how wealthy she is)
- Appearance vs. Reality (False identities, lives and family members)
- Class and Class conflict (To the Victorians, reform means keeping the current social and economic system in place by perpetuating upper-class virtues)
- Identity (Only when Jack finds out his true identity, can he move on with his life)
- Duty and Respectability (The aristocratic Victorians valued duty and respectability above all else)

# Meet the Cast



**Richard David-Caine**



**Gillian Bevan**



**Harrie Hayes**



**Claire Lee Shenfield**





**Martin Miller**



**Elizabeth Bower**



**Susannah Van  
Den Berg**



**Mateo Oxley**

# Meet the creative team

Writer: Oscar Wilde

Director: Ryan McBryde

Designer: Katie Lias

Lighting Designer: Lucía Sánchez Roldán

Sound Designer: Beth Duke

Casting Director: Marc Frankum

Assistant Director (Birkbeck Placement): Chani Merrell



# In rehearsals





Photo credit: Pamela Raith

# An interview with Emilie Leger



**Stage Management is a pivotal role in a theatre performance. In the below interview Emilie, who has worked on many Mercury productions, gives an insight into her role, herself and the production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.**

## **How did you get into Stage Management?**

Whilst at secondary school I found a real love for drama (fuelled by my mother's love of musicals) but I didn't enjoy being on stage. I wasn't comfortable with performing or with lots of people looking at me! However, I knew I wanted to be involved somehow, so with the help of my drama teacher, I started looking into all the different roles there were within a production, and Stage Management was the one that aligned with my interests the most. I started researching further education and studied Technical Theatre and Production Arts in Edinburgh. Whilst I was there, I was able to learn about so many different roles in theatre, and specifically the different roles in Stage Management. After trying my hand at each of the roles, it was evident to me that DSM (Deputy Stage Manager) was the role I enjoyed the most.

## **If you were not a Stage Manager, what would you be?**

I like to think that I would be a baker. I love baking, it is the best way for me to de-stress after a long week, and I always bring my cakes into the theatre I'm working in to share with everyone.

## **What is your favourite part of being a Stage Manager?**

I love that I get to work with so many new people constantly. Each production brings together a new group of incredibly talented and creative people who all work so hard together to create an incredible piece of theatre. I also love being a part of the show every night and hearing the audience react to different moments that they find impactful, funny or heart-warming that evening.

## **What advice would you give to a student wanting to work in Stage Management?**

Try to get as much hands-on experience as you can, through work experience, or amateur dramatic societies. You will pick up so much whilst on the job, that you can't really learn through exclusive classroom-based learning. I would also advise trying to gain a base knowledge in technical components such as lighting, sound or stage, as these skills can become transferable and potentially invaluable.

## **What does your typical day look like when working on a show?**

My days vary depending on what point we are at in the process of the show. If we are in rehearsals, I will start the morning with setting up the rehearsal room for whichever scene we are working on that day, and setting out the correct rehearsal props. I will then spend the day in rehearsals, supporting the director and the cast. This can be in a number of different ways, from writing down the blocking (the moves that the actors make in the scene), taking notes on specific props that they ask for, and prompting them on their lines once we start running sections. I then end the day with writing the rehearsal notes, which are the notes I have compiled during the day, and sending them to the various production departments i.e. lighting, sound, workshop, wardrobe etc. I also write the schedule for the following day, and send that to the members of the cast.

If we are in performance, then my day looks a little different. I start my day by checking in with all of the backstage team that their checks have gone well and everything is ready for the performance. I then check in with the actors while they're warming up and make sure they're feeling fit and well. Half an hour before the performance, I ensure that the stage is ready to open the house, which involves making sure we're in the correct lighting state, all the furniture is set on stage and that the pre-show music is playing. I then liaise with Front of House to let them know that we're ready for them to start letting the audience in. Once it is time for the performance, I then go to prompt corner, in the Stage Left wing and I call the performance. This entails cueing all of the elements of the show including lights, sound, scene changes, fly cues and actor entrances to make sure that everything happens at the right time and the show flows as it should. Once the show is over, I write the show report detailing anything that went wrong, and the schedule for the following day.

## How would you explain The Importance of Being Earnest in three words?

Witty, chaotic and commentative.

## Which character is your favourite?

My favourite character is Cecily because she is so strong willed, and goes after what she wants, even if it isn't the most practical. She is quite stubborn (which I can relate to) and headstrong.

## What was the last show you worked on?

The last show I worked on was The Mercury's pantomime, Sleeping Beauty. This was my 5th panto at The Mercury, and I really enjoy coming back to work on it each year. There are a number of returning cast and crew, so it always feels like a big family reunion.



# Lesson Plan

## Secondary

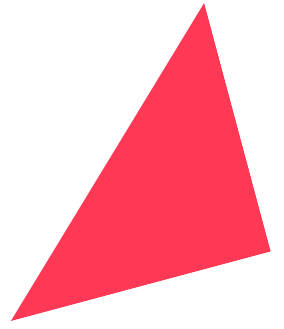




## **Workshop (Secondary)**

**Curriculum links: Drama, English Literature**

**Objection: Ideas for further exploration of the production, through games and exercises.**



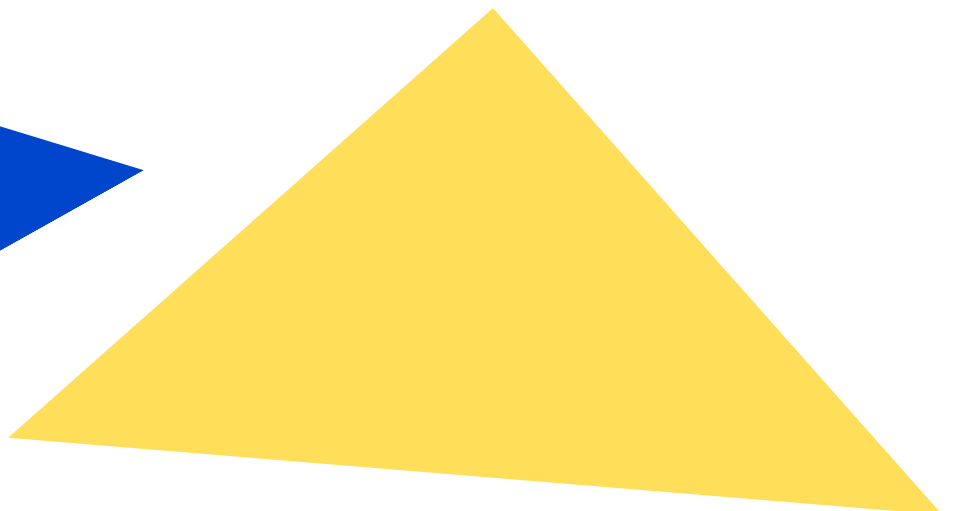
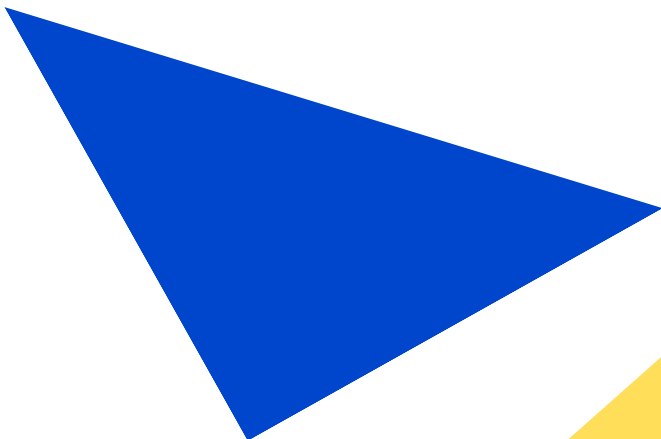
### **WARM UP**

#### **Zip/Zap/Boing - Earnest edition**

The group should stand in a circle. All commands should be said and played out with energy, pace, and to add fun a posh RP type accent to match the characters in the play.

There are 5 commands to choose from;

1. To send the action around the circle you must say 'I say' using your body to make it clear which direction you are sending it.
2. To stop the action and send it the other way, you throw your hands up in the air adopting the character of 'Lady Bracknell' and say 'A handbag?!' with utter disgust. The action 'I say' will then continue in the opposite direction.
3. To send the action across the circle you throw point your arms in the direction of your chosen person and say 'Dearest Ernest'
4. To force everyone to change positions you must shout 'Lady Bracknell is arriving!' and everyone very quickly changes position in the circle, the same person will then continue the game once everyone is in a new position
5. 'Gwendolyn' said in a playful way that makes everyone turn away from each other, and pretend they are embracing someone else by wrapping their arms around themselves.



## EXPLORING CHARACTER

### Crossing the Circle Activity

#### Using intention to show how a character is feeling/what they're thinking

The group should be standing in a circle. One person (A) crosses the circle making eye contact with someone on the other side as they go (B). That person (B) then leaves their place and makes eye-contact with someone else and so the game continues. Now you can pause the game and add different intentions each time, the aim of the game being that the person must communicate what their character is thinking/feeling purely by their physicality and facial expressions. Some examples of intentions to use:

- You are a high society gentleman on a morning stroll
- You are a young person madly in love going to see their lover
- You are keeping a secret and trying to be very inconspicuous
- You think you have the highest status in society and look down on everyone else.
- You are gearing yourself up to propose to your betrothed.

Add more than one person crossing at a time. Then you can add greetings using the text for example: one person could walk across the space and ask the person they approached "Where have you been since last Thursday" and the person could reply "In the country" before moving into the circle themselves to repeat the first part of the greeting.



## **EXPLORING SETTING**

### **Creating the environments**

#### **To explore the contrasts between London and the Country**

Participants walk around the space as though they are in 1890s London, behaving as Ernest would. The environment is vibrant with people wearing their finest suits and dresses, fancy and well decorated buildings, people drinking champagne, nodding to one another as you go past. What can you see and hear in the palace?

Add the line 'Good afternoon', this can be repeated as many times as needed. Ask the group the following questions - What words would we use to describe the palace? What's it like as an environment, and what did being in that environment do to how you moved?

Next, participants walk around the space as though they are in the grounds of Jack Worthing's country home. What can you see and hear? Add the line 'The air is crisp today'. Ask the group the following questions; How is being out in the country different from London? What was different physically? How would it feel if you had always loved to be in London but was obligated to go to the country?

Divide into two groups. One group is invited to make a tableau of being in London, showcasing all the people that you would find there and the other group is going to create a tableau showing the beautiful country house.

## **EXPLORING FARCICAL COMEDY**

### **Multiple exercises with an aim of using physicality in a comical way**

#### **The Tight-Rope**

The group will perform an action normally e.g. mime making a cup of tea, and then repeat it as if they're on a tight-rope. The movement needs to flow and the action continues.

#### **Repeat and interrupt**

Then the group is going to create a repeating physical pattern, followed by a sudden interruption e.g. building a brick wall interrupted by the wall falling down. How do they react using their entire physicality?

#### **Exaggerated gesture**

The group will perform an action normally e.g. typing on a typewriter, when the facilitator claps their hand the group exaggerates this gesture using broad facial expressions, the movement takes over their whole body, the movement needs to be completed like their life depended on it.

## Reflections

Decide on several statements to pose to the class, linked to themes within *The Importance of Being Ernest* (see below for suggestions)

- Create an imaginary line running diagonally across the space.
- Read out a statement to the group.
- Explain that to stand at one end means you agree with the statement, and to stand at the other means you disagree.
- Standing somewhere along the line means you agree/disagree to varying degrees.
- One standing at the point on the line which reflects their opinion, class members can be asked to explain their position, thereby generating discussion.

## Statements

- Marriage is a legal contract, love has nothing to do with it.
- You should be able to tell a lie to someone if it protects their feelings.
- Money can't buy happiness
- Rich people are smart
- Upper class people should only hang around with other upper class people only.
- You should be able to change your identity when you want to

