

PROMPT PACK PART A / THEATRE STUDIES

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST



14 FEB – 8 MAR

MALTHOUSE
PROMPT

Malthouse
Theatre
acknowledges
the Land and
Songlines
of the Boon
Wurrung and
Wurundjeri
peoples of the
Kulin Nation.

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Malthouse Theatre presents the Ridiculusmus production of The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde.

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PROMPT PACK CREATED FOR MALTHOUSE
PROMPT—MALTHOUSE THEATRE'S YOUTH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM.

Cover Image / Zan Wimberley
Photographer / Tim Page
Design / Hours After

Theatre Studies Prompt Pack written by / Robyn Kay

SEASON
2020

ICON KEY



LINKS



ACTIVITY



VIDEO



DISCUSS



PODCAST



MORE INFO

#EARNESTMH20



MALTHOUSE THEATRE /



At Malthouse Theatre we collaborate with local and international artists to create inventive performances that cut to the core of the human experience. Theatre has the power to interrogate, disrupt and to be an agent of change—and we think it always should.

At Malthouse Theatre the work we produce explores the world personally, socially and politically. Based in a dedicated venue, The Malthouse in Melbourne, we are a home for live experiences that entertain and provoke a dialogue with and within audiences.

Welcome to Malthouse Theatre.

RESOURCES

Q&A WITH HOURS AFTER, THE CREATORS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST CAMPAIGN IMAGE

**CAST & CREATIVE TEAM**JON HAYNES
CO-CREATOR & PERFORMERDAVID WOODS
CO-CREATOR & PERFORMERJUDE KELLY CBE
ORIGINAL DIRECTIONZOË ATKINSON
SET & COSTUME DESIGNSTEPHEN HAWKER
LIGHTING DESIGNTOM BACKHAUS
SOUND REALISERLYNDIE LI WAN PO
STAGE MANAGERWENDY FINDLATER
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
& DRESSERERIN MILNE
PRODUCER

**Stay tuned for
interviews with
the cast and
creatives in Part B.**

INTRODUCTION /

This Prompt Pack is designed to prepare you for your study of Oscar Wilde's much loved play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The play will be performed by the highly regarded UK company Ridiculusmus. You will be seeing the show at Malthouse Theatre as part of your study of Theatre Studies, Unit 3, Outcome 3.

PART A of Malthouse Theatre's Theatre Studies Prompt Pack will provide you with information about the playwright, the actors and the creatives. It will also examine context, explore the intended interpretation of the play and suggest some preshow activities that you might engage in prior to seeing the production in February/March.

Following your viewing of the play, you can move onto PART B of the Prompt Pack where you can examine in greater depth areas such as: the relationship between the written script and the stage production, the application of production roles, the use of the elements of theatre composition and an examination of some of the creative and imaginative decisions that have been made to interpret the script for performance to an audience.

This unique and quirky interpretation of Oscar Wilde's famous and much admired script is sure to delight its audiences and will provide plenty of scope and rich content for analysis.



Robyn Kay /
Theatre Studies Prompt Pack Author



CAST & CREATIVE BIOS



**JON HAYNES &
DAVID WOODS**
CO-CREATORS &
PERFORMER

Ridiculusmus is a multi-award-winning independent touring theatre company, led by its founding Co-Artistic Directors Jon Haynes and David Woods. Over 27 years Ridiculusmus has created more than 25 original theatre productions, been commissioned by venues including the Barbican Centre, National, Royal Court and Soho Theatre, toured to every region in the United Kingdom and presented work on nearly every continent of the world. The experience of watching Ridiculusmus has been compared by Tom Morris OBE to 'being hit and kissed by a fish in rapid alternating succession,' while The Australian described *A Normal Child*, co-created with The Disability Slapstick Plan, as 'a rage against the machine of virtue signalling'. Ridiculusmus' most recent two-hander *Die! Die! Die! Old People Die!* was selected by the British Council for its 2019 Edinburgh showcase. Their plays are published by Oberon Books.



JUDE KELLY
ORIGINAL DIRECTION

Jude Kelly was appointed Artistic Director of London's Southbank Centre in 2006. She founded Solent People's Theatre, Battersea Arts Centre, and the West Yorkshire Playhouse. In 1997, she was awarded an OBE for her services to theatre, and in 2015 she was made a CBE in the New Year honours for services to the Arts. She has directed over 100 productions from the Royal Shakespeare Company to the Châtalet in Paris. In 2002, Kelly founded Metal, a platform where artistic hunches can be pursued in community contexts, with bases in Liverpool, Southend-on-Sea and Peterborough. She led the cultural team for the successful London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic bid and then served on the Board of the cultural Olympiad. She is a regular broadcaster and commentator on a range of issues relating to society, art and education. In 2011 Jude created the WOW: Women of the World Festival, now heading into its 7th year at Southbank Centre as well as in other parts of the UK and across the globe.



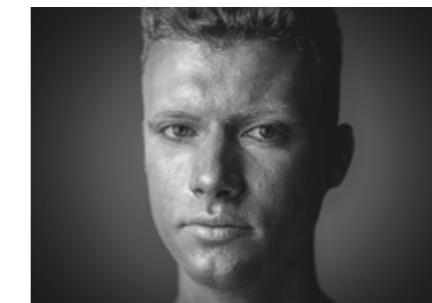
ZOË ATKINSON
SET & COSTUME DESIGN

Zoë studied Design for Performance at the Prague Academy of the Performing Arts, the International Institute of Figurative Theatre and the Institute de la Marionette. Malthouse Theatre credits include *Cloudstreet*, *The Odyssey*, *On the Misconception of Oedipus*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*. Other works with Matthew Lutton include *Elektra* (West Australian Opera) and *The Flying Dutchman* (New Zealand Opera). Zoë was the Artistic Associate and Designer of *Boorna Waanginy*—the opening event of the 2019 Perth Festival, *Cloudstreet* for Malthouse Theatre/Black Swan Theatre, and *The Life of Galileo* for Belvoir St Theatre. She is currently designing *Hecate* (Yirra Yaakin Theatre), *The Cherry Orchard* and *York* (Black Swan Theatre). She has received many awards including a Helpmann Award for Best Costume Design for *The Odyssey* (Malthouse Theatre/Black Swan Theatre) and a nomination for *Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets* (Malthouse Theatre/ Victorian Opera).



STEPHEN HAWKER
LIGHTING DESIGN

Stephen is an experienced Melbourne-based lighting designer. He has designed lighting for theatre, dance, musicals, music events, weddings, dance parties, and once lit a line of broken guitars as an artwork in a warehouse where he lived. He has worked with many companies including Malthouse Theatre, Arts Radar, ATYP, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Belvoir, Flightpath Theatre, Griffin Theatre Company, Musica Viva, Shopfront Theatre, Showtune Productions, Siren Theatre Co, Big hART and Sydney Theatre Company. He is a graduate of the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.



TOM BACKHAUS
SOUND REALISER

Tom is a freelance composer, sound designer and producer. Select sound design credits include *Feather in the Web* (Red Stitch), *Astroman* (Melbourne Theatre Company), *The Temple* (Malthouse Theatre) and *my sister feather* (VIMH). In 2017 Tom was a recipient of the Besen Family Artist Program at Malthouse Theatre, working with Jethro Woodward on *The Real and Imagined History of the Elephant Man*. As a producer, Tom is best known for his work with drag comedy group *Dazza and Keif*. He has presented their debut work *Dazza and Keif Go Viral* in Adelaide, Sydney, Wellington and Melbourne where he was awarded Best Emerging Producer at Melbourne Fringe Festival. In 2019 he presented their follow up *Dazza and Keif Go Viral in Space with Ya Mum* at Melbourne Fringe Festival along with a site-specific contemporary dance piece *Dark Points*. Tom has also worked closely with subversive comedy group The Very Good Looking Initiative. He was associate producer on the Green Room Award nominated *Let's Get Practical! Live* and the award-winning social media comedy, *CULL*.



LYNDIE LI WAN PO
STAGE MANAGER

Lyndie is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts, she has worked as a stage manager and an assistant stage manager both nationally and internationally. Credits for Malthouse Theatre include *Solaris*, *The Temple*, *Blasted*, *Going Down*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Wild Bore*, *Timeshare*, *I Am a Miracle* and *The Good Person of Szechuan*. Select credits include *Token Armies*, *Common Ground* (Chunky Move), *Calamity Jane* (One Eyed Productions), *Funny Girl*, *Curtains*, *Dusty*, *Hello Dolly*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (The Production Company), *Big Bad Wolf*, *Grug*, *Grug and the Rainbow* (Windmill Theatre), *Separation Street*, *Ants* and *Cerita Anak* (Polyglot Theatre).

CAST & CREATIVE BIOS



WENDY FINDLATER
ASSISTANT STAGE
MANAGER & DRESSER

Wendy Findlater assists performers into garments backstage at impressive speed. She dressed David and Jon at Malthouse Theatre's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 2006. Wendy was also been a dresser on *Shakespeare in Love* (MTC), Head of Wardrobe on *Puffs* (Life Like Touring) and was Assistant Head of Wardrobe for the Pop-Up Globe Theatre. Wendy has been fortunate to have travelled the globe on various productions as Head of Wardrobe and dresser since 2000.

ERIN MILNE
PRODUCER

Erin is an independent producer whose practice, Bureau of Works, is deeply driven by a passion for contemporary and experimental art that speaks to the here and now. Living and working on the land of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation in Melbourne, Erin is committed to fostering distinctive voices and ambitious ideas both locally and internationally. Select Malthouse Theatre credits include *Moth*, *Goodbye Vaudeville Charlie Mudd* and *Criminology* (with Arena Theatre Company). Erin is a sought-after collaborator with some of Australia's most distinctive and ambitious artists, including One Step at a Time Like This, Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, Ridiculusmus, Jodee Mundy Collaborations, All the Queen's Men, Gold Satino, Lz Dunn, Michaela Gleave, Anna Tregloan, Too Close to the Sun, and Chris Kohn. She is an associate of Experimenta Media Arts, Punctum, and is a sessional lecturer at Deakin University. Erin was recently awarded an ISPA Australia Council Fellowship for 2020-22.



RIDICULUSMUS & THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST FIND EACH OTHER

The original written script of *The Importance of Being Earnest* was 4 acts. During rehearsals, prior to the premiere of the play in 1895, it was suggested to Wilde that he cut the play to 3 acts, which he did.

Ridiculusmus is a highly regarded and multi-awarded UK based theatre company. The company is comprised of two highly skilled writer/actor/directors, Jon Haynes and David Woods. Since 1992 they had been taking published texts and adapting them for theatre. They also write and devise their own innovative scripts. They are particularly renowned for their incredible skill performing two-handers. Their unique and exciting approach to the interpretation and realisation of theatre caught the attention of Jude Kelly CBE. She had previously directed Jon and was excited by the duo's sophisticated facility for language and words. Jon and David recruited her to give them some new inspiration for a project and she suggested they adapt a comedy of manners. After a search, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was chosen. The structure was perfect and provided a brilliant fit for two actors—it was a play full of duologues. Jon was delighted. He had always been a fan!

The script that Ridiculusmus adapted for this interpretation is the Penguin edition of, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

During the development and adaptation of the script for two actors, David Woods and Jon Haynes have made considered edits to the script to facilitate character and costume changes and assist with the transition of scenes. However, the actors have been extremely careful to retain the intended meaning of the script. This has been achieved through the actors having a sophisticated understanding of the innate comic rhythms of the script and their ability to respect and keep the essence of the characters intact.

'This living, breathing theatre needn't be overtly modern; it doesn't need to shoe-horn in fashionable dance music or topical references. Little dates faster than this month's requisite number of beats per minute (Jungle? Drum'n'bass? Grindcore?) and the move from gossip column to chip wrapper seems to grow faster by the year. Besides, we can find better ways to embarrass ourselves – and/or our audience. But what it does need to do is to engage with the text, and then with an audience; to rediscover meaning and then convey it. It is about serving that text, and finding new ways to tell old truths. This is the Ridiculusmus aim.'



[Ridiculusmus'](#)
[website](#)



THE PLAYWRIGHT

OSCAR WILDE (1854–1900)

i Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 16 October 1854. He was the son of a surgeon, William Wilde who established the St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital in Dublin. His mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, was a poet and skilful linguist who clearly influenced her son's love and aptitude for language and writing. Until the age of nine, Wilde was schooled at home. Wilde proved to be a quick, intelligent, well-read student who began his formal education at Potosa Royal School in Enniskillen, progressing to Trinity College in Dublin. Wilde completed his academic studies at Magdalen College in Oxford.

Throughout his education he was often awarded prizes for his written work. Following his graduation, he settled in London in 1878. His first publication in 1881 was a volume of poetry entitled *Poems*. He received modest acclaim for this work and began to establish himself as a writer of note. Around this time, Wilde, influenced by melodrama, wrote two plays, *Vera* (1883) and *The Duchess of Padua* (written in the early 1880s and staged in 1891). In 1882 Wilde embarked on a lecture tour in America. He gave 140 lectures over the course of nine months. His writing at this time was eclectic and included: publications for gazettes, fairy stories, a collection of children's stories entitled *The Happy Prince* (1888) and his well-known novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* released in 1891. But his plays reflect his real gift for writing and between 1892 and 1895 he wrote his four wonderful satirical comedies; *Lady Windemere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). These all proved immensely popular and went on to delight audiences all over the world. But, the most well known and most performed Wilde play is *The Importance of Being Earnest*. As Wilde himself said:

'It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy... that we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.'

The Importance of Being Earnest is said to be the most frequently quoted play along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Wilde's final play, the dramatic *Salome* (1896), was performed in Paris four years before his death in that same city.

Wilde had become somewhat of a sensation due to his flamboyant dress, outspoken and waspish social commentary and what was regarded at that time as a scandalous sex life. In May 1884, he married Constance Lloyd a wealthy Englishwoman. They had two sons; Cyril (1885) and Vyvyan (1886). Following the birth of their second son, Constance and Oscar became estranged while continuing to live under the same roof. From 1885 to 1889 Wilde ran a once-popular English magazine, *Lady's World*. The magazine had declined in popularity but Wilde revitalised it by including articles that challenged women to think about more than fashion and to consider what they thought and how they felt. But Wilde became bored with his role as editor and let the publication decline again, leaving his position when it became clear that the magazine would not be resurrected.

Like many highly talented and creative people, Wilde's tumultuous and tragic private life eventually spilled out catastrophically into the public realm. In mid-1891, he met Lord Alfred Douglas who quickly became his lover. Lord Alfred, fondly known as 'Bosie' amongst his family and friends, was a very handsome and spoilt



Portrait of Oscar Wilde in New York. Napoleon Sarony, 1882. British Library.

young man. Wilde was besotted with him; he lavished attention, gifts and affection on Bosie and wrote many passionate letters to him. Both Wilde and Bosie conducted themselves very indiscreetly and their affair was one of London's worst kept secrets. Lord Alfred's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, learned of Wilde's affair with his son and decided to publicly humiliate Wilde at the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by throwing a bouquet of rotten fruit onto the stage. The plot was foiled but the Marquess was completely enraged and outraged by Wilde's relationship with his son. Four days after the Opening Night fiasco the Marquess sent Wilde a calling card. On it was written, 'Oscar Wilde: Posing Somdomite (sic.)' Wilde's homosexuality was a fairly open secret, but Wilde decided to sue the Marquess for libel. This was against the advice of his friends who suggested he flee to France. The trial was conducted in March. Evidence against Wilde included a private investigator's findings into Wilde's activities, homoerotic excerpts from his literary works and Wilde's love letters to 'Bosie'. Wilde's libel case was dismissed, and he was arrested and charged with gross indecency; the Criminal Law Act of 1885 made homosexual acts punishable by up to

two years' imprisonment. On 25 May 1895, just three months after the successful Opening Night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was sentenced to two years hard labour in prison. His only writing while incarcerated was *De Profundis*; a long-form letter revealing his journey through his trials and tribulations. This was published posthumously. When he was released in 1897 he was physically and psychologically frail, ill and utterly demoralised. He exiled himself to France where he lived out the last two years of his life under a different name (Sebastian Melmoth) in relative poverty depending on friends for the necessities of life. His wife Constance sent him three pounds a week until his death. He wrote scarcely anything during his last few years. The only notable work was a poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that described his experiences in jail. Wilde was briefly reunited with Bosie and they lived together for three months in Ruen. But they separated when threats to cut off money were received from both families. He passed away on 30 November 1900 from meningitis aged 46.



[Biography.com](#)
[Wikipedia](#)
[BBC UK](#)

EARLY REACTIONS & REVIEWS

i The premiere of the play was staged at the St James Theatre, King Street, London on Valentine's Day (14 February) in 1895. There was potential for scandal on the Opening Night when the Marquess of Queensberry, planned to throw a bouquet of rotten fruit at Wilde. The Marquess was the father of Lord Alfred Douglas who was Wilde's lover. This was in an attempt to publicly discredit and shame Wilde and undermine the success of the play by drawing attention to Wilde's homosexuality. Wilde got wind of the plot and the Marquess was prevented from entering the theatre. *Earnest* was enthusiastically received by the audience who delighted in seeing the aristocracy ridiculed. But the critics gave the work a varied reception. This was probably due to the fact that the play did not appear to be serious in its content and, on the surface, seemed not to confront or deal with social or political issues of the day as other plays and playwrights often did; George Bernard Shaw being one such writer. In his unsigned review for The Pall Mall Review, H.G Wells insightfully summed up this response. He called *Earnest* one of the freshest comedies of the year, saying:

'more humorous dealing with theatrical conventions it would be difficult to imagine.' He also questioned whether people would grasp its message... '*how Serious People will take this Trivial Comedy intended for their learning remains to be seen.*'

Acknowledging the play's cleverness, humour and popularity with the audience, William Archer, a renowned Scottish theatre critic who was at the Opening Night wrote this review: Read the review [here](#).

'Why attempt to analyse and class such a play? Its theme, in other hands, would have made a capital farce but 'farce' is far too gross and commonplace a word to apply to such an iridescent filament of fantasy.'

For the reasons outlined earlier, some commentators also found the play hard to categorise. There were some who thought that it resembled the structure of an operetta. This observation was picked up on by The Times: '*The story is almost too preposterous to go without music*'.

So, the play was launched and embraced by a delighted audience. Unfortunately, due to the unpleasantness and scandal surrounding the ongoing conflict between Wilde and the Marquess of Queensberry and Wilde's subsequent imprisonment and self-imposed exile, the play closed after 87 performances and wasn't published until 1899.



Boxing Night - Our National Theatre. 1885. British Museum.



CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

THE PLAY — THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

Naturally there have been numerous productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Or, *Earnest*, as it is affectionately known. The ones listed below provide a broad timeline and are examples of some of the more significant and relevant productions.

1895

The play premiered at St James Theatre, London on Valentine's Day, 14 February 1895

The original Broadway production opened at the Empire Theatre on 22 April 1895

The Australian premiere, presented by Dion Boucicault Jr and Robert Brough, was on 10 August 1895. Both men also acted in the play

1895—99

B. Tapping's company toured *Earnest* in Ireland between October 1895 and March 1899. The performance in Limerick in late October 1895 was the play's first showing in Ireland, Oscar Wilde's homeland

1899—1900

Elsie Lanham's company toured *Earnest* in England between November 1899 and April 1900

1902

George Alexander presented the play in a small theatre in Notting Hill then mounted a revival at the St James Theatre in 1902

1930

Sir Nigel Playfair the actor director of the Lyric Hammersmith, directed the play in 1930

1939

Sir John Gielgud, arguably one England's finest actors, directed and starred in a famous production at the Gielgud Theatre in 1939. This production went on to tour North America on Broadway in 1947

1982

Sir Peter Hall, founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company mounted a production at the National Theatre, where he was director, in 1982

1988

Melbourne Theatre Company produced the play in 1988. This successful production in which Geoffrey Rush played John Worthing, went on to tour nationally and internationally

1993

Sir Nicholas Hytner, former Artistic Director of London's National Theatre, directed a production that played at the Aldwych Theatre in 1993

2005

The British Theatre Playhouse mounted an international tour in 2005

An all-male cast performed the play in 2005 at The Abbey Theatre in Dublin

2011

The Roundabout Theatre Company produced a Broadway revival in 2011

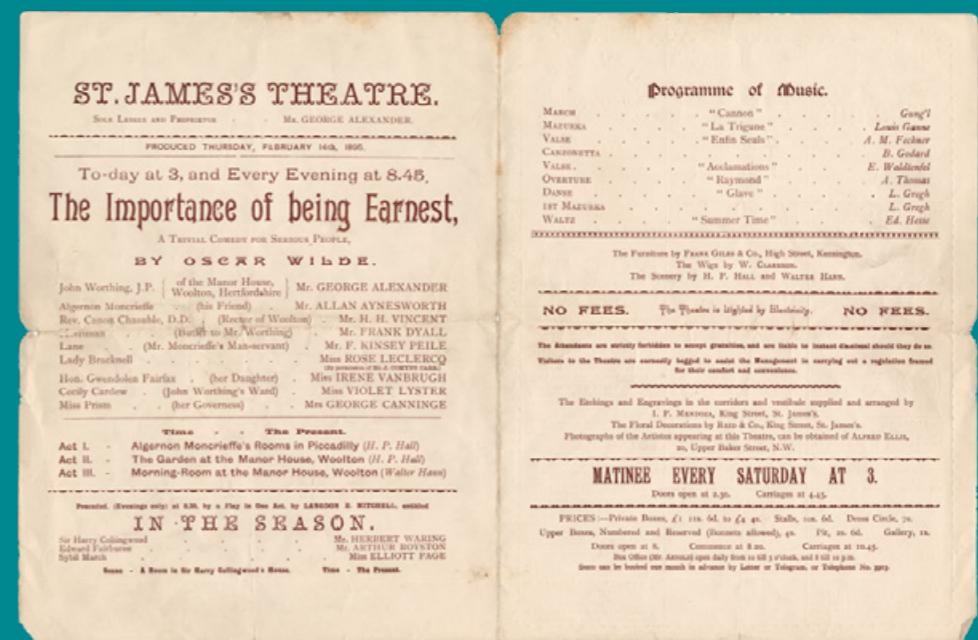
In December 2011 Melbourne Theatre Company staged a revival of the 1988 production with some of the original actors playing the older roles. Geoffrey Rush played Lady Bracknell in this production

2018

A revival was directed by Michael Fentiman for the Vaudeville Theatre London in 2018. This interpretation was not well received by critics who felt it was sexually dark, coarse and heavy handed

2020

Malthouse Theatre will stage a production in February 2020



Program for the first production of 'Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, St James Theatre, London, 1895.'

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

OTHER ADAPTATIONS



Film by Oliver Parker. 2002. Miramax Films.



Film by Anthony Asquith. 1952. Javelin Films.

FILM

1952

Film adaptation by Anthony Asquith

1992

Film adaptation by Kurt Baker

2002

Film adaptation by Oliver Parker

MUSIC

1963

Opera adaptation by Erik Chisholm

1964

Musical *Mein Freund Bunbury* by Gerd Natshinski based on the original play

2005

Musical adaptation by Takarazuka Revue

2011

Opera adaptation by Gerald Barry

2016

Play adaptation *To Hell in a Handbag* retells the story from the point of view of the Reverend Canon Chasuble and Miss Prism

RADIO

1925

Radio adaptation by Hesketh Pearson

1977

Radio adaptation by BBC Radio 4

1995

Radio adaptation by BBC Radio 4

2000

Radio adaptation by BBC Radio 3

TELEVISION

1957

Television adaptation in Australia

1974

Television adaptation by BBC

1986

Television adaptation by Stuart Burge

SEASON
2020

CONTEXT—VICTORIAN ENGLAND



The period of Queen Victoria's rule 1837–1901 was a time of immense change. When Victoria took the throne at the age of 18, Britain was celebrating victory over France. Europe had been in turmoil and there was enormous pressure on the new monarch to maintain peace and create prosperity for the British people. This was a huge challenge because Britain was chaotic. There was rural unemployment that was forcing huge migration into the towns, especially London. People in the country and the cities were living under appalling conditions and there was a lack of infrastructure to cope with a rapidly increasing population. This situation was worsened during the 1840s with years of poor harvests. The Irish Famine, 1845–1849 saw over one million people starve to death and two million people emigrated. Many British people, unable to escape grinding poverty, migrated to America, Canada and Australia.

Politically, Britain remained relatively static. Despite shifts of focus on values and ideals, the two major parties remained. The only legacy was a gradual name change from the Whigs to the Liberal Unionist Party. The Tory Party had morphed into the Conservative Party that was well established by the end of the Victorian era. The main ongoing concern was the issue of Irish Home Rule. This was a constant unsolved problem that dogged parliament. There were minor conflicts and scuffles: The Opium Wars, the retreat from Kabul, Crimean War against Russia and the Sepoy uprising against the East India Company. But for the most part, Britain was surprisingly politically quiet.

However, during this time there was also massive development of railway, canal and steamship networks. Communications were radically improved through the electrical telegraph. Telegram messages could be rapidly sent person to person and in 1854, the year of Oscar Wilde's birth, the submarine telegraph allowed telegrams to be sent from continent to continent. This rapid form of communication and the new transport networks supported the development of industries and aided the establishment and growth of the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution brought rapid social and economic changes to Britain. In 1851 the first Great Exhibition was held in London. The exhibition was designed to show the population and the world that Britain was technologically advanced and as a result prosperous. During the 5 months the exhibition was open in Hyde Park, 6 million people visited. This represented a third of the British population at that time.

Intellectual progress was equally dynamic. There were exciting advances in medicine, engineering, technology and science. Public health and improvement of living conditions was a focus.

The ease of travel and communication also meant that there was easier access to theatres, museums and galleries. Queen Victoria instigated an ambitious building program. Public buildings were created, and many new theatres were built. Now the people from the lower classes could travel to the theatre and see a show. This resulted in a boom time for live theatre.

The arts generally had a renaissance under Victoria's reign. Writers, playwrights, actors, poets, musicians, singers, thinkers and artists were creating brilliant work. People like Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Gilbert and Sullivan, Bram Stoker, Charles Dickens, the Bronte sisters, Thomas Hardy, Tennyson, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, William Blake were making works.

Social change was much slower. English society remained rigidly classed. The traditional structure of lower, middle and upper class still existed and people operated within the constraints of their class. Children and women were in a subclass within their own class. Often their circumstances were very difficult. Particularly the children of the lower classes who were forced into child labour at a very young age.

Britain's expansion during Victoria's reign was unprecedented. At the time of Victoria's death in 1901, the British Empire covered approximately one fifth of the earth's surface.



English Heritage
Wikipedia

SEASON
2020



PLOT OVERVIEW



Full-Dress Party. Engraving. 1879.

The Importance of Being Earnest is usually described as either a comedy of manners or a farce or a satire. However it could be argued that there are elements of all these theatre styles within the script.

Set in Victorian Britain, near the height of the British Empire, the play's overarching plot is relatively straightforward. Two privileged upper-class young men, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, have created separate identities that allow each of them the freedom to escape the societal expectations of Victorian England and to behave differently in the city and the country. However, this deception brings both of them unstuck when they pursue two upper-class young women, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, with a view to marriage.

The plot becomes intricate and complex when their webs of deceit firmly entangle them; putting both the gentlemen in extremely tricky and hilariously funny positions. Like all great farces there are; mistaken identities, characters popping up unexpectedly at inopportune moments, deliberate and accidental misunderstandings, inappropriate

behaviour and wickedly humorous exchanges of dialogue that often spiral into absurdity.

The play concludes with all parties seemingly united. But, because of the satirical insights the play provides into the world of the upper classes, we are left wondering if the characters really have ended up changed and content at all. Therein lies Wilde's message to his audience. Don't necessarily trust what you see, hear, think and feel because the truth and reality might be something quite different. Remember his subtitle for his play was, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. Through the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde constantly challenges our sense of what constitutes appropriate, acceptable behaviour. The play both satirises and embraces 19th century life and leads the audience into a world where privilege and position allow people to behave in whatever manner they wish without repercussions.

CHARACTERS

LANE

Algernon's efficient and complicit manservant. Lane manages all aspects of Algernon's bachelor life. He is the perfect manservant; speaking only when spoken to, staying calm and covering up for his master's failings (he knows about Algernon's 'Bunburying' and glibly explains the lack of cucumber sandwiches to Lady Bracknell).

ALGERNON MONCRIEFF

An upper-class bachelor. Algernon is Lady Bracknell's nephew, Gwendolen Fairfax's first cousin and best friend to Ernest (later revealed to him as Jack) Worthing. Algernon is an idle, witty, charming, argumentative young gentleman. His invented invalid friend 'Bunbury' allows Algernon to escape to the country at whim and get out of boring social events in London.

JOHN (JACK/ERNEST) WORTHING, J.P

The main protagonist of the play. Jack is a bachelor who is in love with Algernon's first cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. He is very wealthy but his social standing is dubious because, as a baby, he was found in a handbag, in the cloakroom of Victoria Station by an elderly man, Sir Thomas Cardew. Sir Thomas adopted him. Later Sir Thomas made Jack guardian of his granddaughter Cecily Cardew. The initials at the end of John's/ Jack's/Ernest's name indicate he is a Justice of the Peace.

LADY BRACKNELL

Algernon's domineering, opinionated, snobby, imperious great aunt. Lady Bracknell is highly positioned in society and has invested all of her resources into preparing her daughter Gwendolen to be just like her. That is to become a woman of wealth and high status. Lady Bracknell never hesitates to offer her bigoted, entitled point of view. Her pronouncements brilliantly satirise the hypocrisy of Victorian society and its ideals.

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX

Daughter of Lady Bracknell. Gwendolen has enjoyed every privilege of an upper-class young lady. Her manners, fashion, taste and pursuits

reflect her high status. She expects to lead a life of privilege and is already quite assertive and aspirational. An important part of her plan is to marry the man she believes goes by the name of Ernest Worthing. We can see that the determination and directness that she exhibits will eventually make her like her mother.

CECILY CARDEW

The late Sir Thomas Cardew's 18 year old granddaughter. John/Jack/Ernest Worthing is her guardian. Cecily resides at The Manor House in Hertfordshire with only her tutor Miss Prism and the aged manservant Merriman as company. She is obsessed with her Uncle Jack's wicked brother Ernest not realising that Jack has invented him to allow him to escape the country and go up to London. Cecily has idealised Ernest and has created an imaginary courtship; writing letters that are meant to be from Ernest and even making fanciful diary entries about the course of their courtship.

MISS LETITIA PRISM

Cecily Cardew's governess. Miss Prism is a spinster—she has never married. She is old fashioned and fairly morally rigid but seems to have a gentle temperament and a slightly flighty nature; she once wrote a three-volume novel. Miss Prism is attracted to the Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D, the local rector.

MERRIMAN

The elderly rather enfeebled manservant at The Manor House. Merriman is a faithful retainer who has been kept on by the family.

REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D

The local rector of the district where The Manor House estate is located in Hertfordshire. He is a man of God who becomes very shy and overwhelmed around Miss Prism. The Reverend is clearly attracted to Miss Prism but, due to his lack of experience in the matters of courtship and love, he makes strange almost inappropriate statements when he talks to Miss Prism. This means that their attempts to build a relationship flounder awkwardly.

In order of appearance. All characters are played by David Woods and Jon Haynes

UNIT 3, OUTCOME 3, FOCUS

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS TASK.

Unit 3, Area of Study 3 is focused on analysing and evaluating an interpretation of a script in production. You are required to:

- 1 / Analyse and evaluate the relationship between the written script and its interpretation on the stage
- 2 / Study the ways the interpretation on stage draws on and interprets the contexts of the script by examining what decisions have been made about acting, direction, design, the use of theatre technologies and elements of theatre composition
- 3 / Evaluate the ways theatre practitioners such as the director, actors, designers or dramaturg have contributed to the interpretation on stage
- 4 / Study how the implied theatre styles and contexts implied in the script are interpreted when the play is performed to an audience
- 5 / Develop theatre terminology and expressions that describe how the script has been interpreted imaginatively and creatively

RELATED TASKS



Your first task is to read the script prior to seeing the play in performance. It is important to familiarise yourself with the play so that you can think about the theatrical possibilities of the script and following your viewing of the play, compare and contrast Ridiculusmus' interpretation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the written script. Go over the following tasks before you begin reading so that you can actively work with the script while reading through it.

As you read, remember that only two male actors are playing all nine roles in the play. Pay particular attention to the stage directions in the script. They provide clues as to what theatrical devices the two actors use to manage the transitions between characters. Consider how this unique constraint might enhance the comedy of the play.

- / Make some notes about each of the characters
- / What personality traits are particular to each character?
- / What are their relationships to each other?
- / What status does each character hold and is this sustained?
- / Can you isolate each character's major objective? How might watching the character strive for this goal add humour to the play?

Discuss how this unique approach to the interpretation of the script might influence design choices. Focus on the following challenges:

- / Two male actors playing nine roles
- / Actors taking responsibility for set and costume changes
- / The need to keep the narrative flowing during transitions
- / Making the characters instantly recognisable
- / Retaining the integrity of each character
- / Retaining the intended meaning and comedy of the script
- / Clearly establishing context

As you read through the script isolate language or references that you don't understand. It is important that you have a firm grasp of the language of the script in order to fully appreciate the witlessness of Wilde's writing and the intended meaning of the lines.

Most of the characters are upper-class and use Received Pronunciation. Or, the Queen's English as it is sometimes referred to. This was deemed the most accomplished British accent and was identified and named by a phonetician, Alexander Ellis in 1869. Sometimes words or references that have fallen out of common usage are used. Take the time to learn their meaning before you attend the performance. This knowledge will enhance your enjoyment of the play.

The Importance of Being Earnest is famous for its quotes; it is one of the most quoted plays. As you read the script, note the lines or passages of dialogue that make you laugh spontaneously. When you attend the performance you can observe how the actor delivers the extracts you have chosen.



SEASON
2020



RELATED TASKS

THE PLAY STRUCTURE

The play is set in England at the time of its writing—1895. It is written in three acts.

Act One

is set in the afternoon in Algernon Moncrieff's bachelor flat in Half-Moon Street, London, W1.

Act Two

is set during the day in the garden of Ernest/Jack/John Worthing's estate—The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

Act Three

is set during the day inside Ernest/Jack/John Worthing's estate—The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.



Create a research/inspiration board of images that relate to each of the three settings/contexts listed above. Use your images to create a design concept for either; costume, lighting, set or sound.

Provide a rationale for each of your design choices.

PROPS DESIGN TASK

The properties in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are a very significant part of the play. They are not merely functional. The properties are used to support and convey the intrigue, chaos and humour of the narrative. They also reflect and support the social status, idiosyncrasies and eccentricities of the characters.



Read the script excerpts that refer to the use of some of the notable properties in the play. Select two of the excerpts and create an inspiration page to help you create a design for the props referred to in the excerpts you have chosen.

Your inspiration board might include: research notes, descriptions, advertisements, images, colour palette exploration, preliminary sketches and notes about how the actor/s might creatively and imaginatively utilise the props in performance. Each design should have a brief rationale that explains the purpose and effect of the prop.

EXCERPT ONE – THE CIGARETTE CASE

Pages 4 – 5

[Enter LANE]

ALGERNON: [takes sandwich] Bring me the cigarette case that Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE: [David] Yes, sir.

[David full change back to Jack]

JACK: You mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON: Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.

JACK: There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

[David cross to centre robe. Removes jacket and wig. Enter LANE with cigarette case on small salver. Presents salver to ALGERNON. ALGERNON takes it immediately. LANE turns salver to OP side of robe. David adds jacket and wig. ENTER JACK.]

ALGERNON: I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. [Opens case and examines it.] However, it makes no matter, for now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK: Of course it's mine. You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case. [tries to grab it - Algy stands and moves to OP].

ALGERNON: Oh! it is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK: I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. [Jack holds hand out] I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON: Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name of

Cecily, and you said you didn't know any one of that name.

JACK: Well, if you want to know, she happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON: Your aunt!

JACK: Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells. Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON: But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? [Reading. Jack follows him round room] 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK: What on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case.

ALGERNON: Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK: It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON: You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here you are. [Taking it from case.] 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.' I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else. [Puts the card in his pocket.]

JACK: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON: Yes, but that does not explain why your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her uncle. Now go on, tell me the whole thing. I may as well mention that I always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist; and I am quite sure of it now.

JACK: Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON: I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK: Well, produce my cigarette case first.

EXCERPT TWO – THE DIARIES

Page 35 – 36

CECILY: [Rather shy and confidingly.] Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

GWENDOLEN: My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the Morning Post on Saturday at the latest.

CECILY: [Very politely, rising and to get diary] I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. [Shows diary making Gwendolen get up and come to her.]

GWENDOLEN: [Examines diary through her lorgnette carefully.] It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5.30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. [Produces diary of her own- gives it to Cecily who reads it.] I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim. [Cecily hands her her diary back then crosses the stage and puts her own away in the drawer again].

CECILY: It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

GWENDOLEN: If the poor boy has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him, and with a firm hand.

CECILY: [Approaching Gwendolen] Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I shall never reproach him with it after we are married.

GWENDOLEN: [approaching Cecily centre stage] Do you refer to me, Miss Cardew, as an entanglement? You are presumptuous. On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.

CECILY: Do you suggest, Miss Fairfax, that I entrapped Ernest into an engagement? How dare you? This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

[CECILY kicks her skirt back and exits to be Merriman sans wig under table].

GWENDOLEN: [Satirically.] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious our social spheres have been widely different.

EXCERPT THREE – AFTERNOON TEA

Page 37

Merriman puts a tiered cake and bread and butter tray up through the table hole and places it on the table S/R side [this tray was set in place behind the table during the break.]

CECILY: [appearing behind the hedge] May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax?

GWENDOLEN: Thank you. [Cecily gets the tea tray from back shelf] Detestable girl! But I require tea!

CECILY: [lays the tea things, pours two teas] Sugar?

GWENDOLEN: [Superciliously.] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [CECILY puts loads more sugar into the cup and stirs it.]

CECILY: Cake or bread and butter?

GWENDOLEN: [In a bored manner.] Bread and butter, please. Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.

[Cecily serves her three slices of cake with fork, and puts the plate and tea in front of Gwendolen. GWENDOLEN drinks the tea and makes a grimace. Puts down cup at once, reaches out her hand to the bread and butter, looks at it, and finds it is cake. David loosens

Cecily's skirt ready to take it off].

You have filled my tea with lumps of sugar, and though I asked most distinctly for bread and butter, you have given me cake. I am known, Miss Cardew, for the gentleness of my disposition, and the extraordinary sweetness of my nature, but I warn you Miss Cardew you go too far!

CECILY: [Rising.] To save my poor, innocent, trusting boy from the machinations of any other girl there are no lengths to which I would not go.

[crosses DS of GWENDOLEN with dress undone].

GWENDOLEN: From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt that you were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right.

CECILY: [getting out of dress] It seems to me, Miss Fairfax, that I am trespassing on your valuable time. No doubt you have many other calls of a similar character to make in the neighbourhood. [David takes off Cecily's skirt and drops it in Gwendolen's lap – reveals Jack's trousers underneath. D goes to exit US turns as Jack]

EXCERPT FOUR – THE HANDBAG

Pages 49 – 50

LADY BRACKNELL: [David] [In a severe, judicial voice.] Prism! Where is that baby? [Miss Prism runs off, Bracknell chases, Prism tips the centre screen over].

Prism! Where is that baby? Twenty-eight years ago, Prism, you left Lord Bracknell's house, Number 104, Upper Grosvenor Street, in charge of a perambulator that contained a baby of the male sex. You never returned. Several weeks later, through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan police, the perambulator was discovered at midnight, 50 standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater. It contained the manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality, but the baby was not there! Prism! Where is that baby?

Music - Mahler

MISS PRISM: [Jon] I admit with shame that I do not know. I only wish I did. The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag [Jack's head turns and he gets out of Bracknell clothes] in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

JACK: But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

MISS PRISM: I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

JACK: What railway station?

MISS PRISM: [Quite crushed.] Victoria. The Brighton line.

JACK: I must retire to my room for a moment. Gwendolen, wait here for me.

GWENDOLEN: If you are not too long, I will wait here for you all my life.

[Exit JACK in great excitement into wardrobe.]

[noises from the OP cupboard]

[Enter JACK with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand.]

JACK: [Rushing over to MISS PRISM.] Is this the handbag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

MISS PRISM: [Calmly.] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received during the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

JACK: [In a pathetic voice.] More is restored to you than this hand-bag, Miss Prism. I was the baby you placed in it.

RELATED TASKS

PLAY THEMES AND IDEAS

- / The nature of marriage
- / Morality and immorality in Victorian society
- / The divisions of class
- / Deception versus honesty
- / The nature of the responsibility that comes with wealth and position
- / Loyalty versus disloyalty (this could be to a person or an ideal)



Find some quotes within the script that refer to and highlight these themes and ideas. For example Lady Bracknell says of her daughter's unapproved and unexpected engagement to Ernest/Jack/John Worthing,

'You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel?'

–Lady Bracknell (p15)

THEATRE STYLES

The conventions for each of the theatre styles listed below and to the right is not definitive. The list provides some of the more usual conventions associated with each theatre style.



COMEDY OF MANNERS

CONVENTIONS:

- / Heightened characterisation
- / Heightened use of voice, gesture, facial expression and movement
- / Rapid delivery of witty dialogue that can be sprinkled with innuendo
- / Mockery of the societal mores and values of the upper classes
- / Precise pronunciation
- / Plot intrigues and deception
- / Intellectual content
- / The use of stereotypes
- / The use of production roles (acting, direction, costume, makeup, set, props, lighting, sound, theatre technologies) to support, enhance or convey humour

FARCE

CONVENTIONS:

- / Light comedy
- / Improbable situations
- / Exaggerated use of expressive skills
- / Highly physical
- / Dialogue that often makes absurd observations or pronouncements
- / Rapidly executed entrances and exits (characters just missing bumping into each other by a second or two)
- / Sophisticated use of comic timing
- / Confusion about identity or use of disguise
- / Characters hoodwinking or betraying each other

/ Rapid and skilful manipulation of production elements such as: set, costume, props, lighting, sound, theatre technologies

/ The use of production roles (acting, direction, costume, makeup, set, props, lighting, sound, theatre technologies) to support, enhance or convey humour

SATIRE

CONVENTIONS:

- / A script that uses comedy or wit to attack a target–political, social, institutional, individuals or groups
- / A script that parodies and highlights flaws and faults, making the audience see the stupidity and hypocrisy of the target
- / A script that focusses on and highlights social inequities
- / Exaggerated, stereotypical characters
- / Characters who appear quite shallow
- / Clear representation of the characters' status in relation to each other
- / Intellectual content
- / Language of the script uses sarcasm and irony
- / Skilful delivery of the language of the script to convey complex ideas and/or observations
- / Sophisticated use of comic timing
- / The use of production roles (acting, direction, costume, makeup, set, props, lighting, sound, theatre technologies) to support, enhance or convey humour

COMEDY

CONVENTIONS:

- / A narrative that focusses on the foibles or weaknesses of the character/s
- / Characters presented in an amusing situation–often a familiar situation–that they have to resolve against all odds
- / A script that usually culminates in a happy or satisfying ending
- / Use of expressive skills to convey humour
- / Skilful application of comic timing to convey the humour of the script
- / The use of production roles (acting, direction, costume, makeup, set, props, lighting, sound, theatre technologies) to support, enhance or convey humour

ECLECTIC THEATRE

Eclectic Theatre is a modern style of theatre that uses different conventions from a range of theatre styles. If you are referring to this style it is important that you refer to the different style conventions that are being utilised.



Examine the script and discuss which theatre style/s are implied in the script.

Tip: Clues can be found in the dialogue, stage directions and contextual references to the wider world of the play.



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MALTHOUSE THEATRE
113 Sturt Street
Southbank VIC 3006

Phone 9685 5111
education@malthousetheatre.com.au

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