

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO
EDUCATION**

DESIGN

SKETCHBOOK

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

**BY OSCAR WILDE
DIRECTED BY SARAH GILES**



DIRECTOR'S NOTE: SARAH GILES



Melissa Kahraman and Sarah Giles

“Arguably the greatest comedy ever written”

- Sarah Giles, Design Presentation 27 June 2023

There is a line of thinking that says theatre can be either a mirror or a window; a mirror reflects our world back at us and a window is an opportunity to look into another world. People assume that Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of being Earnest* is a window, through which we are looking at a different world, a different time. But there is a mirror inside that window. Perhaps a fun house mirror, but a mirror nonetheless. And this mirror is doing a very good job of reflecting many of our contemporary issues back at us, if we’re willing to look beyond the laughter. It’s why his play has lasted so long and is so widely performed. Not because it is perfectly structured, and incredibly funny and clever, but because it has the ability to tell us so much about ourselves now.

Wilde’s play is filled with characters who focus on all the wrong things. All the time. It’s incredibly entertaining. They are caught up in what they look like. What they’re wearing. The women are in love not with a specific person called Ernest, but rather the idea of a man who has the name of Ernest. They are caught up in the idea of the thing, the rule of the thing. In short, they focus on all the wrong things.

We are not much better despite having close to one hundred and fifty years to try and make some progress. We are all so distracted. Distracted by work emails, by how others are living their lives, by an imminent work crisis, or by Instagram, perhaps we’re online shopping and thinking about buying something new – in all circumstances we’re giving our precious attention to the wrong things. Wilde’s characters, loveable but flawed, are also astonishing hypocrites. In their defence they are a product of the times they lived in. The hypocrisy of Victorian society is breathtaking. We look back at it and go – gosh, bloody glad I didn’t live then. And yet the parallels are clear. How far have we really come?

Wilde knew that in order for his audience to hear some hard truths they had to be entertained. It is a sentiment I share. Comedy is the greatest theatrical form to delve into political ideas and ask hard questions. And Wilde certainly trojan-horsed in a lot of very controversial ideas to this genius play.

I think if we can take a moment, to laugh at ourselves, at the hypocrisy of it all, and take a good look in this fun house mirror, perhaps tomorrow morning we might realise we’ve been giving our precious time and energy to the wrong things, and maybe we’ll shift our focus.

As Wilde himself said, “life is too important to be taken seriously.”

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

SET DESIGN

The Importance of Being Earnest was first produced in London in 1895 as the Victorian era was drawing to a close. Written by Oscar Wilde, the play satirises the hypocrisy of the British aristocracy, and the ways in which they maintain their power and privilege through the manipulation of cultural narratives around love and marriage. Director Sarah Giles' vision for STC's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is to explore this hypocrisy with a focus on the exploitation of the working and middle classes, whose lives are misshapenly spent in the service of the aristocratic class as they strive to maintain and continue their privilege.

Set Designer Charles Davis in collaboration with Director Sarah Giles has chosen to keep the aesthetic from the Victorian period, fused with contemporary design influences

to ensure a fresh visual approach to Wilde's classic text. Giles' vision is to bring the two worlds of Wilde's play together for the audience – to foreground the relationship between the glittering surface of aristocratic Victorian England and its utter reliance on the subterranean and invisible world of working people. In Davis' design, the world of the aristocracy has been conceived as one of grandeur, scale, and luxury, with panelled walls and parquet floors. The world of the aristocracy is spacious light and bright. The world of the servant class and in contrast, is dark, small, dirty, and cramped, existing alongside each other with visible inequality.



Brandon McClelland, Charles Wu and Helen Thomson

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

ACT I

Act I is set in the apartment of young aristocrat Algernon Moncrieff in a fashionable area of London. The play opens with a view into Algernon's drawing room, through to his music room, in which Algernon is playing his grand piano, out of sight of the audience. The first character the audience sees in the performance space, however, is that of Lane, Algernon's manservant, suggesting that whilst the apartment and by extension the homes of the aristocracy may be owned by Algernon and his aristocratic peers, they are very much managed, directed, and reliant on Lane and the labour of the working classes to maintain them.

Algernon's drawing room includes natural, white light, clean lines, and white walls which in London infers vast wealth, due to the premium on space in an overcrowded city and the dirt generated in an industrial landscape Designer Charles Davis has chosen furniture to both reflect the luxury of the world of the aristocratic world of the play. Algernon's

drawing room leads upstage left (USL) to his music room, with a grand piano in view of the audience, played by Algernon as he waits for his Aunt Augusta to visit. This room is also light and bright, with a clean and spacious aesthetic.

Whilst not included in Wilde's stage directions, Giles and Davis have also included the scullery and kitchen of Algernon's London apartment, built stage left (SL) in the Roslyn Packer Theatre. It has been designed to reflect its place in the structure of the building (and society) which would typically be downstairs from the owner's living area and built into the earth underneath the house, the result of the overcrowding in the city. Davis' design shows the reality of the servant world, with both rooms being cold, dark, and damp. This design choice has also allowed Giles and the actors in the ensemble to explore not only the inequality satirised by Wilde, but also the physical comedy of the cramped conditions under which the servants must work, creating moments of farce as they rush at cost to themselves, to ensure that their masters want for nothing.



Melissa Kahraman and Megan Wilding

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

ACT II

Act II is set in the beautiful English gardens of Cecily and John (Jack) Worthing's country estate. The transition from Act I into Act II occurs live on stage for the audience. The first moment of this transition involves dropping dirt onto the head of one of Algernon's servants at the end of Act I. It ends with the roses in the country garden owned by Cecily and Jack dropped from the rig to the stage to signify the end of the transition. The audience can see, for the first time, the huge amount of dirt upon which Algernon's apartment is built, which is underneath the apartment. The façade of Algernon's home in Act I transforms into the outside walls of the home of Cecily and Jack in Act II.



Charles Wu, Lucia Mastrantone and Brandon McClelland

This choice is a visual reminder that the façade of the upper class is built on the dirt of England and speaks directly to Giles' vision for the production. A natural element, dirt suggests the biological connection between the upper and lower classes - all humans have emerged from the same organic origins. This connection is hidden by the aristocracy through the structures that they have built around themselves, including the structures regulating human relationships - structures that are difficult to destroy once they have been erected - to ensure their ongoing privilege at the expense of other human beings.

ACT III

Act III opens with a flipped perspective - the audience can see the inside the building that they have seen from the outside during Act II. Both female characters - Gwendolen and Cecily - are inside the house as Act III begins and their male counterparts are outside, wrestling in the dirt. As the narrative progresses, the world of the play becomes increasingly chaotic, with the neat, clean structures of the building changed by the behaviour of the aristocratic characters.



Gareth Davies Megan Wilding and Brandon McClelland

COSTUME DESIGN: RENEE MULDER

Costume Designer Renee Mulder has articulated her vision for *The Importance of Being Earnest* as being that of “Excess and Maintenance.” (STC Final Design Presentation 27 June 2023). Mulder has also noted that her costumes are an exaggerated version of the Victorian period, based in historical accuracy but exaggerated for satirical effect, heightening their shape to visually support the comedic dialogue. Mulder has infused contemporary references to bring the world of the play into the present, with luxury fabrics, shapes and motifs speaking to a contemporary aesthetic. Mulder has referenced the Met Gala, Lizzo and various Parisian fashion designers to bring a modern aesthetic to the costumes.

ACT I

In keeping with Sarah Giles’ vision for the production, Mulder began her design process with an exploration of the servants in the play, exploring historical images of various categories of servants in the Victorian period. Mulder’s designs include the appropriate tailcoats, britches, aprons, mop caps and ties for the status of the servant, a category of worker also divided sharply along hierarchical lines. Mulder has noted that the costumes for these characters reflect Giles’ interrogation of class structures by being ill-fitting on the actors’ bodies, choosing off white, cream, and dirty white fabric to show the physical impact of the demanding work undertaken by the servant class to keep the aristocratic class living in their pristine, privileged environment.

Designer Renee Mulder’s costumes for the aristocratic characters in Act I are evocative of the status of each character. Like Davis’ set, each aristocratic character dresses luxuriously, signifying their immense wealth, and signifying the inhibited movement throughout their world. Mulder’s costumes suggest the way that the aristocracy rely on and exploit the labour of the servant classes to be able to function in the manner that they do. Algernon, for example, begins Act I in the nude with rollers in his hair, moving into a luxurious robe and then a suit – all of which require the intensive attention and support of Lane, Algernon’s manservant. Algernon’s nonchalant selection and rejection of several pieces of clothing as part of this process is illustrative of his disregard for the human labour needed to maintain his clothes for him, particularly in a time when heating water required human labour, along with the action of washing, wringing, and drying each item.

Further, the enormous shapes created by the gowns worn by Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen Fairfax also suggest the reliance on the servant classes to ensure their mobility. The audience may imagine the help required to dress in the undergarments (for example, corsets) required to create the exaggerated shapes of the gowns, the help of footmen and liverymen to access transportation and the difficulties of disrobing on one’s own.



Algernon Costume Design



Gwendolen Costume Design



Jack Costume Design



Gwendolen Costume Design

COSTUME DESIGN: RENEE MULDER

ACT II & III

Acts II and III occur at the country estate of John (Jack) Worthing, with Act II outside in the garden and Act III inside the manor house. The servants remain in the same attire throughout the play, reflecting the constant work expected of them by their employers and their lack of resources with which to escape their lives of service.



Cecily Costume Design



Miss Prism Costume Design

The character of Cecily Cardew is introduced in Act II. Mulder has continued the exaggerated shapes of the female characters for Cecily, including the size of her skirts and the size and grooming of her hair. As a country girl, Cecily's costume reflects a simpler approach to life compared to Gwendolen, whilst remaining completely impractical for her environment. Miss Prism, Cecily's worn-down spinster governess, also introduced in Act II, is dressed in plain colours, reflecting her thwarted desires for romantic and sexual connection. The object of Miss Prism's desire, Rev Canon Chasuble is suitably dressed in the robes of an Anglican priest, and the severity of his costume reflects the small-minded attitudes of the middle class. Their adherence to the dogma of the church, in particular its focus on celibacy, can be seen in their joyless attire.

Both Algernon and Jack have costume changes in Act II and III, including Jack's arrival in mourning for his brother, and Algernon's Norfolk style hunting outfit, worn by the

aristocracy when in country England. Algernon's cape and associated accessories are in homage to Oscar Wilde's own aesthetic. Each character is dressed beautifully, with intricate adornments and expensive cloth used to construct their carefully curated image – that of the "country gentleman." The arrival of Gwendolen and her mother, Lady Bracknell, continues this motif with their country attire, suggesting the excesses of high fashion inappropriate for the environment and deeply restrictive for each. This is particularly noticeable for Gwendolen, whose dress is shaped tightly around her knees, making walking difficult. Both Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen have dirt on the bottom of their attire, reflective of the lack of suitability for their excursion to the country.

Later in Act III, both Jack and Algernon change into their 'country whites,' an aristocratic convention originating from the wealth and privilege that it took to maintain such white clothes and the understanding that the country air would not show the dirt on them as quickly as it would in industrial London. As the audience watches Jack and Algernon move through the dirt of the set, they are made aware of the connections between the different social groups – all people have the same organic origins and all live and breathe in the same world as each other. The dirty whites and creams of the servants in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are not too far removed from the dirty 'country whites' of the aristocracy.



Morton Costume Design



Lady Bracknell Costume Design

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mulder, R (2023) Costume Design Sketches. *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Costume design sketches are courtesy of Renée Mulder.

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The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Kelly is the Education Manager for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Kelly on **kyoung@sydneytheatre.com.au**

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