Co-commissioned by BITE:05, Barbican and Brisbane Powerhouse
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Performed by David Woods and Jon Haynes
Directed by Jude Kelly
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Lighting design by Joe Currey
Music and sound design Jon Haynes, David Woods,
Jude Kelly and Lawrence English
Galiard learnt from Marcelle Davies

Ridiculumus’ work is produced by Your Imagination
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An educational pack for students (Key Stages four and five),
teachers and all those interested in
the Ridiculumus approach to Oscar Wilde’s play.
Devised and designed by Stephen Lee.
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How to use this guide, and who it might be for.

This guide has been created for all those teaching and/or studying drama and
theatre studies at GCSE, AS and A Level standard. We have researched the
various syllabuses and their course requirements accordingly. However, it is not
our intention to address or answer any specific questions directly. We simply
wish to share our passion for the play and to talk a little bit about our particular
performance of it. Therefore, we would be delighted if this pack holds an appeal
or finds an audience beyond these academic confines.

This is not a step-by-step guide to how we produced the show, nor to how
to produce a Ridiculumus show in general. After 13 years together and numerous
productions, much of what we do occurs on an instinctual level, or in the various
forms of shorthand that inevitably emerge when people work in such close proximity. Neither is it a coherent assessment
of nor commentary on the published text of The Importance of Being Earnest.
You’ll have to read and watch the play, and form your own opinions for
yourselves on that score. It is simply a record of some of the ways that we
approached that text, what we found there, what excited us and what we went on
to do with those discoveries.

We have included suggestions about some of the discussions we had, some
workshop exercises that we tried and some experiments that we thought you
might like to try yourselves. We are firm believers in trying anything, however
ridiculous it may first seem or however foolish it may make us appear. We
take the right to fail as granted (but like to keep such failures to ourselves). An
atmosphere of trust is vital. Laughter is encouraged, but never mockery; criticisms
must be made in a constructive manner.

The text that we have used for reference is the Penguin Plays: Oscar Wilde,
published in 1983; all page numbers tally with the subsequent Penguin edition,
The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays, from 1986. Neither text was harmed
in the making of the Ridiculumus presentation. This remains one of the theatre’s great virtues.
Introduction.

“A handbag.”

It is the first thing that every reviewer of “The Importance of Being Earnest” reaches for, even the constructive ones. Even the positive ones (which is not necessarily the same thing). You can find it in Ridiculusmus’s own publicity material, sneaking its way in amidst a flurry of speculation as to which of the role-swapping performers will get to deliver those two little words. (Or two-and-a-half words, given the published text’s preference for hyphenating “hand-bag”.)

For the worst reviewers (and please note that a bad reviewer is not the same as a bad review; a critical review may often contain a worthwhile opinion)… For the worst reviewers, it often seems that a whole production can be reduced to an actress’s ability to sustain an appropriately long vowel sound. “A harned-ba-a-a-a-ag!” This is what they want, and nothing else can ever be quite good enough. Do you think I exaggerate?*

“It’s the pronunciation of the words “a handbag” that typify precisely why the latest movie version of Oscar Wilde’s famous play is such a failure. […] Edith Evans pronounces the words “a HANDbag!” as if they were the most outrageous and obscene she’s ever uttered. As delivered by [Judy] Dench, they’re just a noun and its companion, and the whole fantastically silly contrivance of Wilde’s comic satire falls to pieces around them.”

From an online review of 2002 film version, directed by Oliver Parker, starring Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, Judy Dench, etc.

“Dame Edith Evans practically owned the part of Lady Bracknell on stage, playing it many times. Her delivery of such classic lines as ’A handbag?’ have set the standard which no other actress in the part has ever matched.”

From an online review of the 1952 film version, upon its release as a DVD, directed by Anthony Asquith, starring Michael Redgrave, Edith Evans, etc.

See what I mean? So that’s Judy Dench put in her place then. She isn’t good enough because she isn’t Edith Evans. Makes you wonder why they ever bothered making her a dame.

Ridiculusmus don’t seek to compare themselves to Dame Judy Dench (flattered though they would be by such an association). Nor even to Dame Edith Evans, for that matter. They really aren’t interested in that kind of comparison. What they are interested in is a living, breathing, evolving theatre. That is what they aspire to when devising their own work, and that is what they expect from new productions of an established text, no matter how many “classic” or “timeless” labels it has tagged on to it.

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.

Always remember, Wilde himself was an iconoclast. We do him and his work a disservice when we seek to confine it to one iconic reading.

*(These two quotes were pulled virtually at random from internet review sites, after searching for “The Importance of Being Earnest” + handbag, through Google. Feel free to try it for yourselves.)
Section One: The Opening.

It may seem obvious, but it’s where everybody starts. Whether you’re planning a production, watching a performance, sticking on a video or even reading a stage text for pleasure, the opening scene is where the first impressions really kick in. There may be preludes – the choice of venue (an industrial warehouse versus a plushly curtained, gilt-edged proscenium arch); the style of music or muzak that greets you; even the attire of fellow theatre goers (jeans and T-shirts; black tie and ball gowns) and whether you would consider them “fellow theatre goers”, rather than “a fashionable posse” or “just me and my mates”. There will almost certainly be posters and programmes, opening credits or book covers to guide your expectations. These may include cast lists, where the names will set off associations of their own – Colin Firth and Dame Judy Dench suggest a different evening’s entertainment to Chris Rock and Adam Sandler. (Feel free to insert your own actors and actresses.) You may know something of the director, or a playwright’s reputation. You may even get a specific introduction, like this one. If not, a title alone can set up resonances (The Importance of Being Earnest versus A Nightmare on Elm Street; Richard III versus Rocky III). But it’s in the opening scene where these expectations are confirmed or subverted, where the style and tone are established and we finally see what kind of ride we are in for. This is where we start to look for clues… (See Appendix 1)

And it is instructive just how quickly this particular play kicks into gear. According to the text, we have an opening tableau, where we can take in the scene, “Algernon’s flat in Half-Moon Street. The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished” and view Lane as he arranges afternoon tea. “The sound of a piano is heard in adjoining room.” It all seems very civilised.

And then bash, enter Algernon and we’re straight into the comedy and the wordplay. It should be noted, though, that this is not just a selection of gags and puns – that would not have lasted through the intervening years. The humour takes audience expectation, twists it, tells us something about the norms of the society that the play is set in and goes on to tell us something about the truths behind this social façade.

How is this done? Largely through Lane and his dry – and yet perfectly servile – responses. He never questions the master-servant status, he is certainly not an obvious rebel figure, and yet his world-weary experience suggests an awareness that he is “wiser” that his nominal superior. (Note the similarity to a later comic creation – Jeeves and Wooster – where such a relationship would become central.)

“I didn’t think it polite to listen, sir,” he observes. Why not? Is Algernon’s playing particularly bad? Quite possibly. Algy himself admits that it lacks accuracy, although he goes on to claim that the more important element is sentiment, which he claims as his forte. And just what music is he playing? It should be noted that the stage directions tell us nothing.

For an audience, decisions regarding this have already been made – or at least they should have been. For readers, they are left up to the individual’s imagination. As active producers – whether that be as performers, directors, designers – we have to make such choices for ourselves. We have the luxury of the rehearsal room, of course, and can try out different approaches, but ultimately we must agree on something. And these decisions will affect what follows, and then what follows after that, hopefully building into a coherent evening that ultimately leads to tumultuous applause and the glowing reviews which follow that.

Question:
So, how was the musical piece played in the Ridculmus production? When did it begin? Can you name it or did you recognise it? Was it played live, accurately, with excessive feeling of expression from the pianist himself? How was his physical poise, and could we see any facial expressions? Note that in the text the piano is not even present on stage – does the ability to see the pianist change the mood of the opening in any way? What impact would a virtuoso performance have upon the subsequent dialogue with Lane?
Now take a step back.

Consider whether there were any “preludes” which led you to believe or expect that the Ridiculusmus production of *Earnest* may not be an entirely traditional one. Think of elements from before you even reached the theatre – reviews, perhaps, or publicity material. Look again at the photograph on the cover of this guide. Then consider when you first saw the set. What did you notice? Here’s what some reviewers said.

“Look around Zoë Atkinson’s crazy set of bookshelves, screens and cupboards, all covered in a riot of clashing Victorian floral fabric, and there lurks a fridge, a mini hi-fi and Tetley tea bags.”
(Mark Cook, *Evening Standard*, 13/06/05)

“The action takes place in a modern household, complete with hi-fi, fridge and a vast stock of tea bags, but the shoddy furniture has been decorated with gaudy fabrics to create an illusion of 19th century grandeur…”
(Charles Spencer, *The Daily Telegraph*, 11/06/05)

This opening also gives us some insight into the apparently dissolute drinking habits of what, in terms of the age of the play, would be termed “high society”. There is also a tacit confession of below-stairs pilfering by the (assumed) array of servants, a contrast between married (ie supposedly stable) homes and the hedonistic excesses of a bachelor apartment, and some dry comments on the expectations and the reality of the married state.

**Lane:** “I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.” (Page 253)

Note that the only word which our published texts italicise is that opening “is”. Where else might you choose to put emphasis in order to create a comic effect? (Some possibilities you might try: “very”, “up to the present”, “young”, or even “person”. Or try a pronounced pause for comic emphasis – “I have only been married… once”. Lane could even try counting on his fingers, or consult with a little black book.)

However, we must remain aware that these are “gags” which we are choosing to bring in to the text. We may decide they are implicit in the style of dialogue, but they are not explicitly stated, neither there nor in any stage directions. Adding them in may enhance the effect we are trying to achieve, but it may simultaneously detract from other areas – it may hold up the pace of the dialogue, for example. We may decide that we actually *do* want to hold up the pace of the dialogue at this point, but we must at least consider the impact of these choices and make sure it is a conscious effect, rather than simply a default impact that is allowed to creep in behind our backs.

Let’s look again at those lines of Lane’s. It is the longest continual speech we have had so far, a break from question and answer dialogue. Here, Lane is not only responding to his master’s promptings, he is expanding upon the information - he is, apparently, offering some sort of opinion. Or is he? What do we really have?

- A statement, apparently supporting a traditional value or institution (in this case, marriage)
- The very ability to make this statement is then undermined (“I have very little experience of it myself”)
- This sense of doubt is then undermined, as further evidence shows there actually is sufficient experience for such an opinion (“I have only been married once”)
- But then note that this confession itself undermines the traditional values it purports to support – ie monogamous marriage. Take note of that “only”: it is surely out of place in such a context
- Finally, we get an apparent explanation, which actually explains very little – this marriage was “the consequence of a misunderstanding with a young person” – a prime example of a non sequitur.
So, can we summarise Lane’s seemingly authoritative pronouncements into a logical argument, one which develops point by point, building up a collection of evidence to support a conclusion? Not in any way that I can see. It is designed to leave you reeling. Or it leaves me reeling, anyway. Lane answers nothing – he simply throws out lines which open more questions, should his audience wish to pursue them.

Algernon, the master, makes it clear that he does not wish to pursue these questions. “I don’t know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.” The stage direction, [languidly], might lead us to suppose that he means this dismissively. However, Lane is quite capable of dealing with such a dismissive remark, declaring “I never think of it myself, sir”.

Note that soon after Algernon will declare “That will do, Lane, thank you.” How often have we heard parents or teachers make similar comments? “That’s enough of that,” or the like. It carries an implication, a tone, which goes beyond the actual meaning of the words. We might even conclude that Algyn has been forced to “pull rank”, “to obtain an advantage or concession by virtue of one’s superior position” (Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable). This in itself could be seen as a defeat, the unwelcome deployment of a last resort due to the threat of being outpointed by a “mere” manservant.

In this way, faced with his master’s dismissal of his anecdotal evidence on the subject of marriage, Lane does not seek to defend it, as two social equals arguing in a pub or a playground might do. He takes the bold step of agreeing with his social superior, in effect re-dismissing his own experiences as insignificant. But he does so in such a manner as to suggest that he is even more bored of the subject than his master: he “out-languids” him.

In addition, he chooses to acknowledge that his experiences have no importance: they are trivial rather than serious, and should therefore be treated as such. These are words which will bear serious consideration in the context of this particular play.

You might almost suggest that Lane’s final dismissal of his own worth serves to “trump” Algernon’s lack of interest. The notion of “trumping” (“verb, to outdo or surpass” rather than “to produce a sound as if upon a trumpet”) is worth examining. This is dialogue as competitive word-play – the players can be seen to take turns; they appear to raise the stakes; an idea is built up as it passes back and forth, with each participant vying to get the last word in. And in this particular example Lane, the manservant, clearly fits in to a theatrical/cinematic tradition of “poker-faced” servants – those who see all, appear to know more than they let on, yet give away little or nothing about themselves, their thoughts, their feelings or their private lives. (In this case, we might add “..even while seeming to do so”.)

We will return to this idea of “competitive wordplay” in Section Four.

TIP: Never be afraid to use a dictionary to look up words such as “languid” or even well-known phrases such as “pull rank”, particularly when they are used as stage directions. Any audience will never see these particular words, only the effect of them, the specific “interpretation” the actor and/or the production team choose to give it. A dictionary (or thesaurus) which offers alternatives - “languid: without energy or spirit; without interest or enthusiasm; sluggish, inactive” – can only help us in this process.

So, the whole opening can be said to “pull the rug” from under us. It gives us a great deal of information about the period of the play, it’s social and cultural setting, but it simultaneously undermines a lot of that information. It plays on our expectations, and in certain cases confounds them. It also constructs verbally complex arguments that on examination lack any form of logic or cohesion, beyond their own delight in sheer linguistic fluency. And in so doing, it actually gives us a great deal of insight into what the rest of the play will prove to be like.
Section Two: A brief consideration of some practicalities. 
Period and context.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is often referred to as a timeless play. Yet there is clearly much in it that is entirely of its own period, in terms of class, gender expectations, attitudes to marriage, language and specific period detail. The text’s title page gives the setting as “The Present”, although whether we are meant to assume a shifting present (ie “now”, currently 2005) or the time of writing (a fixed setting of 1895) is left ambiguous. However, the last major contemporary-set version was staged in 1923, ie a 1923 production with a 1923 setting. Subsequent revivals have all put the play into “the past”, though again which period of the past has shifted, with eras ranging from the original 1890s through to the jazz age of the 1920s.

As the York Notes Advanced observe of the play: “The setting demands a world in which the trains run very frequently and on time, in which no-one has a car or a telephone, in which the upper classes routinely have large numbers of servants, where men wear detachable shirt cuffs, and in which women are closely chaperoned. Even in 1923, these things were no longer true. Since the 1920s then, the play has always therefore been staged as a period piece, set in a relatively innocent past, and apparently distanced from more modern concerns.” (page 51, Ruth Robbins, *York Notes Advanced on The Importance of Being Earnest*, York Press, 1999.)

This intrigued us. A “timeless classic”, a continuing commercial hit, but a play that is “apparently distanced from modern concerns”. What accounts for its continuing popularity then; what do contemporary audiences see in it? And of course we also had to ask, what could we bring to a production?

Let’s list some specific period details, restricting ourselves still to the opening exchange between Algernon and Lane.

- The very name “Algernon” (we’ve never met one)
- The corresponding reference to Lane by his surname
- Half-Moon Street, W.
- The sound of a piano (not impossible, but hardly usual in a modern domestic setting)

All of these are culled from the very first page. You might choose to pick out some other instances from the rest of the text.

And on top of this Algernon confirms our growing notions of class and the period’s social structure, speaking apparently to himself but really informing us, the audience, of his opinions. Lane is said to be somewhat lax; he is described as one of the lower orders; they (and hence he) are considered quite homogenously, as a class rather than as individuals; and they are dismissed – albeit ironically – as lacking in moral responsibility. This is a view that Lane himself seems simultaneously complicit in and – through the careful process of revelation and retraction we discussed in Section One – an exception to.

Some Practical Exercises
Stick with this opening scene, the Algy:Lane exchanges. As it so effectively sets the tone, we also find it a useful barometer for our experiments.
Give it a contemporary setting. Feel free to play with the text. You might need to change names and addresses; your music will probably be different; the food and drink may need replacing.
Write it AND perform it.

Next, try and think about the class of the two participants. Try and give Lane a serving role without making him an actual servant – the bartender in a fashionable wine bar, perhaps. Would he still say “sir” so much; would Algy be so aloof? How does it affect the mood and meaning if we try to tweak and update this relationship?
Back to Victorian England then. What do we know about it, or more accurately, what do we think we know? What are our first reactions to that phrase, our first impressions? We suggest you pause and think about it for a while, or even discuss it. While you’re about it, you might also consider how subsequent generations have re-evaluated or “re-branded” that period. Does the phrase “Victorian values” have any resonance for yourself, or for other members of your group?

For those of us growing up in the 1980s, this was a highly charged and disputed topic.

Certain sections of society approved of it, viewing it as something to aim for or aspire to. Britain and the family were strong, children were seen and not heard, crime was suitably (ie severely) punished and the population at large was monogamous, respectful, respectable and God-fearing. Or so it was assumed. Collins Dictionary says: “Victorian values qualities considered to characterize the Victorian period, including enterprise, initiative and the importance of the family.”

Collins Dictionary also says “compare Victorian sense 2”. So we did and discovered: “exhibiting the characteristics popularly attributed to the Victorians, esp. prudery, bigotry or hypocrisy.” This seemed a significantly different definition, but it still rang bells for us. During those same 1980s, certain sections of society saw Victorian values as divisive, leading to an upstairs-downstairs class structure that was resonant of workhouses and poverty, or the worst excesses from the works of Charles Dickens. They also saw social and sexual hypocrisy, an institutionalisation of one rule for the rich (who were seen as “getting away with it”) while the less well-off were preached at and told in no uncertain terms how to behave.

(It would be interesting to know if these resonances still occur around the phrase “Victorian values”. We are very aware that while Margaret Thatcher was the dominant political figure of our youth – and possibly of our lives to date – the dominant figure for today’s youth is much more likely to be Tony Blair. The prospect that history, even disputed history, could be re-disputed in such a relatively short time-span only fed into the path we were moving down.)

Already, then, we were finding echoes and suggestions that we could happily acknowledge as “more modern concerns”. And, working on the assumption that disputed ground is fertile ground, we decided to pursue these issues. A combination of collective memory, background reading and research revealed the following two items, which we gleefully welcomed into our considerations.

“What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds. […] Where more churches were built than in the whole of the previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel. […] Where the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage) was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – had so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. […] Where the female body had never been so hidden from view; and where every sculptor was judged by his ability to carve naked women. Where there is not a single novel, play or poem of literary distinction that ever goes beyond the sensuality of a kiss […]; and where the output of pornography has never been exceeded…

Opening to Chapter 35 of The French Lieutenant’s Woman, by John Fowles. (See Appendix 2 for full quote)
“An Interview with Colin Firth by StudioLA’s Jim Ferguson

Colin: One of the things that amuses me about Victorian England as an idea – and Oliver Parker’s captured this in the film, is that all these corseted people, all these utterly kind of repressed and austere people were studying the classics, which featured nothing but sex, really.

Jim: (laughs) Yeah.

Colin: I mean, you’ve got naked maidens tied to trees...and the pre-Raphaelite paintings.

Jim: In the scene in the nightclub when your character, Jack, a country gentleman, goes into London, they’re all in there watching the dancing girls...

Colin: Exactly.

Jim: ... throw up their skirts, you know —

Colin: That was all going on, as well. I mean, it was a very, it was actually a very corrupt and decadent society. I mean, the Victorians were just as known, really, for all their perversions...as they were for their austerity.”

(See www.firth.com/earnest)

Now we were away. We had a collection of material which suggested that there was a respectable face of Victorian society and a vast array of dirty little truths that stood behind it. This fitted in perfectly with elements we were already discovering in the text.

- The subversive edge to the Algy/Lane, master/servant relationship
- The gleeful acceptance of Bunburying
- The flippant approach to the Church in general and christenings in particular
- The humorous treatment (or worse) shown to monogamous marriage
- The frequently paradoxical dialogue (for example, famously, “All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.” P.270)

This gulf between polished reality and untidy façade was something we could relate to as a contemporary concern, as well. Governments still suffer when public pronouncements diverge from private behaviour; the rich, famous and powerful can still be laid low when caught up in charges of hypocrisy. We might also suspect that certain individuals or sections of society continue to “get away with it”. We had apparently hit upon an historical truth and a modern day fact, and all of it was there already, laid out in our text.

In addition, we had metaphors for this. Visual ones. There was the notion of a swan, all grace and composure on the surface, but whose calm serenity was only maintained by the frantic paddling of the webbed feet beneath it. And then there was the theatre itself, where a hopefully polished performance so often relies upon an awful lot of frantic activity backstage, a frequent sense of mounting panic behind the scenes. We decided we could show this, or some of at it at least – the mad rush to change costumes, the struggle to put your hand on the right prop, the actual labour needed to switch scenes from a city apartment to a manor house garden. Rather than hide these mechanics we could reveal them, bring them into the foreground, and in so doing make some pertinent points about the dual nature of the society Wilde was depicting.

Consider again those two reviewers’ comments on the set for the Ridiculusmus production, quoted in Section One, page 5 of this Guide. Is there a difference of opinion here?

The first reviewer invites us to “look around Zoë Atkinson’s crazy set” to spot the lurking fridge, hi-fi and teabags. The suggestion is that these elements are out of place. The second reviewer assures us, “The action takes place in a modern household”, and that it is the gaudy fabrics which are the anachronistic element

A third individual, a friend of ours, said the setting reminded him of the David Lynch film, Blue Velvet, which had mixed 1950s Americana with 1980s details. For him, there were no anachronisms – he neither knew nor cared when the play was set, he simply saw a clash of cultures.

All three were aware of the duality, but all three viewed it in slightly different ways.

Oscar Wilde may well have approved. In the famous preface to his only novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, amongst a string of epigrams and paradoxes he boldly declared, “When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.”
Section Three: Flirtation, Gender and Stage Directions.

Algernon: “My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.” (page 255)

Alright, then - let’s take a look at that flirtation, once Jack and Gwendolen are left alone together (or more accurately, when a situation is engineered which leaves the two of them together). It is awkward at best. Clumsy. Jack’s opening gambit is “Charming day is has been, Miss Fairfax”. Gwendolen herself is moved to point out just how weak this is as a chat-up – “Pray don’t talk to me about the weather”. Talking about the weather has become something of a cliché these days, so much so that people rarely do it in drama (be it TV, film or theatre) without a knowing wink. “Here we are, talking about the weather again – it’s the British disease, isn’t it?”

Let’s also look at some of the stage directions given to Jack to accompany this supposed flirtation.

- [nervously]
- [JACK looks at her in amazement]
- [astounded]
- [Goes on his knees]

Alright, in all fairness we could dismiss that final direction as the traditional position for a man proposing. But less easy to dismiss is the manner in which Jack gets the re. Even though declarations of love have been made on both sides, Gwendolen is quite insistent that the correct procedure be followed: “Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.” Which forces the decidedly non-traditional prelude to a proposal from Jack, “Well…may I propose to you now?” Even when Jack is explicitly assured of a favourable answer he is still forced to jump through the correct hoops before it can be confirmed.

JACK: Gwendolen!
GWENDOLEN: Yes, Mr Worthing, what have you got to say to me?"
JACK: You know what I have got to say to you.
GWENDOLEN: Yes, but you don’t say it.
JACK: Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees]

Cecily similarly falls in love with Algernon as an idea well before she has even met him. In fact, she has fallen in love with the mythical figure of Ernest, whom Algernon chooses to impersonate in order to facilitate their meeting. As she tells him, “Ever since dear Uncle jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. […] I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you.”

It is quite possible that all parties concerned – Jack, Gwendolen, and not least ourselves as members of the audience – can now breathe a sigh of relief and mutter “Finally” under our collective breath. (Of course, just as we are taking this breath, Lady Bracknell is destined to appear and take it away again, but we can leave that good lady’s breathtaking qualities aside for the time being.

As a clear parallel to the Jack/Gwen pairing, we have Algernon and Cecily. But before we look at their first meeting, it is worth tweaking the play’s chronology a little to see when and why the couple first began to feel and/or show an attraction towards one another.

Algernon knows little of Cecily, other than that she is Jack’s ward, that she is “not a silly romantic girl”, has a capital appetite, enjoys long walks and pays no attention to her lessons, when he first declares “I would rather like to see Cecily”. Jack doesn’t help matters by making it clear he wishes to restrict such a meeting, on the understandable grounds that “She is excessively pretty, and she is only just eighteen”. In a demonstration of his characteristic self-awareness, Jack goes on to declare that one doesn’t blurt these things out to people, but by then Algernon is all set to takes notes of addresses and arrange his forthcoming Bunburying accordingly.
As a brief aside, let us not forget that Gwendolen has already declared, “We live […] in an age of ideals. […] And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. […] The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.” All of the youthful protagonists in this play appear to fall in love with an image they have pre-constructed rather than the actual individual set down before them.

Some questions and an exercise.
Aside from these young protagonists, what other relationships do we see in the play?
How do they fit in to this model?
Consider any developing relationships, where we meet both parties involved and witness their courtship (teacher’s cheat – Miss Prism and the Rev Chasuble); also consider any established relationships where the couple’s interaction is only reported to us (ie, the senior Bracknells). Try writing scenes or monologues for these characters, where they express what they are looking for or were looking for in any potential partner. You might like to consider how they would go about writing a lonely hearts ad as your starting point.

So, let’s look at the first meeting between Cecily and Algernon, who at this point is masquerading as the “wicked brother” Ernest (p.277). In a typically Wildean conceit, during their introduction Cecily actually appears to blame Ernest for not being as wicked as his reputation has suggested:

**ALGERNON:** Oh! I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn’t think that I am wicked.

**CECILY:** If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

**ALGERNON** [looks at her in amazement]: Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

Again, we have those revealing stage directions – [Algernon is rather taken aback], [looks at her in amazement] – and Cecily appears to have the upper hand in the exchange, painting a picture of Algernon (or his assumed character) in a manner of her choosing. Algy is left with little choice other than to play up to his assigned role. But at least the dialogue here does appear genuinely flirtatious; Algernon does produce some genuine “chat-up” lines. They may seem somewhat dated to a modern audience, but their linguistic simplicity at least suggests spontaneity, a genuine expression of true feelings.

- “It is much pleasanter being here with you.”
- “You are like a pink rose, cousin Cecily.”
- “You are the prettiest girl I ever saw.”

Later, when Algernon comes to declare his love (pp. 285-286), this situation is markedly different. Cecily still holds the upper hand and her own composure, with Algy entirely dependent upon her authority for dismissing Merriman and the dog-cart and allowing him to stay. But Algernon’s verbal fluency is gone, replaced at first with a strangely formal declaration: “I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.” Soon he is “somewhat taken aback”, reduced to exclaiming “Ahem! Ahem!” and being suitably chastised for his inability to speak fluently. His next attempt is hardly more successful, and again he is suitably corrected:

**ALGERNON** [speaking very rapidly]: Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

**CECILY:** I don’t think you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn’t seem to make much sense, does it?

**ALGERNON:** Cecily.

[Enter MERRIMAN.]
Let us look again at that strangely formal opening declaration – “I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you…” This is an uncharacteristic statement for Algernon to make – he has never shown any nervousness about causing offence before; indeed, he has apparently revelled in argument and explicitly declared his love of scrapes. Even in his first meeting with Cecily, he seemed more open, less constrained, paying her spontaneous compliments, playing up to his reputation for wickedness and dismissing Miss Prism as “a short-sighted old lady” (although he has yet to set eyes on her). In this second meeting, although he says he intends to “state quite frankly and openly” his language is much more considered. Compare “you seem to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection” to “You are the prettiest girl I ever saw”. Which seems the more natural; which lines would you be more likely to believe, to use yourself, or to respond to?

Note, then, that flirtation appears to be a more free, natural and liberated state, and that once formal declarations of love are made a bureaucratic language of contract and agreement appears to take over. “Romance”, or romantic language, takes a back seat. Perhaps this was what Algernon was referring to in an earlier discussion with Jack:

JACK: I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.
ALGERNON: I thought you had come up for pleasure?...I call that business.
JACK: How utterly unromantic you are!
ALGERNON: I really don’t see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. […] Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty.

We do not have to personally endorse this view to acknowledge that it is one of the play’s central themes: that flirtation is the fun part of a relationship, the enjoyable prelude to declaration, commitment and ultimately marriage, which – in the context of this play, at least – appears to mark the natural end to love and romance. Given such a context, it seems highly appropriate, even commendable, that Cecily and to a lesser degree Gwendolen should choose to stage manage the course of these affaires de coeur - this maybe the only time they get to take any pleasure in them!

The sense of fun that can only be provided by a spontaneous flirtation rather than any lasting commitment might also be why Cecil declares, “Oh, I don’t think I would care to catch a sensible man. I shouldn’t know what to talk to him about.” (Page 279) This truly is a frightful prospect in a play which places so much emphasis on, and which has such a reputation for, the presence of sparkling dialogue.

Some more questions to play with.
According to the text, Algernon says “Cecily” in response to her final line. Had this been a Harold Pinter play, we might have had “Cecily dot-dot-dot”, ie Cecily…[pregnant pause], or even “Cec-”, with Algy never quite completing his beloved’s name due to the interruption. But this text gives us no such clues. Try playing the ending both ways; then try delaying Merriman’s entrance. What lines or responses would you improvise? Can you come up with any? Could he?

Note back to the Ridiculusmus production. How did they portray the play’s two main relationships? Which seemed the more passionate, the more urgent? Why?
How did the characterisation of different individuals affect the portrayal of their subsequent romantic entanglements?
Did you consider the question of age to be an issue at any point?
(Note that the text makes specific reference to the age of certain characters; for example, when Cecily is referred to as being excessively pretty and only just 18, or when Lady Bracknell declares 29 a very good age to be married at. Pages 271 and 266 respectively.)
Finally, ask yourselves which female gets her wish and marries a man named Ernest? What repercussions does this have for the other couple involved?
Section Four: Dialogue as competitive wordplay.

We have already touched upon the suggestion that the dialogue in The Importance of Being Earnest can be seen as competitive wordplay. Now we will look at two specific examples.

One: The eruption of rivalry between Cecily and Gwendolen (pp293-294, Appendix Three.)
Two: Algernon and Jack’s tousle over the cigarette case from Act I (pp256-258 and Appendix Four)
Three: Jack and Algy and “the wrong kind of nonsense” (Appendix Five)

One: Cecily and Gwendolen

Cecily and Gwendolen have met in the Manor House garden, have apparently taken an instant liking to one another, declared this friendship and moved onto first-name terms. However, when they share confidences about their love-lives, confusion and conflict enter the arena. Due to the deceptions of Jack and Algernon, and in particular their shared pseudonym/alter ego, both women believe themselves to be engaged to the same Mr Ernest Worthing. Just as they are about to break into open hostilities, Merriman and a footman enter, and the stage directions inform us: [The presence of the servants exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe.]

Look at the dialogue that follows (Appendix 3), paying particular attention to the stage directions. Note also that the protagonists have reverted to the more formal and ostensibly polite habit of calling one another by titles and surnames – Miss Cardew, Miss Fairfax. With the exception of Gwendolen’s aside, “Detestable girl”, are there any lines of dialogue which we can clearly define as rude, prior to Merriman’s withdrawal? I would suggest not, but try reading the scene aloud. Despite the apparent politeness of the words themselves, there is clearly an air of hostility and one-up-manship between the two girls.

Gwendolen’s innocent question about the walks in the area leads to...
   ...an almost bragging response about a local view from Cecily; Gwendolen seeks to belittle this by declaring her dislike of crowds,...
   .. but Cecily bats this back, enquiring if this is why Gwendolen lives in town.

Fifteen-love to Cecily, we might assume.

This format of leading questions and double-edged responses, thrust and parry, is repeated throughout dialogue, as country and town (or perhaps Town, capital T, as in London) are repeatedly pitted against one another. Added in to this, we have the use of food and refreshment as a weapon, both in its physical form (sugared tea; cake instead of bread and butter) and as evidence of the relative fashionability of the two girls, with Gwendolen declaring “Sugar is not fashionable any more” and “Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays” (p. 293). It is not quite a food fight, but it is actually possible to play it as such, with only the presence of Merriman providing any restraint upon proceedings.

So try it. Place the two girls downstage and have Merriman serving them in an upstage position, so that he can physically witness the interchange between them. Like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merriman</th>
<th>Cecily</th>
<th>Gwendolen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bear in mind that the two girls have to behave impeccably in front of a servant. Now reverse the onstage position, and keep Merriman in a central position, looking out towards the audience as his resting point between stage directions. Like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merriman</th>
<th>Cecily</th>
<th>Gwendolen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The girls are now much freer to (mis)behave, as long as Merriman continues to ignore them. He might do this studiously, or he might enjoy the opportunity to cast surreptitious glances around him. Try both. You might also arm the girls with collections of scrunched-up paper, to represent teacakes and buns (or tennis balls), should the argument descend to a (controlled!) physical level.
Once Merriman has exited the scene, the hostilities become more open. Gwendolen “[Rises in indignation]” and warns Cecily that she may go too far; Cecily, also “[Rising]”, states that for the sake of her beloved, she will go to any lengths, which cleverly works as both a threat and a self-serving testament to the strength of her commitment. Gwendolen has little choice but to resort to plain criticism (albeit in direct contradiction of her earlier “first impressions”), and Cecily clearly implies that it is time for her to leave. It is quite possible that she would proceed to physically manhandle Gwendolen away from “her territory”, were it not for the timely arrival of Jack.

Let us look again at some of the language we have used to describe this sort of exchange.

- Confusion and conflict enter the arena (new italics)
- Open hostilities
- Cecily bats this back
- Fifteen-love to Cecily, we might assume
- Thrust and parry
- Pitted against one another
- Our previous exercise (and typography) both make references to tennis

We are clearly not describing a fireside chat or an afternoon of small-talk here. It is the language of competitive sport, of gladiatorial combat, but nevertheless, when witnesses are present the dialogue carries an outward veneer of politesse. (Again, feel free to use a dictionary, to check on the shades of meaning between politeness and politesse.) To be openly rude would be bad show, but it would also show that that participant was actively bothered by their rival – it could be construed as “showing your hand”, revealing a true inner feeling, when the real aim is to remain as poker faced as Lane managed in Act I.

Such notions of duplicity, of masks and the faces that lie behind them, the hypocrisy and occasionally the necessity of such dissembling are impossible to avoid in Wilde’s work. His particular life story may have led to periods of re-evaluation and additional emphasis being placed upon these elements, but that is not to say they weren’t always there. Such duality becomes explicit in The Picture of Dorian Gray, for example, and in his later poem, The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Wilde would declare:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!

(I can’t resist pointing out the echo to the observation in Hamlet, Act One, Scene 5, “That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain; At least I’m sure it may be so in Denmark”. In Woolton, too, perhaps. And once again we cannot ignore the particular hypocrisies of the Victorian period, as pointed out by both John Fowles and Colin Firth in Section 2.)

Two: Jack and Algernon

All of which makes the occasionally bad-tempered and argumentative relationship between Jack and Algy seem positively healthy by comparison!

In all fairness, though, this observation doesn’t take into account the different context which the Jack and Algy relationship appears in. These two suitors are well aware that they are pursuing discrete love interests, and they have clearly known one another a long time. They may squabble and sulk at times (Jack appears particularly sulky in the Ridiculumus production, perhaps), they may tease and trade insults, but such spats appear to be an integral part of an established relationship – there is nothing new “up for grabs” for these two, so they are not battling for status, for the post of king of the castle, in quite the way that circumstances force Cecily and Gwendolen to.

Nevertheless, there issue of status is clearly an undercurrent between two men who can, on
first reading, seem remarkably similar. Both are idle bachelors, leading dissolute London lives, and as we soon learn both are quite prepared to use deceit to maintain and enhance this comfortable, care-free existence. During the play, both adopt the pseudonym “Ernest” and try to arrange hasty baptisms to make this a more official change. Both, apparently, do this for “love”, or in the hope of marriage. Finally, both are given dialogue that tends towards the epigrammatic, that is fluent and articulate beyond the bounds of naturalism.

Jack is clearly a liar then. He has lied quite blatantly about who gave him the cigarette case and now he is forced to confess that he has also practised an on-going deception about his actual name. Within the course of the play, we may well decide that there isn’t actually anything wrong with being a liar (Algy certainly doesn’t think so), but where Jack is concerned there is another consideration. Namely, he isn’t any good at it.

Look again at how Algy drip-feeds that inscription. Does Jack not realise he has read the whole thing? Apparently not, and so he persists in his increasingly convoluted denials - “Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself.” Eventually, the game is up and Jack is forced to confess to much more than the provenance of his cigarette case. By using the information he does possess, Algy wheedles out important facts about his double life and the existence of his young ward, Miss Cecily Cardew. As an audience, we can only be grateful!

Is it possible to be seduced by this, to simply enjoy the surface wit of such dialogue, and we have seen productions that have been. They provide some laughs along the way, but they are laughs at what we already know, at jokes which are familiar, and there is little or no sense of character or development to accompany this humour. Soon enough, the exchanges become tedious – a parade of actors trotting out lines in a lifeless vacuum.

The truth is, Algy and Jack do have important distinctions between them, and it is during their little squabbles and bouts of competition that these differences are most apparent. They are there right from the start – just minutes into their first on-stage meeting, the two are grappling for possession of a cigarette case. Significantly, it is Algy who is found to be holding this item, and Jack who is forced to follow him (or even chase him) around the room, despite his repeated assertions that the case is his.

As well as possessing the case, though, Algy is also in possession of some valuable knowledge which its inscription reveals. How he chooses to pass on this information is worth examining. (See Appendix Four). At first, he tells us it is inscribed from Cecily, whom Jack claims is his aunt. Then Algy expands: it is from “little Cecily”, and comes “with her fondest love”. Finally, he reads out the whole inscription, “From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack” (my italics).

Compare this to when Algy is in possession of a similar secret – the enigmatic reference to Bunburying, introduced during the same exchange: “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.” (P.258) Algy’s hand is never forced; he is quite willing to reveal his meaning, but only in exchange for additional confessions from Jack. It is quite clearly a quid pro quo arrangement.

Three: The Wrong Kind of Nonsense
Now let’s look at the later exchange between Algy and Jack, reproduced in Appendix Five. Try acting it out, or at least reading it aloud. Where do the laughs come? Which character gets them? Is there a notable difference between laughing at a character and laughing at an amusing line they are given?

Once again, it appears to be Algy who holds most of the knowledge – even if it is imperfect, such as during the discussion on apoplexy and chills. Just look at how many how many questions he asks Algy, and also notice that when he does so it is frequently to solicit his friend’s opinion or to draw on his (apparent) wealth of experience. By contrast, Algy only ever asks questions to gather information, a process which has the added benefit of always moving the action forward.

It is particularly telling that at one point Jack even asks Algy, “Is that clever?”, a question Algy dodges by referring instead to his remark’s phraseology and the relative truth it may have carried. This leads into Jack’s outburst against cleverness, his enquiries about fools, and finally his rather foolish dismissal of such individuals – “What fools!” It is quite possible to play this exchange as if Algy were specifically referring to his onstage companion. Jack’s subsequent indiscretions concerning his young ward – and the blissful ignorance he maintains against blurring such things out – certainly endorse such a view.

It is also worth considering how many times Jack dismisses his friend’s pronouncements as nonsense. This may be true – at the Act’s conclusion, Algy seems quite happy to accept such a view:

JACK: Oh, that’s nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.
ALGERNON: Nobody ever does. (Page 272)

But if it really is the case, why does Jack remain so in thrall to him?

Some definitions:

**hypocrisy** the practice of professing standards, beliefs, etc., contrary to one’s real character or actual behaviour, esp. the pretence of virtue and piety.

**hypocrite** a person who pretends to be what he is not

We concluded that while both Algernon and Jack were dishonest, absurd and frequently foolish individuals, Algernon at least had the self-awareness to acknowledge these faults within himself. He knows that he lies, deceives, sponges off others, has “nothing but his debts to depend upon” (p.305), cannot be trusted… Oh, add in the vices for yourselves. He is even quite brazen about it. But he cannot be accused of hypocrisy, for the simple reason that he does not profess any standards or beliefs for his character or his behaviour to be contrary to. We reasoned such self-knowledge, and the accompanying shamelessness, were contributory factors in Algy repeatedly claiming the upper hand.

The same could not be said for Jack. We have already seen how he lacks self-awareness. In addition, he repeatedly makes it clear that he believes there is – or should be – one rule for himself and another for other people. He thinks the truth is not a thing you tell nice, sweet girls; he lays particular stress upon Cecily’s German lessons before he indulges himself in town; and when caught eating muffins at a time of crisis he informs Algy, “I said it was perfectly heartless for you, under the circumstances. That is a very different thing.” (p.298)

This confirmed our assessment of Jack as a spoilt and sulky individual, caught up in the play’s events, and reacting to them rather than initiating any. It seemed highly fortunate for him, then, that one of the main events was his engagement with the more forceful and on-the-ball Gwendolen – someone who could lick him into some sort of shape, whether he liked it or not!
Section Five: A Brief Look at Audiences.  
Or… The Well-Made Play and How We Remade It. 

LADY BRACKNELL: I need hardly tell you that in families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. They are hardly considered the thing.  (Page 310)

Ridiculusmus have always acknowledged the presence of an audience. There are sound practical reasons for this, not least the fact that we rely on their continued support for our bookings, our revenue, and our very existence as a company. But they also make our work – each production and performance – come alive. We react to their laughter; we are aware of their silences; we sense their attention. Only a foolish performer – or a televised actor – would not acknowledge this element.

How we choose to acknowledge it is always changing, though. In our earliest production, *Three Men in a Boat*, we spoke to our audience directly and encouraged them (or forced them) to join in with a closing sing-along. In *Say Nothing*, appropriately, we said nothing to them directly and used a variety of techniques to initially confuse them and distance them from the characters we portrayed, to force them to do more of the work. As always, we fit the approach to the needs of the piece.

With the Wilde play, we very quickly felt like we were collaborators, or co-conspirators. As we have tried to show, from the very opening we felt that the play was constructed to deliberately set up audience expectations and then to subvert them, twist them, even bamboozle them. This was territory that Ridiculusmus were already familiar with.


*Earnest* is a very tightly plotted play, frequently termed a “well-made play”, which the York Notes Advanced define as, “a play which exhibits a neatness of plot and smooth-functioning exactness of action, with all its parts fitting together. A well-made play leaves no loose ends and its audience knows exactly what to think at the end.” (p.104) Well, we certainly agreed with the first half of this definition. The text was awash with examples:

- The use of the cigarette case to reveal Jack’s double-life deception
- Gwendolen and Cecily both worshipping the name “Ernest”
- Jack’s foundling status (and the question of that handbag)
- His repeated insistence, “I have no brother”
- The various running jokes around cucumber sandwiches, bread and cake, German and Germany

We’re sure that you can add to this yourselves.

In fact, we agreed so heartily that we became suspicious. Let’s look again at the question of Jack’s brother. First he invents one, the wicked Ernest, in order to facilitate his double-life. He is forced to confess this to Algy and, by our good fortune, to the audience. Then he decides to kill Ernest off, necessitating his appearance at the Manor House in full mourning dress. But by now, Cecily believes she has met Ernest, albeit Algernon in disguise, prompting Jack’s first denial, “What nonsense! I haven’t got a brother.” (p.282)

With the arrival of Gwendolen, all four characters converge onstage, these deceptions are exploded and Jack is forced to confess, “I will tell you quite frankly that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don’t intend to have a brother, not even of any kind.” (p.306)
In addition, we are thoroughly aware of Jack’s foundling status, including the memorable line, “To lose on parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness” (p.267) and we know Lady Bracknell’s subsequent advice, to “try and acquire some relatives as soon as possible.” (p.268) If an audience isn’t primed for a final revelation by all this, then it can only be because they have been allowed to fall asleep. And sure enough, it comes, with the added benefit of the name of Ernest and a neat reversal of previous denials, just to emphasise the symmetry.  JACK: Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother!” (p.311)

This seems beyond well-made. It is well-made and boldly declaring its status as such, drawing attention to its own construction and elaborate architecture. It tips a wink towards the audience. It is even possible to play it as such, quite literally. Try it. Look at the extracts in Appendix Six. We have added in some additional stage directions for you. Make sure that you have an audience and position yourself or your performers so that they can address them directly. Try to take them into your confidence.

We also found ourselves questioning the second part of the York Notes definition, which declared “A well-made play leaves no loose ends and its audience knows exactly what to think at the end.” We have already alluded to one loose end, when we asked you to consider which of the play’s two female protagonists gets her wish and marries a man named Ernest. The action has reached such a frenetic pace, with so many comings and goings and switches of (textual) identity, that we suspect few people grasp the fact that Cecily is now condemned to marry an Algernon, a name of which she previously declared, “I might respect you, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention”. (p288)

And as for an audience knowing exactly what to think at the end, it seems hard for them to even think at all. And this is meant as no disrespect to the audience. The play has pulled the rug from under us so many times, has twisted us up in its verbal knots, has raised, subverted and confounded so many expectations that we are left struggling to find a moral or even a concrete point to the whole proceedings. Are we really to conclude that this sudden rash of traditional and presumably monogamous marriages marks a happy ending to proceedings? Or are we meant to agree with Gwendolen’s apparently hopeful final comment?

JACK: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN: I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.

It seems impossible to know what to think, when even the nature of truth seems as slippery and as hard to grasp as a well-soaped eel. And the play’s final words offer little in the way of assistance. When Jack declares, “I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest!”, it may expose the clunking pun that has been lurking in the background all evening, but it offers little evidence of any lesson learnt. In fact, in one final paradox, it could even be taken as contrary to what the body of the text has so ably demonstrated all evening – that very little is worth taking seriously, because all events seem out of our own hands regardless.

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.”
And How We Remade It.
The Onstage Audience.

Perhaps you didn’t notice, but the whole Ridiculusmus production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* only featured two performers. Yes, that’s right. Just the two of them. This has obvious implications for the relationship between performers and audiences, foregrounding the artificial nature of the presentation, demanding that the audience accept it as a work of theatrical presentation rather than a naturalistic slice of life. There’s really no question about it: this isn’t a documentary. If used correctly, the shameless nature of such artifice can support the notion of “tipping the wink”, which we discussed previously.

It allows us to play with audience expectations in other ways, too. More than one reviewer and many an audience member has commented upon the sense of dread they felt after the first few costume changes and the corresponding shifts in the onstage characters. “We’ll be here all night,” seems a fair summing up of their trepidation. We were never unaware of this. As the play itself proceeds, the number of exits and entrances increases, as does the pace of their exchanges and even the number of bodies onstage.

As a guideline, consider how many characters are onstage at the beginning (one, according to the text: Lane), and how many are present at the end (seven, according to the text, though a different production might also find space for Merriman and his footman). This difference allowed us to speed up our own costume changes and character switches, emphasising their comic potential and the text’s own sense of accelerating madness, and allowing us to keep the evening to a manageable length! The accompanying sense of relief may also have worked in our favour.

However, as we stated right back in section one, whenever we make a staging decision, it may enhance one area of the final presentation, but it can also simultaneously detract from other aspects of the play, or at least limit the scope of what we can do with them. Obviously, the decision to stick to two performers made immediate impacts – not least on our design team and the questions of what costumes were appropriate and feasible. And inevitably it affected the question of onstage audiences.

**Question.**

How *did* two people represent an onstage cast of nine? What techniques were used to differentiate between characters? Think about hats, wigs, body language, accents. Were there any points when these elements could be said to fall apart, or when the different actors brought different aspects into one role? Did this confuse you or detract from your enjoyment of the piece?

Think back to the exercise we suggested early on in Section Four, featuring Gwendolen, Cecily and Merriman, and examining how the butler’s presence could act as a restraining influence upon that bubbling dispute. Or examine the stage direction that accompanies the dialogue between Jack and Gwendolen, towards the end of Act I:

GWENDOLEN: What is your address in the country?


[ALGERNON, who has been carefully listening, smiles, to himself, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then picks up the Railway Guide.]

We could play with these elements in workshops, draft in bodies to pad out the stage during rehearsals, but we were always aware that they would need further tweaking – or a leap in faith on the part of the audience – to translate them for the stage.

It should be noted, though, that this is no different to any rehearsal procedure. Any production will have its own constraints and limitations, be they time, budget, performance space… The list is endless. The trick is to use the inevitable compromises to your advantage – and to keep the audience on your side.

We can only hope that we achieved this. Please feel free to let us know.

Yours, as ever, Ridiculusmus.