

## Sierra Madre Playhouse Regales Us With “The Importance of Being Earnest”

By Fran Syverson

It was funny when he wrote it, and it remains the most enduring of Oscar Wilde’s plays, this satire on the manners and mannerisms of Victorian times. That “The Importance of Being Earnest” still tickles our funnybone is a tribute to Wilde’s astute insight into human nature.



Who could attach such importance to the name “Ernest” that only if a gentleman bears that name would she marry him? Only a fickle, egocentric, pretentious lady—or rather, *two* such ladies. So the young men in question, Algernon and Jack, forgot the wisdom of the old adage and each wove that tangled web and “practiced to deceive.”

Each has created a fiction that allows him to get away from certain facets of his life from time to time. A country gentleman, Jack, invents a brother named Ernest. Trips to London to see his “brother” are ruses that allow him to visit lovely Gwendolen (Jessica Culaciati), with whom he’s become so enamored he is ready to propose marriage. Brett Hamilton plays the love-struck beau.

But first he must undergo a credentials quiz by Gwendolen’s mother, a snobbishly officious Lady Bracknell. Wilde’s lines were written to taunt the Victorian snobberies of the era, and Koni McCurdy as Lady Bracknell embodies them to the hilt. She is variously snappish and simpering as she checks off each of Jack’s marriageability traits. With her finger-wagging and tart hypocrisies, McCurdy steals the show whenever she’s onstage.

Alas! Jack doesn’t pass her test, for he has no parentage. He was a foundling.

Meantime, Jason Perlman’s Algernon (affectionately known as Algy) teases his pal Jack into acknowledging that he has an attractive ward, Cecily, whose whereabouts he won’t reveal. When Jack inadvertently mentions his country address during Lady Bracknell’s questioning, Algy makes quick note of it. He heads there in hopes of meeting Cecily.



As indeed he does. We find Cecily resisting at every turn the tutoring being offered by her governess, Miss Prism (Osa Danam.) When Algernon appears, it is instant attraction between the two young people—and an immediate engagement, for he has arrived as Ernest, Jack’s fictional brother. It seems that Cecily, too, is enchanted with the name Ernest. Betsy Reisz plays the impetuous Cecily.



The light-hearted, convoluted plot races through variations on the Ernest-name theme. Cecily and Gwendolen greet each other with feigned affection that evaporates when they learn that each is engaged to Ernest. Alas! How could he be such a cad as to plight his troth on bended knee to two women? It’s easy for us to see, of course, for their fiancés are not the same man, nor is either of them named Ernest.

Which means the men are both liars! Gwendolen and Cecily join forces to confront them. They’re mollified, however, when they learn the fellows had both arranged to have the Rev. Canon Chasuble rechristen them—Ernest!

Naturally, all ends well, or even better than well, in surprise twists and revelations. Curtain!

Implicit in the title is the superficiality of the entire plot, rather like much ado over nothing. It’s Oscar Wilde poking fun at—and poking holes in—Victorian class snobbery and hypocrisy. He plumbs the depths of shallowness with great glee, and we get to enjoy watching him do it.

Director Patricia Wylie chose actors perfect for their roles. The young ladies are satisfyingly superficial, the young gentlemen devious. Phil Apoian as Merriman the butler and T.G.Cody as the manservant Lane

are appropriately deferential while still managing facial clues to their thoughts. Richard Large plays the somewhat rascally cleric with élan.

Victoria Profitt's set places us immediately in the late 1800s, with its wine-hued damask drapes, a wooden hat tree, sparse but formal furnishings and a hand bell. Tall stylistic panels frame the stage. But watch for the quick transformations from a London flat...to a garden...to a manor house drawing room. Especially note the clever quick-change of the windows!



Lavish period costumes enter with Jack's arrival in a gray cutaway that emphasizes and enhances his height. Lady Bracknell wears ensembles as definitive and fussily detailed as befits her personality. As costume designer, Jeri Deiotte chose fitted satiny gowns with high necklines and leg of mutton sleeves for Cecily and Gwendolen. Miss Prism is properly prim in a black and white outfit complete with a brimmed hat. Traditional garb for the rector, butler, and manservant define their roles.

Michael Dessin is the stage manager. Profitt's construction crew comprises Don Bergmann, master carpenter, along with producer Ward Calaway and Justin Larsen. Barry Schwam is sound designer, and Steve Shaw the sound operator. Lighting designer is Kristen Cox. Karen Young and Schyler Gamick are light operators, with Chris Pavan, Sky Quin and Larsen in their crew.

Patricia Liverman designed the poster art. Anne Marie Atwan and Ruth Thompson are in charge of properties. Calaway and John Johnson did the program design and, with Larsen, handled production photography. Philip Sokoloff is publicist. Orlando Mendoza is house manager.

To laugh at "The Importance of Being Earnest," plan on being at the Sierra Madre Playhouse stage any weekend through Sept. 26. Curtain time is 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. for Sunday matinees. Admission is \$20 general, \$17 for seniors (65+) and students (13-18), and \$12 for children 12 years and under.

The Sierra Madre Playhouse is located at 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. Free parking is available in city lots. Restaurants on Baldwin Avenue and Sierra Madre Boulevard offer pre-theater dining for every taste. For reservations or more information, phone (626) 355-4318, or visit the website, [www.sierramadreplayhouse.org](http://www.sierramadreplayhouse.org), for information or for online ticketing.

*Photo credits: John Johnson, Justin Larsen, Ward Calaway.*

1. Betsy Reisz (l.), Jessica Culaciati.
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3. Jason Perlman (l.), T.G. Cody.
4. Jessica Culaciati (l.), Koni McCurdy