

How did Oscar Wilde's personal life influence the plot and performances of his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*?

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Theatre programme for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895

What is it?

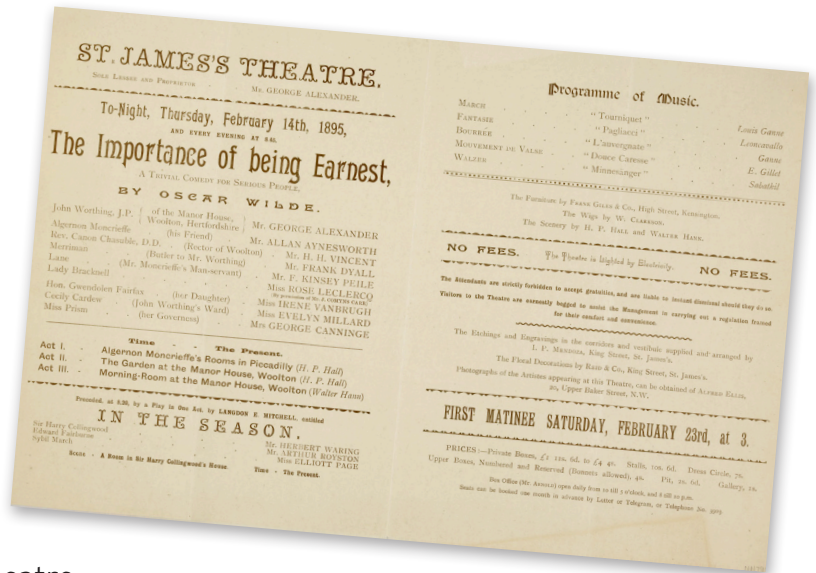
Oscar Wilde was an Anglo-Irish novelist, playwright and a celebrity in late 19th century London. This is a theatre programme for the first performance of his play called *The Importance of Being Earnest* at St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. The programme includes the full cast list and general information about the theatre. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was Oscar Wilde's fourth West End hit in only three years.

The plot of the play revolves around the mischief caused by Algernon Moncrief and his friend Jack Worthing as they both lead 'double lives' and invent characters to justify how they act when in the respectable countryside, or the thrilling society of London.

Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

The Importance of Being Earnest was a huge success until Wilde was embroiled in a scandal. Despite being a popular and talented playwright, he was not protected from Victorian laws which forbade and condemned homosexuality.

From 1891, Oscar Wilde had an affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. In 1895, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensbury, discovered the affair and accused Wilde of homosexuality. In turn, Wilde sued the Marquis for libel. The resulting court case quickly turned into one against Oscar Wilde's homosexuality, and the scandal forced *The Importance of Being Earnest* to close as theatre goers stayed away in disgust. During the case, Queensbury revealed love letters which Wilde had sent to his son and read out homoerotic passages in his works, leading Wilde to be sentenced to two years of hard labour for gross indecency.



Theatre programme, 1895

Today we might refer to London's LGBTQ+ community. It's important to remember that this is modern terminology that would not have been used at the beginning of the 20th century.

Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Present your students with a brief summary of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, focusing on the aspect of 'double lives'.

In what ways could Jack and Algernon's behaviour reflect Oscar Wilde's own experiences?

Students might consider these questions:

- The play isn't about being earnest (honest) at all, but instead about two men who are lying about a character called 'Ernest' in order to lead double lives. How much does the title reflect Wilde's own life?
- Homosexuality was viewed as deviant in the 19th century. Like Jack and Algernon, gay men had to hide aspects of their lives. How can this context add to your understanding of the play?
- Oscar Wilde hid his relationships with men from public view until they were revealed by someone else. How is this similar to the characters in the play?
- Wilde was married while having his affair with Douglas. Does this count as a double life? Why?
- Jack and Algernon's secrets lead to a positive outcome. Can the same be said for Wilde?

If you have more time, you could also link this to other works of Wilde, or those referred to in the trial. For example:

- During Wilde's trial it was claimed that the premise of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), where an older artist is attracted to the beauty of a younger man whose portrait he paints, has homoerotic undertones
- Lord Alfred Douglas had written a poem called *Two Loves* in 1892, the last line of which reads 'The love that dare not speak its name'. This was presented as evidence during Wilde's trial as a reference to their secret relationship.

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