Oscar Wilde’s
The Importance of Being Earnest

SHAKESPEARE THEATRE COMPANY
FIRST FOLIO:
TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCE GUIDE
Consistent with the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s central mission to be the leading force in producing and preserving the highest quality classic theatre, the Education Department challenges learners of all ages to explore the ideas, emotions and principles contained in classic texts and to discover the connection between classic theatre and our modern perceptions. We hope that this First Folio: Teacher and Student Resource Guide will prove useful to you while preparing to attend The Importance of Being Earnest.

First Folio provides information and activities to help students form a personal connection to the play before attending the production. First Folio contains material about the playwrights, their world and their works. Also included are approaches to explore the plays and productions in the classroom before and after the performance.

First Folio is designed as a resource both for teachers and students. All Folio activities meet the “Vocabulary Acquisition and Use” and “Knowledge of Language” requirements for the grades 8-12 Common Core English Language Arts Standards. We encourage you to photocopy these articles and activities and use them as supplemental material to the text.

**Enjoy the show!**

The First Folio Teacher and Student Resource Guide for the 2013-2014 Season was developed by the Shakespeare Theatre Company Education Department:

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Algernon Moncrieff receives his close friend, John Worthing, whom he knows as Ernest, and who has come to propose to Algernon’s cousin, Gwendolen Fairfax. Algernon, however, refuses his consent until he explains why his cigarette case bears an inscription signed to “little Cecily,” from “her dear Uncle Jack.” “Ernest” confesses his double life: in the country, he goes by the name of Jack and cares for his young ward, the heiress Cecily Cardew. In the city, he lives the libertine lifestyle of his fictional younger brother, Ernest. Algernon confesses a similar double-life: he visits his fictional invalid friend Bunbury whenever he wishes to avoid social obligations.

Gwendolen and her formidable mother Lady Bracknell arrive. As Algernon distracts his aunt, Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts, but seems to love him mostly for his name of Ernest. Jack resolves to be rechristened as “Ernest” as soon as possible. Discovering them compromised, Lady Bracknell interviews Jack as a prospective suitor. Horrified to learn he was adopted after being discovered as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station, Lady Bracknell forbids any further contact. Gwendolen, swooning, promises “Ernest” her undying love. Jack gives her his address in the country, as Algernon secretly writes it on his cuff.

In the country, Cecily is studying with her governess, Miss Prism. Algernon arrives, pretending to be Ernest Worthing. Long fascinated by the black sheep younger brother—like Gwendolen, she is particularly besotted with the name—Cecily falls for Algernon, who, like Jack, makes plans with the rector, Canon Chasuble, to rechristen himself as “Ernest.” Meanwhile, Jack arrives in full mourning, dressed head to foot in black, and announces his brother’s death in Paris of a severe chill. Jack’s story is undermined by Algernon’s presence, and the two friends withdraw into the house, quarreling. Having run away from home, Gwendolen arrives. She meets Cecily, and both women learn that each is engaged to “Ernest.” When Jack and Algernon reappear, their deceptions are exposed.

Arriving in pursuit of Gwendolen, Lady Bracknell is astonished to learn of Algernon’s engagement. Jack, Cecily’s guardian, reveals her trust fund, but vows he will consent only if Lady Bracknell agrees to his own marriage to Gwendolen—something she declines to do. The impasse is broken by the entrance of Miss Prism, whom Lady Bracknell recognizes as the nursemaid who, years earlier, had taken a baby for a walk and never returned. Miss Prism explains that she had placed the baby in a handbag, which she had left at Victoria Station. Jack produces the very same handbag. He is the lost baby, the elder son of Lady Bracknell’s late sister, and thus indeed Algernon’s elder brother. Having acquired respectable relations, he is acceptable as a suitor for Gwendolen after all.

What, however, is his real name? Lady Bracknell informs Jack that, as the first-born, he would have been named after his father, General Moncrieff. Jack examines the army lists and discovers that his father’s name—and hence his own name—was in fact Ernest. Pretense was reality all along. As the happy couples embrace, Lady Bracknell complains: “My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.” “On the contrary, Aunt Augusta,” he replies, “I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of being Earnest.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>WHO’S WHO in The Importance of Being Earnest</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>JACK WORTHING</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>A seemingly respectable young gentleman leading a double life. In the country, his family calls him Jack, but in London, he is known as Ernest. He is in love with Gwendolen Fairfax and is guardian to Cecily Cardew.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gregory Woodell</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Daughter of Lady Bracknell and in love with Jack, who she knows as Ernest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vanessa Morosco</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CECILY CARDEW</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jack’s young ward. Cecily is in love with Jack’s imaginary brother, Ernest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katie Fabel</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LADY BRACKNELL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother of Gwendolen and aunt to Algernon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sian Phillips</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MISS PRISM</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cecily's governess.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patricia Conolly</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DR. CHASUBLE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The reverend on Jack’s country estate, the Manor House.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floyd King</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MERRIMAN</strong></td>
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<td>Algernon’s manservant.</td>
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<td>John O’Creagh</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LANE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The butler at Jack’s country estate, the Manor House.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Todd Scofield</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
No comedy in history has been as concerned with the issue of pleasure itself as Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Everything that happens in this play turns on the question of pleasure, as one character after another affirms the attraction of it, interrogates the meaning of it, and either announces or denounces the goal of pursuing it. A declaration about pleasure sets the action in motion, as Algernon asks what brings Jack from his home in the country to London. “Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?” is his reply.

In turn-of-the-century England different kinds of pleasure were available depending on one’s gender, and Wilde’s audiences were likely to fill in their mental pictures of what living for pleasure meant according to their own experience. Certainly, it was difficult for women to indulge themselves; attention to the demands of respectability overshadowed their lives far more than those of men and limited what they could do—or, at least, could be seen doing. Not only were women required to guard their own reputations, but to pay careful attention to the moral character of everyone and everything around them.

For working-class women employed as domestic servants, loss of reputation could mean being turned out “without a character” and being left to perish on the streets. But for women of the elite classes too, in Wilde’s day, becoming the subject of gossip could mean social death. The majority of women confined themselves to pleasures such as lavish eating, dressing, entertaining, and spending that were consistent with their roles as showpieces. Over time, however, pleasures like these were often indistinguishable from indolence and stifling boredom.

Far more active pleasures were open to gentlemen. They could explore every facet of what the world’s greatest metropolis had to offer. Not only did the West End theatres beckon to them nightly, but so did the music halls—sites of raucous and risqué entertainment. Before and after these indulgences, gentlemen could repair to splendid restaurants or to their clubs. When the usual rounds of drinking and playing card games or billiards grew wearisome, men could travel abroad, unencumbered by their wives and families. There they could “Bunbury” to their hearts’ content. Oscar Wilde frequently did so, leaving his wife Constance and their two boys behind.

In 1894, the year of the composition of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was determined to enjoy himself as never before. Wilde felt empowered to display the “reckless extravagance” that he assigned to the fictional Jack and Algernon of *Importance*. He could at last eschew such pleasureless activities as journalism, along with the tedium of home life and could put more of his energy into extramarital affairs with young men, especially with Lord Alfred Douglas.

In the company of Douglas, a hot-tempered poet, Wilde went Bunburying to the point of indiscretion. Not only did Society take note, but so did Douglas’s outraged father, the Marquess of Queensberry. Seeing Wilde lionized, after the triumphant opening of *Importance* on February 14, 1895, was the last straw for this violent and vengeful figure. On February 19, he invaded one of Wilde’s places of pleasurable escape from domesticity, the Albemarle Club, and left an accusatory card that resulted in a catastrophic libel trial—and that led eventually to Wilde’s own prosecution and conviction on the grounds of “gross indecency.”

Wilde’s post-imprisonment works, following his sentence of two years at hard labor were filled with sorrow. He met his end at age forty-six in exile, breathing his last in a cheap Paris hotel room. Oscar Wilde’s fate was an unspeakably cruel one, especially for someone who had given such delight to so many playgoers and readers—never more so than through his masterful final comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. To see it staged anew, we continue to flock to theaters around the world, again and again. What brings us there? “Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere?”

This essay has been edited for the First Folio. The full essay can be found online in the GUIDE TO THE SEASON’S PLAYS e-book, available for Kindle and Nook.
Class is defined as social or economic hierarchies that attempt to divide and separate groups of people. Class distinctions in Britain were solidified during the Victorian Era (the period ruled by Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901). In legal terms, Britain had two classes: the aristocrats (those who inherited land) and the commoners (everyone else); however, most Victorians divided commoners further into the middle class who earned a salary and the working class who earned a daily wage performing hard labor.

In addition to land inheritance, social class was also determined by income, birth, and family connections. Women’s social class was derived from their husbands. Social class affected every person’s daily life, including their manners, speech, clothing, education and values.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, even though he was born an orphan, Jack Worthing’s position as a landowner in the country was typical of the aristocracy. Jack inherited a house and a staff of servants to manage. Jack is also expected to engage in local affairs, promote local charities, and serve as a justice of the peace. Life in the country for the aristocracy included living in a manor house with stables, gardens, and extensive land for a short time during the year. Houses required an extensive staff of servants to maintain them. The aristocracy would spend their leisure time playing sports, visiting neighbors, hunting, and attending balls and festivals. Life in the city for the aristocracy was spent in a mansion in a fashionable part of London.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, class is revealed at every turn, from the potential presence of servants at any moment to the obligation to entertain with tea, sherry and cucumber sandwiches to Lady Bracknell’s inspection of Cecily’s appearance.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**
- What moments in the play are concerned with appearance and manners?
- How do rules about social behavior create the comedy in the play?
- What is the role of servants in the play? What does Wilde say by including them when he does?
- What is the relationship between class and money in the play?

**Performance Activity**

Explore societal roles and how class influences how characters treat each other.

- Students stand in a line with the student at the head of the line prepared to create a clear character with a well-defined social class in society.
- The student tells the class who they are, acting in character:
  - “I am a greedy business man who cares little for those less fortunate than me.”
- The next student in line will create a new character with a well-defined social class that is ready to enter the scene. Upon entering the student will say, “Ahhh Hai!” and offer something that will give the first student a reason to exit, for example:
  - “I am a scared servant and there is a man from the IRS at the door who says he needs to see you immediately.”
- The two characters will interact for a few moments (no more than thirty seconds) and then the first student will exit.
- The next student in line will create another character that will chase the student who is left in the scene away, such as: “I run the Prime Minister’s residence and I would like to offer you a job that pays twice as much. You must report to the Prime Minister’s house immediately.”
- The game continues until everyone in the class has had a chance to create a character.

Challenge students to create characters that hold both high and low places in the society; a character with a lower place in society can easily make an offer that will force a high character to exit. Also, students have a tendency to offer predominately negative incentives to get their scene partner exit. Challenge students to think of some positive things that would make someone want to leave a scene/situation.
Earnestness, seriousness and respectability were terms indicating Victorian values. Earnest people pursued pleasure and recreation for health and rejuvenation, but did not over-indulge. Earnestness also meant having patience, wearing modest clothing, and using proper language. Serious people valued being sober and honest and were not vain or frivolous. Respectable families had neat clothing, a clean house and decent manners. Other values promoted in books, magazines, sermons and self-help organizations centered around economic success: timeliness, orderliness, initiative, and attention to detail.

Women maintained respectability by volunteering (but never working), getting married and managing the home. Women were expected to demonstrate obedience and refinement, catering to the needs of their husband and children. Using proper names was important; no unmarried girl would allow herself to be addressed by her first name before her engagement.

Gentlemen were born into the aristocracy, but would no longer be considered gentlemen if they were publicly scandalous or dishonorable. Foppishness (extremely genteel manners) was abhorred. Gentlemen were expected to be courteous, social, disinterested in others’ personal affairs and independent; they should never cheat at cards or question another gentleman’s honesty.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Do the characters in *Earnest* live up the Victorian values of earnestness and respectability? Why or why not? What statement does the play make about these values?

- Do the male and female characters in the play live up to the gender expectations of the Victorian era? Why or why not?
In the late nineteenth century, artists and critics were spreading the gospel of art without meaning, art for the sake of beauty: art for art’s sake. Attention was paid to the beauty found in the smallest details of nature, with the figures displayed in landscapes of rich colors, floral beds and intricate architectures.

Oscar Wilde embodied the Aesthetic movement by making his life his art. He was known early in his career for wearing velvet breeches and coat, keeping his hair long and carrying a sunflower around as an aesthetic accessory. His lectures exalted the Aesthetic way of life: “We spend our days, each one of us, in looking for the secret of life” he shared. “Well, the secret of life is in art.”

Art in the “High Aestheticism” period at the end of the century grew less naturalistic. The artists of the movement were inspired by East Asia. James McNeill Whistler’s Peacock Room, on permanent display at the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery, showcases his eastern influences, as he covered the room with deep colors, golden peacocks and Chinese porcelain.

As his own work of art, Wilde was continuing to evolve his own personality. His new look tossed aside the colorful velvet. Instead he dressed in black silk, complete with top hat, and cut his locks to a short, Roman-inspired cut. Wilde’s art of personality and desire of beauty remained the central point of Wilde’s life, and his art. Nowhere is that more clear than in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the play is built around the beauty of words, fashion and pretense. With his last play, as he was unknowingly on the brink of the final period of his life, Wilde embraced the elevation of aesthetics transcending the world around him and touching audiences for generations to come.

This production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* embraces the aesthetics of the period, being focused above all on beauty. The set design and costume design are lush beyond what real life displays. The set designer was inspired by Whistler’s Peacock Room and the costume designer takes the costumes of the period and elevates them to their most glamorous.

**Design Activities**

**ACTIVITY #1**

Pretend you are a set designer designing a modern day morning-room. Morning-rooms during the Victorian era were the rooms in upper class homes that got the most morning light, with a place to sit to read the paper and drink tea. First, draw a sketch of what a morning-room in your own home would realistically look like. Think about all of the furniture in the room and where it would go. Think about anything else that belongs in the room.

Next, imagine you are a member of the Aesthetic movement. Draw and color a fully designed rendering of your morning-room inspired by an Aesthetic approach. Which details would you add or change to bring out the room’s beauty? Focus your design on discovering the room’s decadent beauty and style rather than its usefulness.

**ACTIVITY #2**

Oscar Wilde became his own work of art. Consider what you wore to school today. What do you think the clothing you wear says about you? Write a couple of sentences describing your clothing and how they reflect your personality.

Pretend you are an Aesthetic artist. Your job is to find and highlight beauty in everything. What would you wear on a daily basis? Draw a picture, write a few sentences or have a conversation about how to turn yourself into a work of art.
Classroom Activities

Wilde’s Wit

Entering America for the first time, Oscar Wilde reportedly told a customs agent, “I have nothing to declare but my genius.” There is no mistaking Wilde’s wit. Epigrams, paradox and wordplay are the building blocks of his works.

An epigram is a terse, sage, or witty and often paradoxical saying. A paradox is a statement with two parts that seem to contradict one another, but also make sense or prove true when read together.

Wilde’s paradoxes upset the status quo and reversed sayings and ideas that his audience knew well. His stated philosophy for The Importance of Being Earnest reveals a rebellion against society:

“We should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

Wilde’s attraction to epigrams was two-fold. Words were sacred to him; each word was perfectly placed in the phrase, each phrase linked to the next. Each one-liner was its own work of art. Forget the humor - consider the contrast, symmetry and sound of the following:

“He atones for being occasionally somewhat over-dressed, by being always absolutely over-educated.”

Look closely at this sentence. Where do you see Wilde repeat words and sounds? Why do you think he does that? Does the sentence end differently than you expected it to? Why is that funny?

The best of Wilde’s epigrams play directly with tired, cliché ideas or phrases. Wilde had an encyclopedic knowledge of literary history: he studied all the great English writers and poets, was devoted to French literature, and won awards at Oxford and Trinity College, Dublin for his studies in Greek and Latin. He constantly references his artistic heritage for humor and context. For Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players” but for Wilde,

“The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.”

Now Test Your Wit...

A pun is a humorous way of using a word or phrase so that more than one meaning is suggested. Puns are a literary tool that Wilde and many other writers used often for comedic effect. For example, in this Wilde epigram: “Women give to men the very gold of their lives, but they invariably want it back in such very small change.”

Here are some other examples:

``Ben Battle was a soldier bold, And used to war’s alarms: But a cannonball took off his legs, So he laid down his arms.” - Thomas Hood

I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger. Then it hit me.

I used to have a fear of hurdles, but I got over it.

Did you hear about the guy who got hit in the head with a can of soda? He was lucky it was a soft drink.

A new type of broom came out, it is sweeping the nation.

To write with a broken pencil is pointless.

There was once a cross-eyed teacher who couldn’t control his pupils.

I did a theatrical performance about puns. Really it was just a play on words.

Which letter of the alphabet has the most water? The C.

How does the moon cut his hair? Eclipse it.

In groups two or three, have students write their own puns. Give students a prize for the funniest pun or the most original pun or for the group who comes up with the most puns. You can also have a basket of words that the students can pull from for inspiration.
Classroom Activities

128 Punch Lines

The goal of this game is to come up with a great pun to create the punch line of a joke, using language in a creative way.

Start with the framework of a joke:

128 _____ walk into a bar. The bartender says we don't serve ______ here.
The ____________ says insert punch line.

Break into groups of two or three. Have the class suggest nouns. Choose a few and have each group try to complete the joke with the selected word. This can be a competition and the class can choose the winner.

Example:

128 bananas walk into a bar. The bartender says we don't serve bananas here.
The bananas say 

Status Train

Understanding the strictness of the societal hierarchy in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can often times prove challenging for students. With “Status Train” you can give your students the opportunity to experience how one’s status affects how they handle a situation and deal with other people.

- Four actors are chosen to be in the “status train.” The student at the head of the status train will have the highest status and the last student in line will have the lowest.
- The class will come up with a task that the high status character needs completed. The highest status character will ask the next person in line to do this.
- The second highest status person will ask someone else to do the task. The passing off of the task continues until it gets to the lowest status character.
- The low status character will mess the task up and explain what happened to their superior. Everyone will have to do this and no one is allowed to blame the person behind them.
- The game ends with the highest status character handing down some sort of punishment for the task not being completed correctly.

Before students play, inform them that they are not allowed to blame the person behind them in line; it was their responsibility to complete the task and they did not get it done. Also, encourage the students in the middle of the status train to have a short dialog with one another; they do not need to rush the information up and down the train.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How did the actors show they had high or low status? What type of physical and vocal choices did the actors make to show their status?
- Who has high and low status in our own lives? Do people’s status change, like in the game, depending on who they are talking to and where they are? If so, give an example.
- Who has the highest and lowest status in *Earnest*? Do any of the characters in *Earnest* see their status lowered and raised throughout the course of the play?
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What makes *Importance of Being Earnest* funny? The characters? The language? The story? Did you find different things funny when you saw the play and when you saw it performed?

- How do the characters in the play mirror each other? Who reflects who? Compare and contrast each pair. Why do you think Wilde created these parallels?

- Do you find any of these characters to be realistic? Why or why not?

- As members of the upper classes, Lady Bracknell and the young couples have very definite ideas of what is wicked, inappropriate, or acceptable behavior. Find examples of what Lady Bracknell denounces and what she praises. What is Wilde saying about the customs and morals of the upper classes?

- Why do you think Wilde wrote *Earnest*? Does the play have a message? Is the play trying to make a point about society, or just trying to be funny? Why do you think so?

- In your opinion, what is the purpose of art? To be beautiful? To have a message? To reflect the real world? Where do you think *The Importance of Being Earnest* fits in this?

Resource List

Books on Oscar Wilde and his time period

Websites
-󰀃 AsidesOnline, Shakespeare Theatre Company—http://asides.shakespearetheatre.org/
  Articles and information about STC’s production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- Reading Wilde, Querying Spaces: An Exhibition Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Trials of Oscar Wilde—http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/exhibits/wilde/00main.htm
  Articles, images and primary sources on several topics from Wilde’s life.

Standards of Learning

The activities and question sequences found in the Folio supports grade 8-12 Common Core standards in English Language Arts. Primary content areas addressed include but are not limited to:

READING LITERATURE
- Key Ideas and Details
- Craft and Structure
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
- Range of Reading and Complexity

WRITING
- (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-12.2 )

SPEAKING AND LISTENING
- (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8-12.1 )

LANGUAGE
- (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-12.3,4, 4 )
The phrase “theatre etiquette” refers to the special rules of behavior that are called for when attending a theatre performance.

Above all, it is important to remember that the actors on stage can see and hear you at the same time you can see and hear them. Be respectful of the actors and your fellow audience members by being attentive and observing the general guidelines below:

**Before you go:**

- *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes place before cell phones and other fun technology existed. Please help us create the environment by turning off your cell phone and other electronic devices (iPods, games, etc.). Not only will it be historically inaccurate, but it can be very distracting, not to mention embarrassing, when a cell phone goes off during a performance. The lights from cell phones and other electronic devices are also a big distraction, so please no text messaging.

- We’re sure that you would never stick your gum underneath your chair or spill food and drinks, but because this theatre is so new and beautiful, we ask that you spit out your gum before entering the theatre and leave all food and drinks in the lobby or the coat check.

- We don’t want you to miss out on any of the action of the play, so please visit the restroom before the performance begins.

**During the performance:**

- Please feel free to have honest reactions to what is happening on stage. You can laugh, applaud and enjoy the performance. However, please don’t talk during the performance; it is extremely distracting to other audience members and the actors. Save discussions for intermission and after the performance.

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**Thoughts about the importance of being an audience member from Shakespeare Theatre Company Artistic Director Michael Kahn**

“When you go to the theatre, you are engaging with other living, breathing human beings, having an immediate human response. In the theatre you sense that all of this may never happen again in this particular way.

As a member of the audience, you are actually part of how that’s developing—you have a hand in it ... You are part of a community where you are asked to be compassionate, perhaps to laugh with or grieve as well as to understand people, lives and cultures different from your own.”