

Tracy Wells

Adapted from the play by Oscar Wilde

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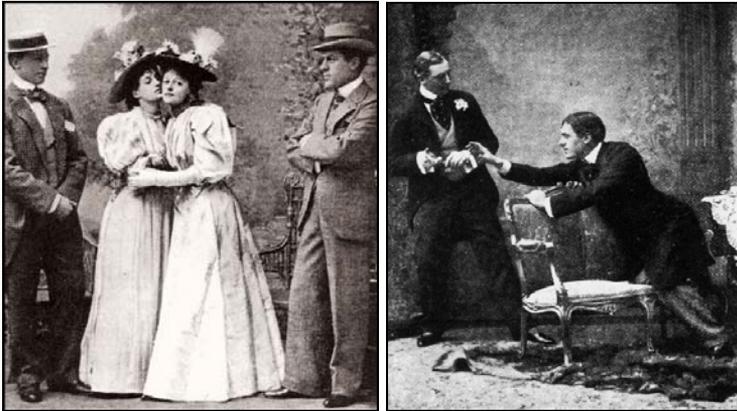
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*For my Dad,
who always taught me
the value of honesty.
Thank you for instilling in me
a sense of humor that is reflected
in this play and throughout all of my work.
I love you, Dad.*

The Importance of Being Earnest

CLASSIC. This 60-minute adaptation of Oscar Wilde's uproarious play is easy to stage and perfect for young actors. Jack has fallen in love with Gwendolen, the cousin of his best friend, Algernon. Meanwhile, Algernon has plans to woo Cecily, Jack's young ward. The only problem is that both women will only love a man named "Ernest." To win Cecily's hand in marriage, Algernon poses as Jack's brother, Ernest. But when Algernon arrives at Jack's estate, he discovers to his dismay that Ernest has recently "died." In the meantime, Jack has made plans to be christened with the name "Ernest" at 5:30 p.m. not knowing Algernon has also made arrangements to be christened "Ernest" the same day. In the end, Algernon and Jack realize the importance of being earnest!

Performance Time: Approximately 60 minutes.



(Left) Allan Aynesworth, Evelyn Millard, Irene Vanbrugh and George Alexander in the 1895 London premiere. (Right) The original 1895 production as Algemon Moncrieff (left, played by Allan Aynesworth) refuses to return Jack Worthing's (Sir George Alexander) cigarette case.

About the Story

Oscar Wilde was born in Dublin in 1854 and died in Paris in 1900. *The Importance of Being Earnest, a Trivial Comedy for Serious People* was first performed at the St. James Theatre in London on Feb. 14, 1895. One of Oscar Wilde's most popular plays, it serves as a satire of Victorian social conventions and is chock full of clever witticisms and humorous paradoxes. Wilde was influenced by French theatre and based the structure of the play like that of a French farce. Wilde also was influenced by the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s, which was critical of moralistic Victorian values and customs and emphasized "art for art's sake." On opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, women wore lily corsages and men wore lilies of the valley in their lapels to honor Wilde's aestheticism.

Characters

(4 M, 4 F, 3 flexible)

(With doubling: 4 M, 4 F, 2 flexible)

JOHN (JACK) WORTHING: Young, eligible bachelor who leads a double life and goes by the name of “Ernest” in the city and “Jack” in the country; in love with Gwendolen Fairfax and guardian to Cecily Cardew; male.

CECILY CARDEW: Jack’s ward who is obsessed with the name Ernest and in love with Algernon, who she thinks is Jack’s brother; female.

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF: Jack’s best friend, a charming, witty, idle bachelor who leads a double life and is known as “Algernon” in the city and “Ernest” in the country; male.

LADY BRACKNELL: Algernon’s snobbish, opinionated, domineering aunt and Gwendolen’s mother.

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX: Algernon’s cousin and Lady Bracknell’s daughter; she is in love with Jack, who she thinks is named Ernest.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE: Clergyman who has a secret crush on Miss Prism.

MISS PRISM: Cecily’s governess who has a secret crush on Rev. Chasuble.

MR./MRS. GRIBSBY: Solicitor summoned to collect Algernon’s debt; flexible.

LANE: Algernon’s sarcastic manservant; male.

MERRIMAN: Butler or head maid at Jack’s country house; flexible.

MOULTON: Gardener at Jack’s country house; flexible.

Option for Doubling

GRIBSBY/MOULTON (flexible role)

Costumes

Costumes should represent the late 1800s. Jack, Algernon, Gwendolyn, Cecily, and Lady Bracknell should be dressed in fine clothes, depicting wealth and status. The servants should be dressed in more modest earth tones reflecting servants of that time period.

Setting

Late 1800s. London flat and a country home in Woolton, England.

Sets

This play is easy to stage with very few set requirements. A minimalist approach can be utilized or the set can be as elaborate as your time/budget allows.

Algernon's London flat. Decorated elegantly with a sofa CS and two chairs flanking either side. One small table is near the sofa.

Garden at Jack's country home. Plants and/or trees are present and there is a small table piled with books and two chairs CS.

Drawing room of Jack's country home. There is a writing table and chair SL and a sofa CS. A bookcase is rear. A chair and side table are SR.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Algernon's London flat.

Scene 2: Garden at Jack's country home.

Scene 3: Drawing room, Jack's country home.

Scene 4: Drawing room, Jack's country home,

Props

Tea tray	Calling card (business card)
Tea service	Watch, for Gribbsby
Plate of cucumber sandwiches (small sandwiches)	Pen
Hand bell	Small presents or packages
Cigarette case	Pearl necklace
Potted plants and/or trees	Bundle of tied-up letters
Books	Sugar cubes
Watering can	Plate of bread
Garden shears	Plate of muffins
2 Diaries	Plate of cake slices
	Bill
	Black handbag

Sound Effect

Piano music

"I've now realized
for the first time in my life
the vital Importance
of Being Earnest."

—Jack

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Interior of Algernon's London flat. The sound of piano music is heard offstage. Lane enters, carrying a tray with a tea service and cucumber sandwiches on it. Lane arranges the food on the table. Piano music stops. Algernon enters and throws himself lazily onto the sofa.)

ALGERNON: Did you hear the song I was playing on the piano, Lane?

LANE: (*With a dry sense of humor, not looking up.*) I didn't think it was polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry to hear that, for your sake. I don't play accurately, but I do play with such wonderful expression. Expression is the true essence of life, you know, and I do have such a taste for life. Speaking of a taste for life...have you prepared the cucumber sandwiches for Lady Bracknell?

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: (*Holding out his hand, not looking at Lane.*) Ahem! Where are they, then? I am expecting Lady Bracknell any minute.

LANE: (*Annoyed, indicates plate on table.*) Ahem! They are right here, sir.

ALGERNON: Oh! There they are! (*Sits up, takes two sandwiches, and eats them as he speaks.*) Why is it that we only have cucumber sandwiches when we are expecting guests? They are quite delicious, wouldn't you agree, Lane?

LANE: I wouldn't know, sir. The servants aren't permitted to eat cucumber sandwiches.

ALGERNON: Surely, your wife has made you a cucumber sandwich at one time or another?

LANE: I have very little experience with marriage. I have only been married once, and that was due to a misunderstanding between myself and the young lady in question.

ALGERNON: I don't think I am very interested in your personal life, Lane.

LANE: It is not a very interesting subject. I will try not to think of it myself when I am in your presence.

ALGERNON: Very good, Lane. Before you go, give me just one more cucumber sandwich.

LANE: Yes, sir.

(Annoyed, Lane hands the entire plate of sandwiches to Algernon and exits. With the plate resting on his stomach, Algernon leans back and eats another sandwich.)

ALGERNON: *(To himself.)* Lane doesn't seem to have a very good viewpoint on marriage. It is really up to the lower classes to set a good example to those of us in higher social standing. If not, what is the use for them?

(Lane enters, followed by Jack.)

LANE: *(Announcing.)* Mr. Ernest Worthing has arrived.
(Exits.)

ALGERNON: How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you to town? Business or pleasure?

JACK: Oh, pleasure! What other reason is there? And how are you, Algy? Eating, as usual, I see.

ALGERNON: It is customary to enjoy a refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been all week?

JACK: In the country.

ALGERNON: My goodness! What on earth could you possibly be doing in the country?

JACK: It's no matter. I see you have tea ready. I can't help but wonder who you're expecting.

ALGERNON: Oh, merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK: How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON: I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't approve of you being here.

JACK: May I ask why?

ALGERNON: The way you flirt with Gwendolen is awful.

It's almost as bad as the way she flirts with you.

JACK: I am in love with Gwendolen. In fact, I have come to town to propose to her.

ALGERNON: I thought you had come up for pleasure? I call that business.

JACK: How utterly unromantic you are!

(Jack takes a sandwich from the plate. Algernon swats his hand away.)

ALGERNON: Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches.

They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta.

JACK: You have been eating them this entire time.

(Algernon takes a bite of the last sandwich left on the tray.)

ALGERNON: That is a different matter. She is my aunt. But back to your proposal. Gwendolen is my first cousin.

Before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole matter of Cecily.

JACK: Cecily?! What on earth do you mean? I don't know of anyone named Cecily.

(Algernon crosses to the table and rings a hand bell.)

ALGERNON: Is that so?

(Lane enters.)

LANE: Yes, sir?

ALGERNON: Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left the last time he dined here.

LANE: Yes, sir. *(Exits.)*

JACK: Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I have been writing letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was planning on offering a large reward.

ALGERNON: Well, I'd be more than happy to accept a reward. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

(Lane enters and hands Algernon a cigarette case.)

LANE: Here is the cigarette case, sir.

ALGERNON: Thank you, Lane. *(Inspects the case as Lane exits.)*

Well, it is no matter. Now that I look at the inscription inside, I find this isn't your case, after all.

(Indignant, Jack attempts to take the case from Algernon.)

JACK: Of course it's mine, and you have no right to read what is written inside!

ALGERNON: *(Holding case out of Jack's reach.)* But this isn't your case. It's from someone named Cecily. You don't know anyone by that name.

JACK: Well, if you must know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON: Your aunt?!

JACK: Yes, and a charming old lady she is, too. *(Tries to grab the case.)* Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON: But why does she call herself "little Cecily" if she is your aunt? *(Runs away from him. Reads case.)* "From little Cecily with her fondest love."

JACK: Some aunts are tall and some aunts are not.

(Jack tries to get the case. Algernon runs away.)

ALGERNON: Yes, but why does your aunt call you her uncle? "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack." I have no objection to your aunt being small, but no aunt should call her nephew her uncle. Besides, your name is not Jack. It's Ernest.

JACK: My name isn't Ernest, in fact. It's Jack.

ALGERNON: You have always told me it was Ernest. You answer to the name Ernest. You even look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I have ever seen in my life.

JACK: My name is Ernest in town, and Jack in the country. The case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON: I must hear the whole story behind this!

JACK: A Mr. Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will the guardian to his granddaughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle for reasons of respect, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON: Where is your place in the country, by the way?

JACK: That is no matter to you, Algy. You will never be invited to my country home.

ALGERNON: We'll see about that, but do go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK: Because I am in the position of guardian, I must adopt a high moral attitude. In order to get up to town, I pretend to have a brother named Ernest who gets into the most dreadful scrapes.

ALGERNON: I have always suspected you of being a secret Bunburyist, and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK: What on earth do you mean? What is a "Bunburyist"?

ALGERNON: You have invented a brother called Ernest so that you can come into town when you like. I have invented an invalid named Bunbury, so that I can go down to the country whenever I choose.

JACK: What nonsense!

ALGERNON: It isn't nonsense. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at the Savoy tonight, for I have had plans to dine with my Aunt Augusta for a week.

JACK: I haven't asked you to dine with me tonight.

ALGERNON: I know. You are absolutely careless about sending out invitations.

JACK: Well, I can't dine at the Savoy. I owe them 1,500 pounds. They are always filing lawsuits against me.

ALGERNON: Why on earth don't you pay them? You have heaps of money.

JACK: Yes, but Ernest hasn't, and I must keep up Ernest's reputation.

ALGERNON: Now that I know you are a true Bunburyist, I want to talk to you about the rules of Bunburying.

JACK: I am not a Bunburyist at all. If Gwendolen accepts me, I am going to kill off my brother. In fact, I think I am going to kill him off either way. Cecily is a little too interested in him.

ALGERNON: Is that so?

(Lane enters with Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen.)

LANE: *(Announcing.)* Lady Bracknell and Miss Fairfax have arrived.

LADY BRACKNELL: *(To Algernon.)* Good afternoon, nephew. I hope you are behaving very well.

ALGERNON: I'm feeling very well, Aunt Augusta.

LADY BRACKNELL: That's not quite the same thing. In fact, the two things rarely go together. In any case, I think I am ready for a cup of tea and one of those nice cucumber sandwiches you promised me.

ALGERNON: Certainly, Aunt Augusta. *(Crosses to the tea table and feigns surprise.)* Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them specially.

LANE: *(Sighs, recites story.)* There were no cucumbers at the market this morning, sir. I went down there twice.

ALGERNON: *(Feigned anger.)* No cucumbers?! That is not acceptable, Lane! You had better try harder to find them next time!

LANE: *(Rolls his eyes.)* Yes, sir. *(Exits.)*

LADY BRACKNELL: It is for the best, Algernon. I am planning quite a feast tonight, and the cucumber sandwiches might have ruined my appetite. You are still coming for supper, aren't you?

ALGERNON: I am afraid, Aunt Augusta, I shall have to give up the pleasure of dining with you tonight.

LADY BRACKNELL: I hope you are telling a joke, Algernon. It would truly disrupt my seating arrangement. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs in his room...fortunately, he is accustomed to that.

ALGERNON: It is a disappointment to me as well, but I received word that my poor friend, Bunbury, is ill again.

GWENDOLEN: Mr. Bunbury seems to suffer from curiously bad health.

LADY BRACKNELL: Well, I think it is high time Mr. Bunbury made up his mind whether he is to live or die. Algernon—of course, if you are obliged to be by the bedside of Mr. Bunbury—I will excuse you from dinner. But I would be much obliged if you would ask Mr. Bunbury, from me, to be kind enough not to have a relapse on Saturday, for I expect you to attend the ball I am having.

ALGERNON: I'll speak to Bunbury, if he is conscious, but I think I can promise you he'll be fine by Saturday.

LADY BRACKNELL: Thank you, Algernon. That is very thoughtful of you. (*Stands.*) Come now, show me your gardens. Gwendolen, you will accompany me.

(Lady Bracknell holds out her arm to Algernon and they exit. Jack rushes to Gwendolen and takes her hand.)

JACK: I would like to take advantage of Lady Bracknell's temporary absence.

GWENDOLEN: I would advise you to do so. Mamma has a way of coming back so suddenly into a room that I have often had to speak to her about.

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

GWENDOLEN: I am aware of that fact. And it has always been my preference to love someone named Ernest. The moment Algernon mentioned that he had a friend named Ernest, I knew I would love you.

JACK: You really love me, Gwendolen?

GWENDOLEN: Passionately!

(Jack and Gwendolen embrace.)

JACK: You don't really mean to say you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Ernest?

GWENDOLEN: But your name is Ernest.

JACK: Yes, I know. But suppose it was something else? To be honest, I don't care for the name Ernest. I must say that there are lots of nicer names. I think Jack, for instance, is very charming.

GWENDOLEN: Jack? No, there is very little music in the name Jack, if any at all.

JACK: Gwendolen, I must get christened at once— *(Catches himself.)* I mean, we must get married at once.

GWENDOLEN: But you haven't proposed to me yet.

(Jack gets down on one knee and takes her hand.)

JACK: Let me amend that. Gwendolen, will you marry me?

GWENDOLEN: Of course I will, darling. My goodness, you've certainly taken your time asking!

(Lady Bracknell enters.)

LADY BRACKNELL: Mr. Worthing! Rise, sir, from this atrocious position! It is most indecent!

GWENDOLEN: But, Mamma! I am engaged to Mr. Worthing!

LADY BRACKNELL: You are not engaged to anyone. When you do become engaged, I will inform you of the fact. But if Mr. Worthing is intent on proposing, then I have some questions for him. Mr. Worthing, how old are you?

JACK: Twenty-nine.

LADY BRACKNELL: A very good age to marry. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK: I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL: Good. I don't approve of anything that hinders natural ignorance. And are your parents living?

JACK: I have lost both my parents.

LADY BRACKNELL: Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as misfortune. To lose both seems like carelessness.

JACK: The fact is, Lady Bracknell, it would be nearer the truth to say that my parents seemed to have lost me. I don't actually know who I am by birth. You see, I was...found.

LADY BRACKNELL: Found?!

JACK: The late Thomas Cardew found me in a handbag in the train station in Victoria. He gave me the name Worthing because he happened to have a first-class ticket to Worthing at the time.

LADY BRACKNELL: I see. Well, I could hardly allow my only daughter to marry a man whose only relation is a parcel. I'm sorry, Mr. Worthing, but if this is the case, I cannot permit you to marry my Gwendolen.

JACK: May I ask you what I should do? I would do anything in the world to marry Gwendolen.

LADY BRACKNELL: I would advise you to acquire some relations as soon as possible. Gwendolen, we are leaving.

(Lady Bracknell exits. Gwendolen reluctantly follows. Algernon enters.)

ALGERNON: How did it go, old boy? You look like a mess.

Don't tell me Gwendolen refused you...

JACK: As far as Gwendolen's concerned, we are engaged, but her mother is perfectly unbearable. I beg your pardon, Algy.

I shouldn't talk about your own aunt that way in front of you.

ALGERNON: I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only reason I put up with them at all.

JACK: In that case, do you think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her horrible mother?

ALGERNON: All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.

JACK: What am I going to do now?

ALGERNON: You could take me to your country home to meet Cecily. That is, unless she is very old and plain.

JACK: She happens to be excessively pretty, and she is only just 18.

ALGERNON: Have you told Gwendolen you have an excessively pretty ward who is only 18?

JACK: I will tell her in time. Besides, I'll bet they'll be calling each other "sister" as soon as they meet.

ALGERNON: Women only do that after they have called each other a lot of other things first.

(Gwendolen enters in a rush.)

GWENDOLEN: Ernest, I fear we shall never be married if Mamma has anything to say about it.

JACK: Dearest Gwendolen, I will do everything I can to prove myself so that I may someday marry you.

GWENDOLEN: Until then, I should like to have your address in the country so that I might write to you.

JACK: It is the Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

GWENDOLEN: Very well, I will communicate with you daily. Now, I really must hurry back to Mother.

JACK: I will see you out then, my dear Gwendolen.

(Jack offers his arm to Gwendolen and they exit. Lane enters.)

ALGERNON: *(Lounging on sofa.)* Get me a glass of sherry, Lane.

LANE: Yes, sir.

ALGERNON: Tomorrow, Lane, I'm going Bunburying and shall not be back until Monday. I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

LANE: It never is, sir.

ALGERNON: Lane, you are a perfect pessimist.

LANE: I do my best to please, sir.

[END OF FREEVIEW]