

# the Importance of being artificial

## STYLE as substance

IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

by Tara Maginnis

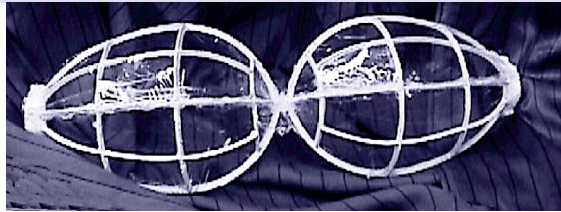
In the late Victorian era, fashion was, according to Oscar Wilde, “a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.” Wilde was a notable dress reformer in the late 1870s through the 1880s, known for wearing purple velvet knee breeches and shoulder length hair, when more conventional men dressed in black wool tube trousers, frock coats, short hair and long whiskers.

From 1888–1890, in his magazine *The Woman's World*, Wilde wrote not only of art, poetry, and socialism, but at length on the tyranny and absurdity of modern fashion. The corset, worn by nearly all adult females in the Victorian era came under particular attack, on both health and aesthetic grounds.

By the 1890s when *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written, Wilde had opted for a somewhat more conventional look for himself, but his generally poor opinion of the overstuffed absurdity of uncomfortable items like “that modern monstrosity the so-called ‘dress improver’” (bustle) continued unabated. Fashionable English dress in the late nineteenth century was almost amazingly artificial and uncomfortable. Men's fashions in-

cluded starched detachable collars, worn up to three inches high, and stiffened to the point that they maintained perfect rigidity in all weather. Matching detachable cuffs, such as those worn by Algernon in Act I, were normally starched so stiffly that Wilde could give a stage direction like this: “(Algernon, who has been carefully listening, smiles to himself, and writes the address on his shirt-cuff. Then picks up the Railway Guide.)”

In the 1890s women also began wearing detachable hard collars similar to those worn by men, or wore high collars out of the main dress fabric that were kept high and stiff with small sewn in bones or wires, turning the necks of their dresses into miniature corsets. Women's dress bore the biggest burden of dis-



Lady Bracknell's bust improver, made of a plastic light protector and shrink wrap.

comfort and artificiality: with corsets compressing the torso, “dress improvers” on the buttocks, bust improvers for the under-endowed, artificial hair to plump out one’s hairdo, high-heeled, high-lacing boots (that now would qualify as fetish gear), stockings and garters, under-drawers (bloomers) and camisoles under the corset, corset covers and one to two petticoats over the corset, then topped off with a dress (also boned for stiffness), gloves and a large hat. If this were not enough, wealthy, fashionable people like those in *Earnest* would often change their clothes several times a day. Wilde parodies this kind of excessive wardrobe extravagance in this exchange in *Earnest*, where we see the quantity of clothing Algernon requires for spending a week relaxing in the country:

**Merriman.** Mr. Ernest’s luggage, sir. I have unpacked it and put it in the room next to your own.

**Jack.** His luggage?

**Merriman.** Yes, sir. Three portmanteaus, a dressing-case, two hat boxes, and a large luncheon-basket.

**Algernon.** I am afraid I can’t stay more than a week this time.

Previously he told his manservant, Lane,

to pack “my dress clothes, my smoking jacket, and all the Bunbury suits.” Even for walks in the country or the park, fashionable English people maintained these standards. Servants, like Lane and Merriman, were obliged to wear formal semi-uniform dress in order to advertise the consequence and fashion of their employers.

In the fashionable world of the 1890s, clothing was used to demonstrate one’s wealth and freedom from work. The principles of Conspicuous Consumption and Conspicuous Leisure are best demonstrated by an excess of clothing that inhibits the wearer from engaging in any kind of manual labor. (For more on this see Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, especially chapter seven, “Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture.”) Conspicuous consumption could be achieved by wearing lots of clothing (like all the layers and items described earlier), by changing the clothing often (as Algy clearly does), and by having clothing made out of expensive or fragile, high-maintenance materials.

The characters in *Earnest* inhabit a surreal reflection of the real world of 1890s London society. They carry this notion of style over substance, and fashion over common sense until their efforts to live up to an “ideal” image of



Ben Thompson as Lady Bracknell in a wig made from draped buckram, A-B cellophane, pipe cleaners, curled ribbon, and a little bit of nylon “hair.”

a more perfect world cause them to deny reality completely, as illustrated in the following exchange between Cecily, Algernon and Gwendolen.

**Cecily:** Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian’s brother?

**Algernon:** In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you.

**Cecily:** (To Gwendolen.) That certainly seems a satisfactory explanation, does it not?

**Gwendolen:** Yes, dear, if you can believe him.

**Cecily:** I don’t. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.

**Gwendolen:** True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.

For me as the costume designer of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at University of Alaska, Fairbanks, the final sentence of this exchange sums up the main characters’ attitudes toward life. They are so thoroughly enamored with the form of being, that they make form and style “being” itself. It is as though they see all of life as a play, and themselves as more or less valuable insofar as their appearance is

Rendering of Gwendolyn Fairfax, created by the author in Photoshop.



Heather Maas as Gwendolyn Fairfax. Everyone wore gloves throughout the production, except for a few moments during Act I when Heather turned Gwendolyn's glove removal (ostensibly in order to try on her engagement ring) into a major erotic strip-tease for Jack, followed by some very ardent hand kissing. The extent to which the clothes were all-covering, rendered this small act wondrously naughty.



Christine DuBois as Cecily Cardew, in a clear plastic skirt that shows her numerous, and quite covering, undergarments.



Andrew Castle as Jack in a clear vinyl tailcoat made by Lorraine Pettit.



Rendering of John "Jack" Worthing, created by the author in Photoshop.



"Prism! Where is that baby???" Ben Thompson as Lady Bracknell and Phillip Evans as Miss Prism both wear translucent gowns that reveal the bustles and bust improvers that create their female selves.



Shannon Luster as Algernon Montcreiff with painted on hair. Actors were told that they would be wigged, so

that they need not worry about how they chose to cut their hair. This actor wanted to shave his head a week before opening, so I decided to paint on his hair instead of using a wig. It was especially funny since in the play he is asked by his inamorata, "I do hope your hair curls naturally?" To which he replies "Yes—with a little help from others."



Andrew Castle as Jack and Shannon Luster as Algy wear coats and vests that "deconstruct" their appearance by showing multiple layers at once, and revealing their pocket's contents.



Clear top hat for Jack made of hat wire, florist tape and shrink wrap.



“smart” and their words “clever” regardless of content. “All art is quite useless.” Wilde said in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and these characters seem fully determined that, as Wilde said in his “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,” “One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.”

In our production of *Earnest*, the existential obligation, to self-create meaning in a meaningless world, was key to the characters’ motives. Each main character self-creates an

(often given a surreal finish of silver or gold leaf) that there is more hard, tooth-breaking sugar coating on the outside than there is actual almond in the center.

I believe that the characters in *Earnest* not only are this way, but take great pains to be this way. Wilde said, “I sometimes think that God in creating man somewhat overestimated his ability.” The characters in *Earnest* intend to improve upon God’s version of them by wrapping themselves up in an ideal self.

male actors in their attempt to portray “ideal” femininity. Clothing for these characters was not merely disguise, but the essence of a reinvented self: You are “Earnest” if you claim to be; Lady Bracknell is a Lady (not a man) because she dresses as one.

Our actors were wonderfully tolerant of the costumes’ many layers, and of uncomfortable items like period corsets, hard plastic collars, and hot plastic garments. Uniformly they put up with these items that restricted

My central metaphor for the costumes in this play was that of a wedding favor... wrapped in a combination of fluffy bridal illusion, cellophane and/or lace... often trimmed with white silk flowers, or decorated with objects like

plastic doves holding rings in their beaks, plastic glass slippers and lacy hearts.

ideal, and then attempts to live up to that ideal, no matter what common sense obstacles intrude.

They are all very like a bride, so enamored of the ideal of love and marriage, that she agrees to marry the first man who offers, and then concentrates all her energy and purpose on having the perfect wedding. A perfect dress is made, a perfect selection of music is chosen, perfect decorations are put up, and a perfect cake sits amidst the guests at a perfect reception. Everyone cries sentimental tears.

Anatoly Antohin, the director of this production, said that he wanted everyone (except the servants) in summer white, à la Fanny and Alexander, as if at the very beginning of the play everyone was ready for a wedding. Plot complications ensue for three acts, and when reality is tamed and forced to conform to everyone’s wishes by the Act III curtain, the weddings can go on.

My central metaphor for the costumes, therefore, was wedding favors. A wedding favor is a small object, usually a group of three to five Jordan Almonds, wrapped in a combination of fluffy bridal illusion (fine net), cellophane and/or lace. They are often trimmed with white silk flowers, or decorated with objects like plastic doves holding rings in their beaks, plastic glass slippers, lacy hearts, or some over-blown combination of all of these. They are given to guests at the reception, and as any child will tell you, after you unwrap them, the contents seem either disappointing, or inedible. Even when you think you get to the core, you discover upon biting into the candy

Our costumes in *Earnest* took the basic forms of upper class English dress of the era 1895-1900. However, to “push” this metaphor we constructed them rather oddly. Firstly, everything was in shades of white. (The servant characters were styled realistically after servants’ dress c. 1895.) In general, the outermost layer of the costumes was translucent net, lace, plastic or chiffon, so that all the complex inner layers were revealed. However, with the sheer quantity of decoration and layers, no skin showed other than the face. One’s impression was of clothing, on top of clothing, on top of clothing, excess piled on excess, until one might imagine that unwrapping the character might make the person disappear altogether. The wrappings, in each layer, were also excessive; There were silk flowers on lace on ruffles on clear plastic, with even much of the hair (wigs) being made of cellophane, ribbons and roses. In the case of Algy, his hair was simply painted on his head in white and violet makeup.

When Jack enters in the middle of Act II dressed in mourning black, he sticks out like a sore thumb (even with a translucent organza black tailcoat). Everyone asks him to change, as though his variance from the excessively romantic cheerfulness of bridal white is an offense or social blunder.

Gender too, was treated as a matter of clothing. Two of our female characters—Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell—were male actors (as was a scene-changing maid). The clear costume parts showed the “bust improvers” and bustles that assisted both our male and fe-

their movements, and were stiff and hot to wear, because, they said, the garments helped them transform into people who prized style over substance. Rarely have I put actors into such torturous outfits; and rarely have I received so few complaints.

The translucency and shine of the costumes (aided by lots of cheap plastic) gave us a cellophane wrapped look that made the clothing, hats and hair seem insubstantial, even somewhat ghostlike. As if to say these people were brought to life by Wilde in 1895, and they continue to live, like airy spirits, as long as people wish to believe in “Ladies” and “Gentlemen,” in “Love” and “Ideals,” as long as wit is prized, and romantic novels have the “good end happily, and the bad, unhappily.” ♦

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## WORKS CITED

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