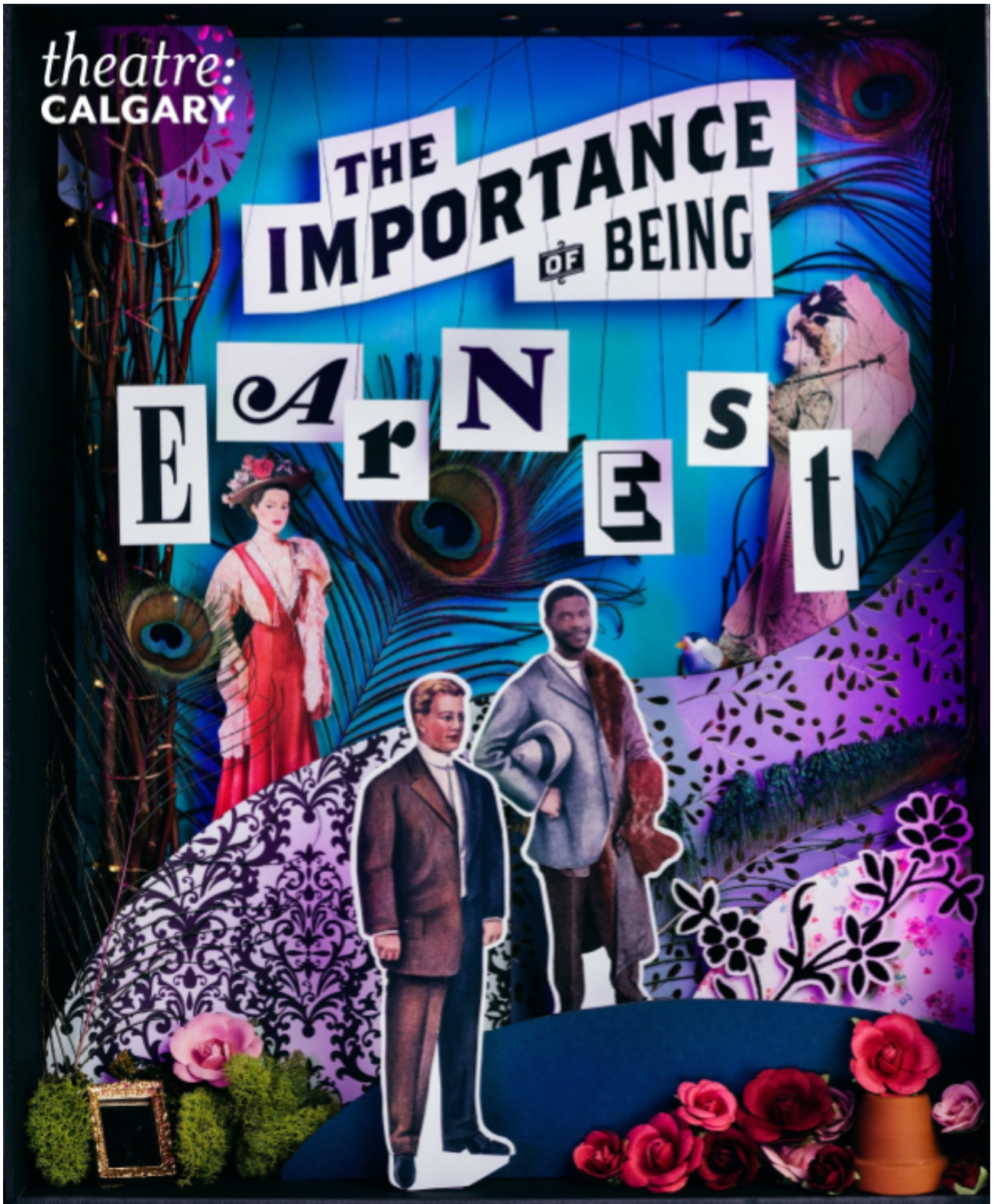


theatre:
CALGARY

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING

EARNEST



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
BY OSCAR WILDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3** **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

- 4** **ABOUT THE PLAY**
 - Summary
 - Character Breakdown
 - Historical + Social Context

- 8** **WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE**

- 10** **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**
 - If you have 15 minutes...
 - If you have 30 minutes...
 - If you have an hour...

- 13** **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION**

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome, Educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2022-2023 Play Guides are intended to support your students' experience at Theatre Calgary this season. We encourage you to use some—or all—of these materials to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While not mandatory in order for students to enjoy the production, research shows that where young people are given opportunities to connect a work of art to their personal lives and experiences, they are more deeply able to understand and appreciate the piece.

With that in mind, each guide provides you and your students a range of contextual material. You will find background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context; expectations for attending the theatre; activities for you to lead in the classroom; and reflection questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, tie to your curriculum, and can be facilitated for various lengths of time.

Pages marked with a ★ are intended to be photocopied and distributed directly to your students.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

ABOUT THE PLAY

SUMMARY.

The Importance of Being Earnest is a classic comedy by Oscar Wilde. It is set in England during the Victorian era (its first performance was in 1895), and its primary source of humor is the invention of a fictitious character named Ernest.

Algernon, a wealthy young Londoner, pretends to have a friend named **Bunbury** who lives in the country and frequently is in ill health. Whenever Algernon wants to avoid a social obligation—or just get away for the weekend—he makes a visit to his "sick friend." In this way Algernon can pretend to be pious and dedicated to his ill "friend," while having the perfect excuse to get out of town. He calls this practice "Bunburying."

Algernon's real-life best friend lives in the country but makes frequent visits to London, under the name of **Ernest**. "Ernest" discloses that his visits to the city are also examples of "Bunburying." In the country, "Ernest" goes by his real name, **Jack**, and pretends that he has a black-sheep brother named Ernest, who lives in London. (Yes! This is confusing. Use the Character Breakdown on pg. 6 to help!) When Jack comes to the city, he assumes the name of Ernest and tells everyone he has a brother named Jack who lives in the country.

In his visits to the city, Jack-as-Ernest falls in love with **Gwendolen**, Algernon's cousin, but runs into a few problems. First, Gwendolen seems to love him only because she believes his name is Ernest, which she thinks is the most beautiful name in the world. Second, Gwendolen's mother is the terrifying **Lady Bracknell**.

Gwendolen and her mother arrive at Jack-as-Ernest's country home, and he is delighted to discover that Gwendolen returns his affections. Gwendolen, fixated on the name Ernest, which, of course, is not his real name, makes clear that she would never even consider marrying a man who was not named Ernest.



Algernon gets the idea to visit Jack in the country, pretending that he is the mysterious brother "Ernest." Unfortunately, unknown to Algernon, Jack has decided to "give up his Bunburying," and he has announced the tragic death of Ernest. Jack is furious to find Algernon masquerading as Ernest but has to go along with the charade. If he doesn't, his own lies and deceptions will be revealed.

A hilarious series of comic misunderstandings follows, as Algernon-as-Ernest visits the country (a dead man, as it turns out), and Jack shows up in his mourning clothes.

Algernon-as-Ernest encounters Jack's ward—an adopted daughter, of sorts, **Cecily**, who believes herself in love with Jack's non-existent brother, Ernest, whom she's never met. Algernon-as-Ernest falls hopelessly in love with Cecily and asks her to marry him, only to discover that Cecily already considers that they are engaged. She, too, insists that a man named Ernest is the only man worthy of her affections.

Gwendolen decides to pay Jack an unexpected visit and is shown into the garden, where she encounters Cecily.

Gwendolen is upset to learn that Cecily is "Mr. Worthing's ward," and Cecily explains that it is Jack, and not Ernest Worthing who is her guardian, and that, in fact, she is engaged to be married to Ernest. Gwendolen points out that she herself is engaged to Ernest, and the tea party deteriorates into a war of manners.

Jack and Algernon make arrangements with the local clergyman, **Dr. Chausuble**, to get themselves re-christened as Ernest. It is then that the women discover that they've been deceived and turn their backs, together, on Jack and Algernon.

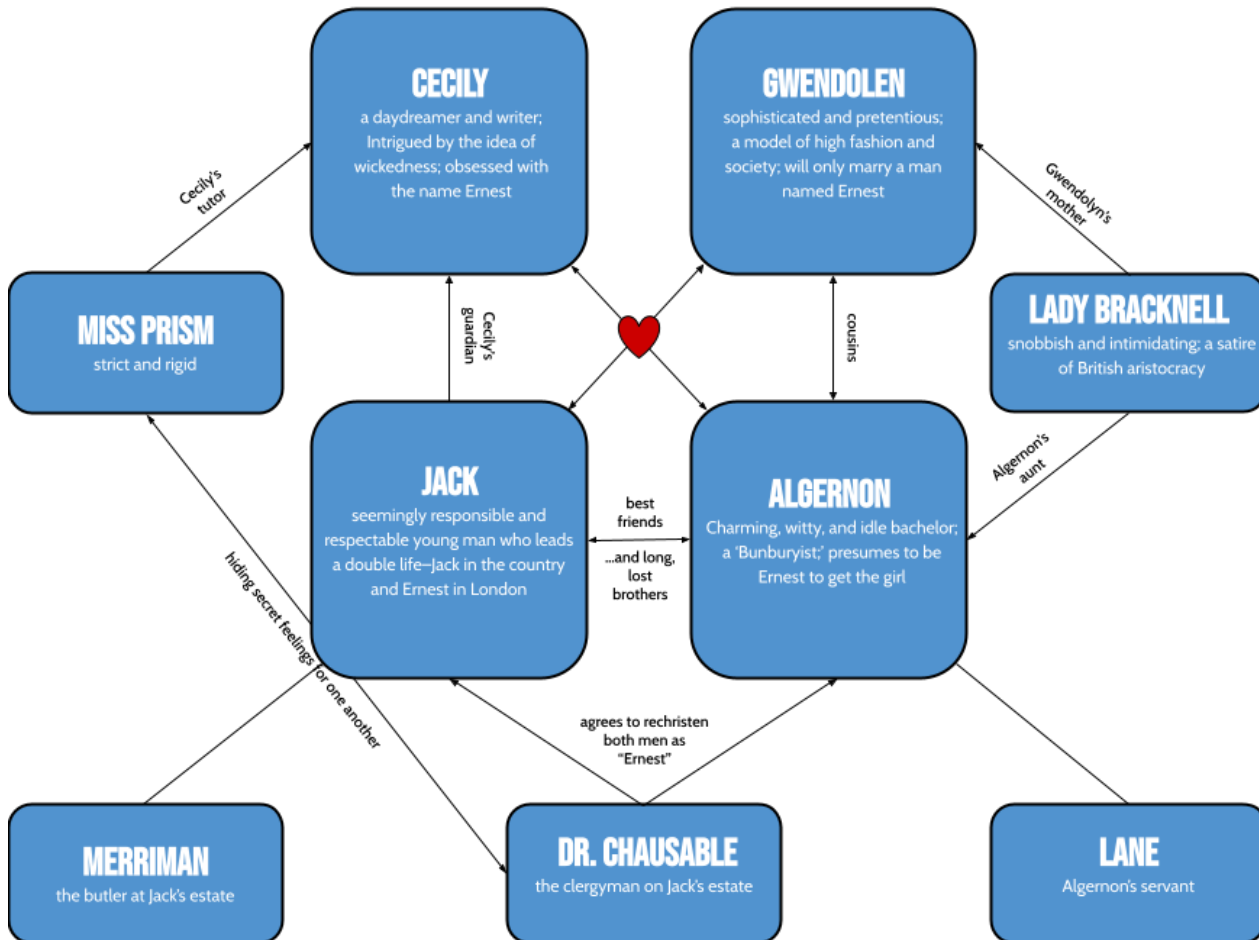
Both men manage to explain their way back into the women's hearts, and once they reveal that they will each, respectively, be renamed Ernest, all is well, until Lady Bracknell appears and refuses to give her blessings for either union. It is only when Jack's true identity as the long, lost brother of Algernon that all is made well, and a happy ending is revealed.

STORY WHOOSH

is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even (and especially) without participants having prior knowledge.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape, pose, or action that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!" and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- The storytelling continues around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT OSCAR WILDE

- 1 Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was a playwright (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), author (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), and social activist.
- 2 A statue of him lounging on a rock can be found in Merrion Square, Dublin, Ireland.
- 3 Wilde was the editor of a women's magazine that addressed issues such as women's rights.
- 4 He was imprisoned for being a gay man in Victorian England.
- 5 In 2017 he was pardoned by Queen Elizabeth II, under the Turing Law, which overturned convictions for gay men in England and Wales.

WHAT IS A COMEDY OF MANNERS?

A comedy of manners is a type of play that uses **satire*** to poke fun at society— particularly its way of speaking and every day actions. It especially makes fun of polite and 'well-bred' behavior.

It relies heavily on the use of **subtext*** and wordplay, which means finding the humor requires paying close attention to the dialogue. The characters are often caricatures of familiar members of the community (like Lady Bracknell).

***satire.** the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or mockery to expose or criticize society

***subtext.** the unspoken (or less obvious) meaning behind what a character is saying

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE A SINGLE WOMAN IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND?

- You never addressed a gentleman without an introduction.
- You always had to be chaperoned by someone older, and preferably married, when in the company of a man.
- You never rode alone in a closed carriage with a man who wasn't a relative.
- You would never visit an unmarried man at his place of residence.
- You never looked back after anyone in the street, or turned to stare at others at church, the opera, etc.
- Intelligence was not encouraged, nor was any interest in politics.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind.

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatre magic (How *did* they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats.

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors.

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality.

Theatre-makers ask the audience to "suspend their disbelief." If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions.

Listen carefully to the story being told. Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing? If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (*See the box on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.*)

Disconnection.

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING Q'S FOR A Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 9) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do if I want to be a...
- What has been your favorite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the production team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to meet.

The Playwright writes the script—sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story. They decide what the characters say and give the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors and the costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure that everyone is telling the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Color Your Numbers

Much of the humor in The Importance of Being Earnest comes from the characters not quite saying what's on their mind. The humor is, therefore, found between the lines—the subtext. In this game students will say lines—numbers—in a variety of ways that challenge them to communicate using only their voices and bodies.

Focus Question. How can you communicate intention and emotion with limited text?

Objective. Students will be able to observe how the body and voice changes how one says a line, depending on their intention or state of mind.

Procedure.

1 Arrange your students in two parallel lines facing one another, ensuring that each person has a partner directly across from them. There should be as much space as possible between them.

(NOTE. This will not work for a group of 3, so for odd-numbered groups, teachers get to jump in!)

2 Assign each student a number, and make sure they remember! It will be their 'script' for the remainder of the activity.

3 On your cue, both sides meet in the middle greeting each other, using only their number. For example, instead of "Hi! How are you?" "Great! How have you been?" They might say "Two! Two?" and "Seven! Seven seven?" They may say their number as many times as they'd like, but they cannot add any other words or numbers to their 'script.'

4 Once students return to their spots in line, repeat as many times as you'd like, using any of the prompts below (or those proposed by the students):

- Like enemies
- Like snobs
- Like long-lost friends
- Like it's your biggest crush
- Like you have a big secret
- Like you're a politician
- Like you just won the lottery
- Like you just failed a test
- Like you're talking to your grandmother
- Like you're talking to a parent
- Like a (broken) robot
- Like you're heartbroken
- Like a polka-dot
- Like you're walking on a cloud
- Like you're totally bored

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Character Playlist

Each of the main characters in The Importance of Being Earnest is madly in love and feels very deeply. Students will curate a Spotify playlist for Jack, Algernon, Cecily, or Gwendolen—even Lady Bracknell or Miss Prism.

Focus Question. How can we use music to tell a story?

Objective. Students will be able to articulate the connection between music and emotion, using *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a springboard.

Procedure.

- 1** Ask students to choose one of the characters from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- 2** Group students into teams by character.
- 3** Provide the following prompts for discussion in small groups:
 - How would you describe the character's state of mind at the beginning of the play?
 - How does it change by the end?
 - What type of music would this character listen to? What makes you say that?
- 4** Have students break off and individually create an 8-10 song playlist for the character based on their discussions. They can create an actual playlist on their devices or as a list on paper, but they should be prepared to explain their choices.
- 5** Have one student per character share excerpts from their playlist with the class. They should explain why they chose the song and share an audio clip or lyrics as evidence.

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

A Modern Day Comedy of Manners

The Importance of Being Earnest *remains relevant and funny despite being written in the 19th century. Students will explore what a comedy of manners (see pg. 7) might look like today by using current gossip news as a springboard for original scenes.*

Focus Question. How do we write dialogue that conceals how characters *really* feel?

Objective. Students will explore the genre of comedy of manners and by connecting the societal issues represented in *The Importance of Being Earnest* to contemporary celebrity culture through the creation of short scenes.

Procedure.

- 1** Divide students into groups of 2 or 3, and provide them with a selection of gossip articles. In order to stay current, you can find up-to-date gossip online at [People Magazine](#), [Entertainment Weekly](#), or [Us Weekly](#).
- 2** Students will read through a collection of articles and choose one as the inspiration for their scene using [this planning tool](#) to organize their thoughts.
- 3** Before they dive into dialogue, they should answer the following questions about their article:
 - What does the content of this article say about our concerns as a society today?
 - What can you infer about our social norms/behaviors from these articles?
 - What behavior is considered acceptable, unacceptable, scandalous, or shocking?
- 4** Once they've planned their characters, setting, conflict, and what is going *unsaid*, they can begin creating dialogue using improv or by writing a script. It's up to you!
- 5** Students should be sure that their scene answers the following questions in the dialogue (not just the stage directions):
 - What is the relationship between the characters?
 - Where are they?
 - What is the conflict between them?
 - What will happen if they don't resolve their conflict?
- 6** Once you're satisfied that students have a working draft of their scene, they should be able to share with the class. Be sure to engage students in a conversation about how their scenes capture the spirit of comedy of manners and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatre experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1** Which character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* do you most connect with? What draws you to them?
- 2** What are examples of 'Bunburying' that you see in your own life?
- 3** Cecily and Gwendolen are insistent that the name *Ernest* reflects a specific type of person. What is the value and impact of a name?
- 4** How does gender play a role in *The Importance of Being Earnest*? How relevant does this feel in today's society?
- 5** How would you define *earnestness*? Is this a quality you possess? What about the closest people in your life?

THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY

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