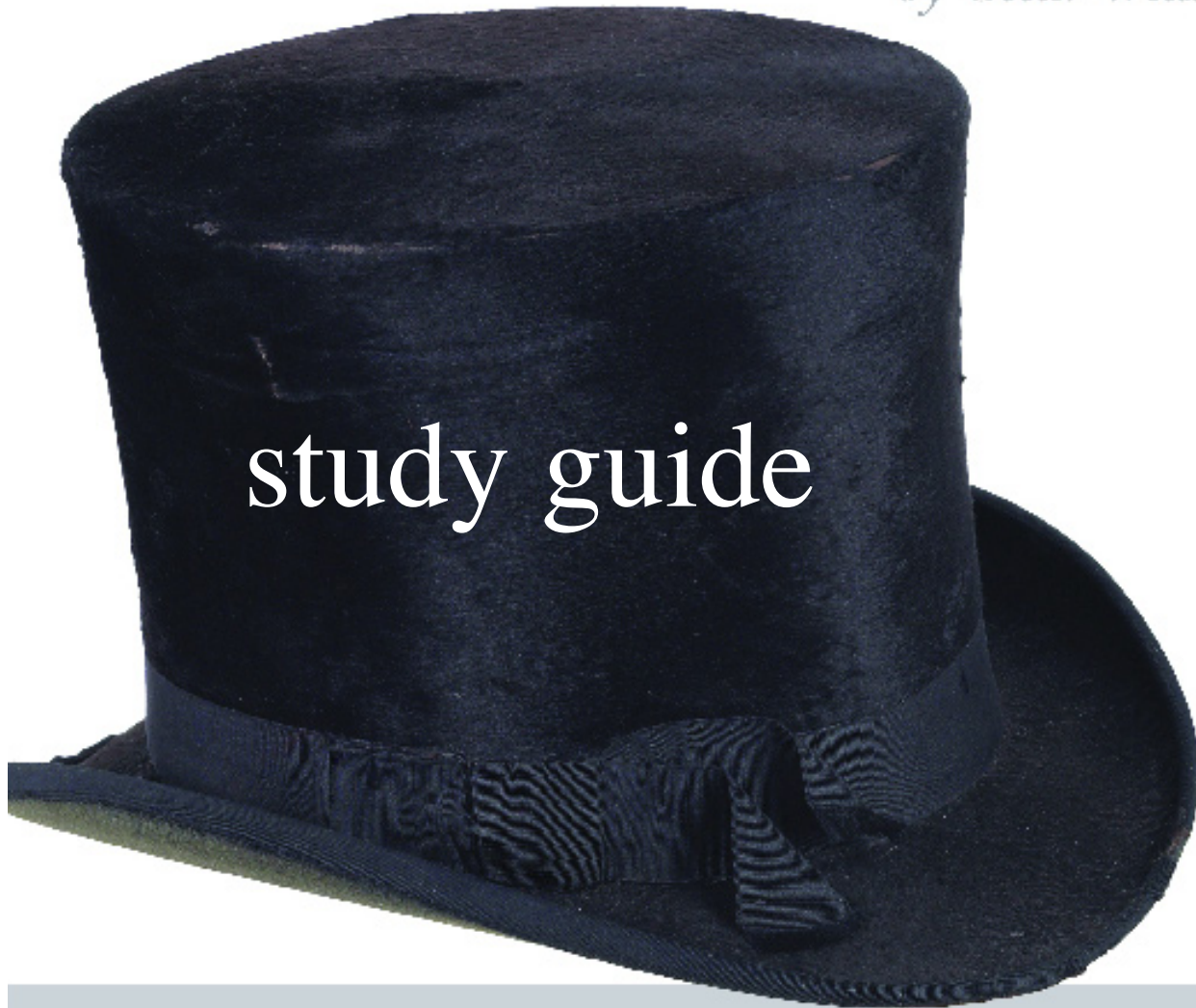


# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

*by Oscar Wilde*



umass*theater*

December 6, 7, 8, and 13, 14 at 8 p.m.

December 15 at 2 p.m.

Special Student Matinee: Dec. 12 at 10 a.m.

The Rand Theater



# Oscar Wilde: A Writer of Wit

*“In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”*

—Gwendolen in *The Importance of Being Earnest*



Oscar Wilde was the witty, perfectly dressed aesthete that his play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, relishes in presenting to its audience. Living in and writing for a Victorian high society where social conventions and restrictions dictated all aspects of elite life, Wilde was the perfect aesthete while remaining an outsider in many ways. His plays were commercial pieces written for the fashionable West End theaters. The West

End was—and is—London’s theater district as Broadway is today in New York City.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, on October 16, 1854, Wilde initially made his way to England in 1874 after winning a scholarship to Oxford. Four years later, in 1878, Wilde moved to London where, in the words of biographer Peter Raby, he was “the archetypal artist of late romanticism, one of the figures not only associated with the doctrines of aestheticism and their hothouse flowering in the decadent 1890s but someone who epitomized them.” Meticulously attentive to his own public appearance, Wilde was the social dandy\* found in his plays (Jack and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example).

England was at the height of its colonial power and Wilde funneled the aristocratic wealth and snobbery of London’s elite class into his plays. The lush Victorian setting of *The Importance of Being Earnest* provides the carefully mannered backdrop that sparks Wilde’s characters’ repartee (a lightening-fast exchange of witty remarks). Wit was Wilde’s forte; it gained him a place in English society and characterized the day in its presentational manner. Wit is composed of a carefully selected short phrase or sentence that is able to convey layer upon layer of meaning. It is fast and furious, never resting or repetitive, and immensely engaging.

In addition to being a foreigner (a Dubliner by birth), Wilde’s private life did not always align itself with Victorian social standards. In 1894, Wilde took his family to Worthing, England, where he wrote *The Importance of Being*

*Earnest*. The play was produced the following year at the St. James’s Theater in London, opening February 14, 1895. A public scandal followed shortly thereafter. Wilde was arrested and his first trial, for homosexual offenses, began April 26<sup>th</sup>. Disagreement among the jurors led to a retrial May 25<sup>th</sup> and imprisonment for two years. Wilde was released in 1897 and left the country. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (along with another of his plays, *An Ideal Husband*) was published two years later in 1899. The following year, on November 30, 1900, Wilde died at the age of forty-six in Paris’s Hôtel d’Alsace.

While some of Wilde’s works clearly demonstrate the tensions between Wilde’s personal and public lives (his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example), *The Importance of Being Earnest* was subtitled “A Trivial Comedy for Serious People” and remains light-hearted and fun from the moment the curtain rises. Considered in some ways a farce, a “low” form of comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was “triumphantly transformed... into a glittering and unique artifice.” While Wilde himself referred to *The Importance of Being Earnest* as “exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy,” there are some slight undertones of the pressures that would soon erupt in this cushy, privileged world of Victorian elites. While the “acts of violence in Grosvenor Square” (one of the more fashionable parts of London) that Lady Bracknell predicts did not come to be, the decades following Wilde’s death included WWI in addition to revolutions and uprisings around the globe. The comforts of the privileged English home would only last for so long.

And yet, *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains a delightful piece of international fame. From the butler who drinks the champagne (Lane) to the elderly woman (Miss Prism) who mistakenly places a baby in a handbag, Wilde creates characters that are naturally absurd. A poet and playwright who composed everything from novels to essays, Wilde— a Victorian dandy to the last— remains style and wit at its best.

*\*Dandy- A man who gives his personal appearance an exaggerated amount of attention*

## FUN FACTS

- It took approximately 600 people-hours to build and install the set
- The set contains a half mile of steel.
- The “show portal” around the edge of the proscenium is the only set piece that does not have a curve (at least in the design, the bottom portion across the stage actually does curve around the apron of the stage)
- 12 pages of drafts and 3 models (built using approximately 35 exacto blades) were made by Rob Christiansen (set designer).

# Suggesting a world

## *An interview with the director*

*One of the wonderful things about a play is that no two readers will see it exactly alike in their mind's eye. Different themes in the text hold more or less weight for different people, and the way each one pictures the world and people of the play will differ, too.*

*In this piece, dramaturg Anna Norcross talks with Aaron Schmookler, the director of the UMass Amherst Department of Theater production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, about how he sees the world of the play.*

**Anna Norcross: What first drew you to *The Importance of Being Earnest*?**

Aaron Schmookler: I just love anything with kind of heightened language. I really enjoy having language that crackles. I also just find the whole play to be lighthearted and fun in a way that I enjoy. In our society fun is almost like a guilty pleasure. It's like there's work and there's fun and you've got to get your work done before you can have the fun. I don't agree with that. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" is definitely true and, you know, it's no small part of why my work is theater because I find it fun and I can do both at once.

I really appreciate about these characters that they are, many of them, in it for fun. If there is anything that I admire in these characters, it's that they are unabashed about wanting to have fun, about wanting life to be that.

**AN: *The Importance of Being Earnest* has a very specific time and place, the 1890s in Victorian England. Could you talk about the triviality in this world and what the world of these characters is?**

AS: There is this really minute focus on appearance that is a big part of at least the upper orders, as they're called in this play, in Victorian England where really what's happening in any kind of profound, true way for somebody in their life is not nearly as important as what they are able to present. I know in literature and film and plays about the era you have these very high class, very well-to-do in some fashion, very well-regarded socialites who are penniless and somehow just get by, by dodging their creditors and relying on their friends. But because they are able to present this perfect demeanor, the perfect dress, their address is still in the fashionable parts of London, they're still highly regarded.

**AN: *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed in 1895, but you have a 2007 audience coming to see it. How has the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of your audience influenced your telling of this tale?**

AS: Many of the productions that I've seen of this are a bunch of people standing around and talking to each other. It's a living room drama where people spend a lot of time in chairs or stand still. And I don't think we've got a whole lot of patience for that as a modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, so we're moving around more.

Particularly in this country, comedy tends not to be very witty. It tends to be a lot more situational and a lot more slapstick and a lot more potty. I've introduced some of the slapstick, some of the more physical comedy, both to augment the wit and in some cases to point it up and kind of make it a little bit more obvious. And whether we were successful or not we'll find out when we get an audience that either laughs or doesn't. But it's definitely been on my mind that wit is not something that we're trained to as an audience. And it's also something that I'm finding with my actors that it's not something that we're trained to much as performers, either. Being in the same sort of media milieu, wit doesn't come as easily as some of the brasher kinds of comedy.

**AN: There's an artist's image of Alfred Hitchcock that largely influenced the design of the production. What drew you to this image and how has it shaped the world of the play?**

AS: It's interesting, I can't tell you what drew me to it because I just sat down one day and I had been thinking about the play and somehow that image just came into my mind. It just rose. And I was like, yeah, alright, Hitchcock. And then the drawing that you're talking about is these kind of very spare outlines that kind of present, when taken in combination, the faintest glimmer of Alfred Hitchcock's profile. But it's unmistakably Alfred Hitchcock's profile. I tried to shove it aside because it had nothing to do with my play. And I still kept trying to think of what was going to be the physical world of this play and I kept just picturing this very elaborate Victorian world and it just left me flat and so I kept asking myself, okay, well if it's not that then what is it? And Alfred Hitchcock kept coming into my head and finally I decided to stop trying to shove him aside. If my artistic impulse is this persistent about this, then there must be something there. Having accepted it, then it started to give up its secrets. One of which is on the most surface level, this veneer that I was talking about earlier, this sense of artifice. It doesn't matter what really is behind a thing. What matters is that propriety, elegance, wit are suggested. And if they're suggested, then maybe we'll buy it and we won't dig in any further. In the way that Alfred

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## *An interview with the director*

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Hitchcock's profile is suggested, maybe we just then suggest the set, suggest the setting of this Victorian space. Then, we're on to something and we're also saying something about this sense of veneer, and certainly a hint is different from a veneer but they're related somehow.

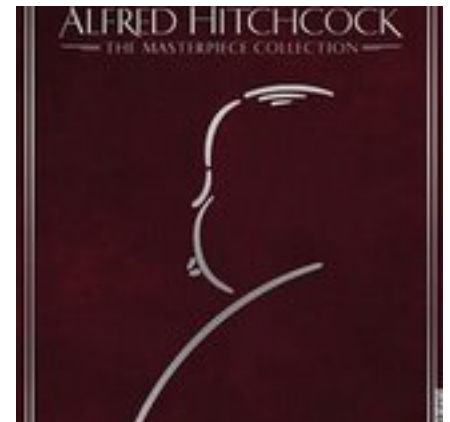
Also, I've had all along the notion, going along with this veneer, the notion that reality is malleable. In the world of this play, as long as you can prove — or even not prove, but demonstrate — that something is so then it is, it is beyond question and there is nothing to argue about. If Cecily says to the man she's just met today "we've been engaged for three months," he is certainly taken aback and wonders how it is possible but as soon as she demonstrates it by showing the entry in her diary, then it's

so, it is beyond question. There is a way in which these characters create reality by their own will and by being able to demonstrate what they want to prove. We've extrapolated that to include this notion that they generate reality by force of will entirely.

And then finally, when I read the wit and find it funny, I feel smart. I know what he's doing. I can see all of the little layers of meaning behind what he's saying. And I can tell little manipulations that he is intending which is very exciting to me because I feel there is a lot of art these days that is about making people feel stupid. I'm excited to tell an audience to feel smart. And similarly to reading the script, when I look at this sketch of Hitchcock that is so minimal and so suggestive an image, I feel smart when I see Hitchcock. Oh, I can see Hitchcock, aren't I smart? Oh, I can see

this Victorian flat even though there is only a door and a hint of a ceiling, I feel smart.

Fun is a really necessary part of life and it's as important as food, which is also important in this play. Algernon, one of the main characters, is constantly eating and I would be too if I could; I love food. So, food and fun, man. Good stuff.



Hitchcock sketch



A model of the set in Act One. It was designed by Robert Christiansen..

# Diaries in *The Importance of Being Earnest*



Megan Buskirk as Gwendolen and Leland Karn as Jack in the UMass Amherst production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (Photo by Jon Crispin)

When Algernon arrives at Jack's country estate in Act II, he finds Jack's "excessively pretty" young ward, Cecily Cardew, out in the garden avoiding her studies. Algernon pretends to be Jack's "wicked" brother Ernest, about whom Cecily has heard so many tantalizing details. Algernon states his love for Cecily and asks her to marry him. Though they have never met before, she informs him that they have been engaged for the past three months. Every detail of their relationship has been meticulously recorded in her diary:

*"To-day I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming."*

Keeping a diary was a common practice among the educated English of the Victorian era; in *The Importance of Being Earnest* both Gwendolen and Cecily carry diaries and use them to confirm their engagements to "Jack's brother Ernest." Diaries are still popular today- from England to the U.S. While a diary always sees the world through the eyes of its author, Cecily's diary is unique: It is a record of her fancies rather than her physical reality. When she becomes swept up in the handsome, mischievous image of Ernest, her guardian's (Jack's) brother, she fabricates an entire history, including an engagement, between the two of them. Even though they have never met, she writes letters and buys jewelry in Ernest's name.

In the conversation above, Cecily informs Algernon that she forgave him "before the week was out" but defends breaking off the engagement on the basis that it must have been broken off at least once for it to be "a really serious engagement."

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is a delight in part because the characters are so invested in their world, as nonsensical as that

world may be. From their ideals and fantasies, we learn so much about them. The things that "actually" happened are not nearly as exciting. How the characters view their world, what they prize above all else, becomes clear in their fantasies and desires rather than in their realities.

## EXERCISE

Imagine that your past can be anything you want. Conjure up the perfect day, moment, or person (or all three) and write a diary entry about this ideal experience. Where was it? What was the weather like? Who was there? What happened? More importantly, how did you respond?

## REFLECTION

Look over your diary entry and, as you read, consider how accurately your imagined experience represents who you are. While the events or people may be fictional, this fictional account probably sheds light on your inner workings in a way a factual biography could not.

The presentation of fantasy as fact appears throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Ideals carry a lot of weight for the principle characters. Jack and Algernon go to great lengths to remain "Ernest" in the eyes of the young ladies who adore them. The name "Ernest" may not hold much power over you, but understanding the young ladies' attraction to it helps an audience to accept the lengths to which the men will go to remain "Ernest." Does your diary entry reveal some ideal that, if it were offered to you, you would be willing to do everything you could to remain in that fantasy?



# The Nature of Beauty

**Aesthetic** n.- a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation of and appreciation of beauty; a pleasing appearance or effect: BEAUTY

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

Tenth Edition

Defining the world (or worlds) of a show is one of the most important initial phases of the production. Before the designers can build the set, light the stage, and costume the actors, the director has to develop a jumping-off point by deciding what defines the world of the play: When and where does the story take place? Will it be cramped and claustrophobic or open and free? Is it mythic or historically accurate? Is it a world of ghouls and goblins or farmers and peasants?

For UMass Theater's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the director decided that Wilde's play was a "comedy of manners" and could only exist in its original setting: Victorian England in the 1890s. Beyond that, he decided that the characters fell into three different categories: aesthetes, non-aesthetes, and exceptions to the rules. These classifications came to define everything from how the characters get what they want to the clothes on their backs.

## AESTHETES

*Aesthete- One having or affecting sensitivity to the beautiful, esp. in art*

The term comes to us from the British and its first recorded use was in 1881 (*The Importance of Being Earnest* celebrated the birth of the "aesthete" less than twenty years later, in 1895). Wilde's aesthetes are brilliantly witty, avoid work at all costs, and prize appearance above all else.

In the world we've created, the aesthetes include the four principle characters: Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen, and Cecily. We decided that these young lovers, who can pull a perfectly phrased line right out of the air at a moment's notice can do the same with a more material thing: a diary, for example. All they have to do is focus their attention on a thing and they can will it into being: the set and props for the production only exist when these characters give them their attention, and then they magically appear.

## NON-AESTHETES

*Non-Aesthetes are the opposites of Aesthetes.*

Non-Aesthetes are just what they sound- the opposite of Aesthetes. They have no sense of the delicate beauty of life and it takes a lot of hard work for them to get what they want. There is none of the easy wit or graceful appearance that is characteristic of an Aesthete.

Miss Prism, Dr. Chasuble, and Merriman are the production's Non-Aesthetes. Things do not appear out of mid-air for these characters: a pile of books or a watering can prove a daunting opponent. Even their dress reflects their toils: the colors are earthy and mundane in contrast to the jewel-toned Aesthetes.

## EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES

*Those outside the Aesthete and Non-Aesthete categories.*

In this world of wit and manners, where appearance matters most, there are those who do not fully belong to either the Aesthetes or their opposites: Lady Bracknell and Lane.

Lady Bracknell is Gwendolen's mother, a woman of great status. While she could probably overpower any of the younger Aesthetes, her power is such that she does not need to engage it as frequently as they do. One gets the sense that it's not that she can't but that she simply doesn't need to.

Lane, on the other hand, is a servant who plays the Aesthetes' game well. He is equally witty and presentational but he simply doesn't care. While they will their world into being, causing things to simply fall from the sky into their hands, Lane goes about his business with style but without that same desire.

In grouping the characters into three categories, the director was able to begin to define the characters' worlds and articulate these worlds not only for the designers but for himself and the actors as they began rehearsals. That's a lot of impact for a simple idea: Aesthetes, Non-Aesthetes, and the Exceptions to the Rules!

### FUN FACTS

- Over 200 hours of rehearsal (including technical rehearsals) were logged for this production.
- A ballet dancer was brought in to train the cast in the basics- affecting how the actors walk and stand as their characters.
- When the actors start to lose focus or energy, the director has them run a lap around the theater and do push-ups to get them back-on-track.

# *The Importance of Being Costumed*



The sketches above display the costumes for one of the couples in Act II: Algernon and Cecily. Do the outfits look like they belong together? Why or why not? What do the costumes tell you about the people wearing them? (Think about gender, time period, class, age, etc.)

Director Aaron Schmookler mentions in his interview that when he thought about how this production should look, he was partly inspired by an abstracted image of Alfred Hitchcock (see page 3 for this image). How do the costume designs by Heather Crocker Aulenback reflect that image? Once you can see the connection between the lines in the Hitchcock image and the lines accenting the suit and dress, is this similarity one of the things that allows these two costumes to compliment one another so nicely?

These questions can seem abstract and hard to answer. That's the way it should be! When you examine the costumes, set, props, lights, and sound of a production more closely, you find similarities that allow all of these very different areas to combine to form a unified world. When you watch the play, you aren't supposed to focus on these details. You simply take them all in and subconsciously make decisions about the characters or place you are seeing develop on the stage.



# The Importance of Being Costumed

Continued from previous page



Now that you've started thinking about what draws different aspects of a production together, consider what makes them different. Above are three sketches of costumes designed for the UMass Amherst Department of Theater's production of *The Importance Of Being Earnest*. How is each of these costumes different from the other two? What does that tell you about these people and what can you infer about their relationships to one another?

Heather Crocker Aulenback, our costume designer, put a lot of thought into what each and every costume would say about its wearer and how these different costumes would combine to form the world of the play:

*"When designing The Importance Of Being Earnest, one of the challenges of the design was creating three different worlds of characters: the world of the Aesthetes, the Non-Aesthetes, and the characters outside those categories. The Aesthetes are young characters who are able to manipulate the world around them, while the Non-Aesthetes, an older group, are forced to succumb to the bounds of real life, and the characters in between are a mix of the two. When designing the Aesthetes I used bright jewel toned colors, flashy accessories, and dressed them as stylish, attractive people. When designing the characters in between I chose to use slightly duller colors, but dressed them in clothing similar to the clothing of the Aesthetes. For the Non-Aesthetes, I chose to dress them in a dull muted color scheme, with very simple outfits, signifying people of a lower class, as opposed to the upper class Aesthetes."*



# Shattering the Victorian Woman Stereotype

The actresses playing Gwendolen and Cecily in UMass Amherst's production came into rehearsals with a very strict idea of what a proper Victorian woman would and would not do. As the dramaturg (someone whose responsibilities include researching the play's time and place), the director was able to use my research to help shatter some of these rules when it turned out that they just were not accurate, freeing the actors up for dramatic possibilities beyond their expectations.

Here are some of my discoveries!

—Anna Norcross

## A VICTORIAN WOMAN WOULD:

- Shake hands with another woman
- Daintily cross her legs when seated
- Flirt with her fan (from "Courting the Victorian Woman"):
  - Fan fast—I am independent
  - Fan slow—I am engaged
  - Fan with right hand in front of face —Come on
  - Fan with left hand in front of face—Leave me
  - Fan open and shut—Kiss me
  - Fan open wide—Love
  - Fan half open—Friendship
  - Fan shut—Hate
  - Fan swinging—Can I see you home?

## ONCE ENGAGED, A VICTORIAN WOMAN WOULD EVEN:

- Hold hands with her fiancée in public
- Stroll alone with him in public
- Ride alone with him
- Visit alone behind closed doors, but never overnight!
- Permit his hand around her waist
- Allow a chaste kiss

## A VICTORIAN WOMAN WOULD NOT:

- Adjust her hair or make-up in public
- Kiss or embrace in a public place
- Walk alone
- Accompany a gentleman alone without her mother's permission
- Accompany a gentleman late at night
- Ride in a closed carriage with a man who was not her father, guardian, husband, family member, or betrothed
- Receive a man in her home without a family member present
- Address a man to whom she had not been introduced

### Fun Facts

- Approximately 800 feet of cable was run for the sound design system's speakers.
- The magnets in the hanging center cluster of speakers in the theater weigh 66 pounds each.
- All sound clips were edited on PC using Cool Edit Pro.
- 12 hours of music and 2 1/2 hours of sound effects were listened to during the selection process.



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*This study guide was written by Anna Norcross, production dramaturg for the Dec. 2007 production of The Importance of Being Earnest at UMass Amherst, compiled by public relations director Anna-Maria Goossens and edited by professors Paul Walsh and Gina Kaufmann*

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