

BEING EARNEST

A Modern Day One-Act Adaptation
of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest"

by
Bradley Hayward

PREVIEW ONLY!

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haywardb@hotmail.com

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SYNOPSIS

This one-act adaptation brings Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" into a modern day prep school setting with teenage characters. High schoolers Jack and Algernon invent fake identities to escape their responsibilities and chase their highly romantic, trend setting sweethearts. When their lies collide at an elite boarding school, a hilarious showdown erupts until an unexpected identity reveal settles the score.

TIME

The present.

SETTING

SCENE 1: Algernon's dorm room at The City Academy.

SCENE 2: The courtyard of The Manor School.

SCENE 3: The courtyard of The Manor School.

RUNNING TIME

30-35 minutes.

CHARACTERS

(3m, 4f)

JACK WORTHING (17, m): A high-achieving student at The Manor School.

ALGERNON "ALGY" MONCRIEFF (17, m): A stylish student at The City Academy.

GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX (17, f): Algy's unapologetically elite cousin.

LADY BRACKNELL (40s, f): Gwendolen's overbearing mother.

CECILY CARDEW (16, f): Jack's self-absorbed ward at The Manor School.

MISS PRISM (40s, f): A prim and proper English teacher at The Manor School.

PRINCIPAL CHASUBLE (50s, m): The bumbling principal at The Manor School.

SCENE 1

(SETTING: ALGERNON'S luxury dorm room at The City Academy. It features a velvet sofa, an espresso machine, and a ring light on a tripod.)

(AT RISE: ALGERNON lounges on the sofa, aggressively scrolling on his phone while eating mini-muffins from a silver tray. JACK enters, looking effortlessly debonair. He runs a hand through his hair and flashes a cocky smirk as he sets down a Starbucks cup.)

ALGERNON

Ernest! What a sight. You look entirely too accountable. It's deeply aging.

JACK

I've been in transit, Algy. The train from the suburbs is a psychological experiment designed to destroy human dignity. But fortunately, my bone structure is resilient.

(He collapses smoothly into an armchair.)

Where is Gwendolen?

ALGERNON

Oh, she's with my aunt, checking the credentials of the barista in the dining hall. Apparently, Lady Bracknell won't drink anything unless the oat milk has a pedigree. What brings you to town?

JACK

Pleasure, Algy, pleasure. What else should bring anyone anywhere? Eating your mini-muffins, I see.

ALGERNON

Kindly don't touch them. They're for Gwendolen. She's my cousin, and I made them for her. You have no right to my pastries. You aren't even family.

JACK

(Chuckles)

But I'm your friend!

ALGERNON

My friend is named *Ernest*. You told me your name was Ernest.

JACK

It is Ernest. I'm Ernest everywhere excellence is required.

ALGERNON

Then why does your iPad say otherwise?

JACK

(Freezes)

My iPad? I told you I lost it at the transit hub.

ALGERNON

You did. But I found it here, under a stack of textbooks. And I spent the last few days trying to bypass your facial recognition, but I simply don't have the cheekbones for it. I finally guessed your pass code. It's your GPA, isn't it? Pathetic.

JACK

Give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON

Not until you explain the engraving on the back. It doesn't say "Ernest." It says: "Property of Jack Worthing. If found, please return to Cecily, with all my love." Who on earth is Cecily? And more importantly, who on earth are you?

(JACK sits up straight and flashes a superior smile.)

JACK

If you must know, Cecily is my ward.

ALGERNON

Your ward? You're seventeen. You can barely legally guard your own AirPods.

JACK

My adoptive father passed away last year and left me in charge of his daughter's academic timeline. She lives at The Manor School in the suburbs. I'm her guardian.

ALGERNON

You must be close to the same age.

JACK

She's sixteen, but her mental acuity is nowhere near that of mine. So I take care of her. In the suburbs, I must maintain a high moral standard. It's exhausting. I have to look interested in European History, and I have to pretend I understand the dress code.

ALGERNON

How dreadfully civic of you.

JACK

Exactly. So, in order to preserve my sanity, I invented a fictional, deeply troubled younger brother named Ernest, who lives in the city and is constantly getting suspended. Whenever I need a break from the suburbs, I tell Miss Prism I must go "rescue my brother Ernest." And that's how I get to come to the city and hang out with you.

ALGERNON

(Leans forward, delighted)

Jack, you're a natural born fraud! You're a Bunburyist!

JACK

A what?

ALGERNON

A Bunburyist. I'm doing the exact same thing. I've invented an incredibly sickly friend named Bunbury who goes to our rival academy. Whenever my aunt tries to drag me to a family charity gala, Bunbury suddenly suffers a catastrophic relapse. I'm devoted to his fake health.

JACK

That's completely different. I'm doing it out of a sense of duty!

ALGERNON

You're doing it because the suburbs are a cultural wasteland. But tell me, if your name is Jack, why does Gwendolen call you Ernest?

JACK

Because I told her it was! I'm going to propose to her today, Algy. And she only loves me because she thinks my name is Ernest. It's her ideal of a stable, Ivy League future. If she or her mother finds out my name is Jack, she'll think I sound like a hockey player who peaked in middle school!

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, if her mother rejects you for sounding like a hockey player, she's entirely justified. And surely Gwendolen will follow suit. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does, and that is his.

JACK

Then it's imperative she never finds out!

(ALGERNON'S phone suddenly emits a loud text notification.)

ALGERNON

(Jumps up)

Ah! The matriarch arrives. She just pinned her live location to my group chat. Quick, hide the muffins. If Aunt Augusta sees them, she'll accuse me of overeating before the admissions cycle.

JACK

(Panic stricken)

Algy, you must promise to secure me ten minutes alone with Gwendolen! If Lady Bracknell corners me first, she'll audit my entire family tree before I can even ask for a corsage.

ALGERNON

I shall do my best. But it will cost you. You're paying for my dinner tonight at that obnoxious place where they foam everything.

(The door opens and LADY BRACKNELL enters like a thunderstorm. GWENDOLEN follows, a vision of perfection, clutching an iPad.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Algernon. I hope you have not been studying. It is so bad for the complexion. Stand up straight. Your spine looks like a poorly formatted spreadsheet.

(To JACK.)

Ah, Mr. Worthing, is it? You look remarkably out of place. It suits you.

(JACK bows smoothly, with a killer smile.)

JACK

Lady Bracknell. Gwendolen.

GWENDOLEN

(Beaming)

Ernest! When your location pinged on my smartwatch, my heart rate monitor spiked. The font on your name is so incredibly pleasing to my eyes.

LADY BRACKNELL

Gwendolen, sit down. Your posture is entirely too enthusiastic. I have just muted several committees on my device, and I will not tolerate unadulterated joy. Algernon, I require your assistance. The PTA Gala committee is in shambles. They want to serve tap water at the silent auction. Can you imagine?! I need you to arrange the music playlist to distract the donors from the lack of imported sparkling. I have already drafted the executive order.

ALGERNON

I'm afraid that's quite impossible, Aunt Augusta. I've just received a text. My poor friend Bunbury has had a sudden, catastrophic relapse.

LADY BRACKNELL

That young man's immune system is an absolute menace to modern medicine. It shows a distinct lack of character. Can he not choose a more convenient day to be chronically unwell? I shall have his medical files subpoenaed by the board.

ALGERNON

I must go to him at once. He relies on my playlist. Jack... I mean, Ernest... will keep Gwendolen company while you review the catering invoices in the study.

LADY BRACKNELL

Very well. But do not be long, Algernon. Weak health is catching, and I cannot have you looking pale for the family portrait. I have already approved the colour palette, and illness is not in the guidelines.

(She exits, quite dramatically. ALGERNON gives JACK a sharp wink and follows her out. JACK turns to GWENDOLEN and takes her hand.)

JACK

Gwendolen, you look absolutely breathtaking.

GWENDOLEN

Thank you, Ernest. I've updated my look for the spring quarter. It's called "Academic Melancholy." It matches the exact Pantone color of a Yale acceptance letter. But tell me, are you going to propose to me today? I've cleared my calendar from 4:00 to 4:15, and the lighting in this room is highly flattering.

JACK

(Smirks)

You know I want to propose?

GWENDOLEN

Of course. My destiny is entirely bound up in yours. Even before I met you, it was my absolute dream to love someone named Ernest. There is something so incredibly Ivy League about the name. It inspires absolute confidence in a portfolio. If a boy's name doesn't sound good on an engraved metal desk plate, I literally cannot perceive his soul.

JACK

Really? But what if my name weren't Ernest? What if it were something else? Something like Jack?

GWENDOLEN

(Laughs uproariously)

Jack? Oh, don't be ridiculous, darling. Jack is the name of a boy who wears his baseball cap backward and thinks auto racing is a personality trait. It has no resonance. If your name were Jack, I should cease to exist.

JACK

Right. Right. Well, Gwendolen, will you do me the honour of being my co-captain for life? Will you go to the Spring Gala with me?

(GWENDOLEN falls dramatically into his arms.)

GWENDOLEN

Oh, Ernest! Yes! A thousand times yes! I've already drafted the Instagram announcement. We just need to take a candid photo where our outfits match!

(The door suddenly flies open. LADY BRACKNELL stands on the threshold, holding a printout.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Gwendolen! Get out of that boy's arms at once. This behaviour is utterly unacceptable. Mr. Worthing, I have been looking at your extracurriculars. They are sparse. We must have a chat. Gwendolen, wait for me in the Uber.

GWENDOLEN

(Whispers)

Stay strong, my Ernest. She only respects people who have founded their own non-profits. If she checks your tax returns and they aren't visually stunning, I'll be so embarrassed.

(She exits. LADY BRACKNELL sits on the sofa, pulls out a gold pen, and glares at JACK.)

LADY BRACKNELL

Now, Mr. Worthing. Let us begin with the basics. Who are your parents, and what is their net worth? I require a formal financial disclosure before I authorize verbal pleasantries.

JACK

(Clears his throat)

I don't actually have a portfolio for my parents, Lady Bracknell. I'm an orphan.

LADY BRACKNELL

An orphan?

(She lowers her pen, looking genuinely appalled.)

To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune. To lose both looks like economic carelessness. Who was your legal guardian prior to your current independence?

JACK

I was found, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL

Found? Where? Kindly do not tell me you were discovered in a suburban dumpster. I tolerate many things, but municipal waste management is not one of them.

JACK

No, nothing like that. I was found by a very charitable gentleman. The late Mr. Thomas Cardew, who happened to be commuting back to the suburbs. He found me in a bag.

LADY BRACKNELL

In a bag?

JACK

A designer tote bag, to be precise. A vintage Marc Jacobs.

LADY BRACKNELL

And where did this tote bag choose to deposit you?

JACK

In the lost and found at Grand Central Station. On the commuter rail side.

LADY BRACKNELL

The commuter rail side! Mr. Worthing, this is a disaster. To be born in a designer tote bag, even a Marc Jacobs, presents a distinct lack of social lineage. A lost and found is not a demographic, it is a logistical error! You can hardly expect me to let my only daughter, a girl with a legacy admissions track at five separate Ivy League universities, marry into a transit hub! I do not co-sign unions with lost property.

JACK

But Lady Bracknell, I have an excellent GPA! I'm captain of the debate team! I've already been scouted by Dartmouth!

LADY BRACKNELL

Dartmouth is a hockey school surrounded by trees, Mr. Worthing. It does not compensate for a total lack of origins. I strongly advise you to acquire some parents before the end of the fiscal quarter. Even one reputable step parent with a recognizable address would suffice. I shall veto any further communication. Good day to you.

(She storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her.)

JACK

(Shouts at the closed door)

You can't audit human affection, Lady Bracknell!

(ALGERNON opens the door and pokes his head in.)

ALGERNON

I take it the interview didn't make the newsletter?

JACK

She's a tyrant! A high fashion, policy driven tyrant. She refuses to allow the match because I was found in a tote bag at Grand Central. It's completely irrational! Gwendolen loves me for who I am.

ALGERNON

No, she loves you because she thinks your name is Ernest.

(He casually reaches across JACK and grabs the tray of mini-muffins. He pops one into his mouth.)

JACK

How you can sit there, calmly eating muffins when we are in this horrible trouble, I can't make out.

ALGERNON

Well, I can't eat muffins in an agitated manner. The crumbs would probably get on my cuffs. One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It's the only way to eat them.

JACK

(Snatches the tray away)

I say it's perfectly heartless your eating muffins at all, under the circumstances!

ALGERNON

My, my, I didn't mean to offend.

JACK

Things are far too complicated for sweets!

ALGERNON

Are you going back to your boarding school in the suburbs tonight?

JACK

Yes. I have to go back and check on Cecily. And I'm going to have the school registrar legally change my name to Ernest first thing tomorrow morning. I cannot risk Gwendolen finding out the truth.

ALGERNON

And what did you say the name of your idyllic, heavily funded boarding school was again? The one with the naive and incredibly wealthy ward?

JACK

The Manor School. But don't you dare think about visiting, Algy. Cecily is pure, studious, and entirely off limits to city boys with fake sick friends.

(He grabs his Starbucks cup and exits.
ALGERNON smiles wickedly, pulls out his
phone, and taps the screen.)

ALGERNON

The Manor School. Perfect. Time to introduce Cecily to the legendary, deeply troubled "Ernest."

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 2

(SETTING: The courtyard of The Manor School. A stone bench sits center stage, in front of a manicured hedge, and perhaps a topiary.)

(AT RISE: CECILY paces the stage, dictating into her phone's voice memo app, completely lost in a romantic cloud. MISS PRISM marches behind her, carrying a stack of heavy textbooks, looking on the verge of a minor nervous breakdown.)

CECILY

"And as the rain lashed against the windows of the elite boarding school, Captain Ernest took her hand, marvelling at how her skin remained utterly flawless without a single beauty filter, his dark eyes flashing with the tragic knowledge that their love was forbidden by the student council bylaws --"

MISS PRISM

Cecily! Drop that device at once. Your dedication to fan fiction is an insult to the college board. We're supposed to be analyzing the syntax of *The Odyssey*, book nine, passage three, which introduces the central theme of what it means to love home.

CECILY

But I don't like Homer. It isn't at all a becoming text. I know perfectly well that I look quite plain after my ancient Greek mythology lesson.

MISS PRISM

Focus on the syntax. For you sake, and mine.

CECILY

(Gazes dreamily into space)

Syntax is so uninspired, Miss Prism. It has no pulse. Captain Ernest would never worry about syntax while trying to escape a six-headed sea monster! He'd be too busy admiring my bravery and my exceptional wardrobe. Plus, my fan fiction has a huge fan base! I have 412 followers, including a fan club president who writes forty page essays analyzing my metaphors!

(MISS PRISM sets the heavy textbooks on the bench, aligning them perfectly with the edge of the stone.)

MISS PRISM

Captain Ernest does not exist. He's a fictional symptom of your chronic screen time. Your guardian, Jack, pays me an extraordinary stipend to ensure you get a perfect score on your SAT's, not to watch you narrate your own teen drama. It's time we begin mastering your vocabulary words.

CECILY

Jack is entirely too practical to understand the human soul. He spends all his time in the city doing crisis management for his brother. Honestly, it's lucky I'm so naturally intelligent, otherwise his complete neglect of my emotional evolution would be a tragedy. If I didn't have my digital journal, my imagination would wither away like the school's Wi-Fi during a storm.

MISS PRISM

Mr. Worthing is a model of civic responsibility! A young man who prioritizes family emergencies over urban nightlife is a rare commodity in this school. Now, open your vocabulary workbook to page ninety-four, column B, line six. Utilitarian. Define it.

(CECILY collapses onto the bench and holds her phone up to take selfies as she speaks.)

CECILY

Utilitarian: anything that lacks a statement. Like your flats, Miss Prism. Or anything that requires me to do work when I could be starring in my own romantic comedy.

MISS PRISM

My flats are orthopedically certified for long periods of proctoring, Cecily!

(PRINCIPAL CHASUBLE enters. He spots MISS PRISM, freezes, and tries to smooth his hair down, coughing nervously.)

CHASUBLE

Ah, Miss Prism. Cultivating the young minds of tomorrow, I see? Or merely surviving the midterm slump? You look remarkably fresh today. Like a textbook that's never been dropped.

(MISS PRISM instantly transforms, her voice softening into a fluttery, nervous soprano, adjusting her glasses precisely.)

MISS PRISM

Oh! Principal Chasuble! I was just explaining the integrity of classical literature. Cecily has such a vivid perspective on the humanities.

(PRINCIPAL CHASUBLE tries to lean smoothly against the hedge, but misses and stumbles before recovering with a bright red face.)

CHASUBLE

Yes! Quite! I often think of you... I mean, literature! ...as a robust filing cabinet of joy. If I were a misplaced invoice, Miss Prism, I would certainly hope to be filed under your immediate supervision.

MISS PRISM

(Blushes)

Principal Chasuble! Such a metaphor is highly non-standard for campus hours.

CECILY

Miss Prism was actually just explaining how much she values structural support. Specifically in her footwear.

MISS PRISM

Cecily, that's quite enough. Principal Chasuble, I trust your afternoon rounds are going smoothly? The campus air is so intellectually stimulating today.

CHASUBLE

Indeed. I'm merely conducting a wellness audit of the courtyard flora. Miss Prism, I noticed the library is currently unoccupied. If you have a brief window between your educational duties, perhaps we could discuss the upcoming school fundraiser? Over a highly regulated cup of faculty lounge tea? I believe the temperature is exactly as you like it.

MISS PRISM

(Fans herself with a worksheet)

A fundraiser discussion! How thrilling. Cecily, you will remain on this bench and memorize twenty roots of Greek origin. If I catch your phone screen lighting up, I will confiscate it until graduation.

CECILY

My mind will be a fortress of dead languages, Miss Prism. Mostly because I look incredibly scholarly when I'm brooding.

(MISS PRISM and PRINCIPAL CHASUBLE exit down the path together. The second they vanish, CECILY whips out her phone and begins to record a video.)

Hey guys, welcome back to my study stream! Today I'm ignoring Greek roots because they don't spark joy!

(There's a rustle behind the hedge and ALGERNON steps out. He wears an expensive designer jacket, sunglasses, and carries a sleek leather bag. He looks around and sniffs the air with absolute snobbery.)

ALGERNON

Excuse me. Is this a prison for the academically over-privileged, or have I accidentally wandered into a catalogue for lawn care?

(CECILY gasps and drops her phone. She quickly adjusts her hair and looks at him with wide, romantic eyes.)

CECILY

You're not from the admissions office. They don't hire people with eyes so perfectly situated on their face. You look like a prince from a dystopian romance novel who's come to rescue me from punctuation.

ALGERNON

(Takes off his sunglasses with a flourish)

Heavens, no. I have a severe allergy to administration. My name is Ernest. Ernest Worthing. I believe my brother Jack keeps me locked away in his conversational closet out here.

CECILY

You're Ernest? The tragic, deeply misunderstood brother from the city? I knew it! I literally manifested this encounter on my vision board! I knew you would arrive with dark secrets and impeccable tailoring!

ALGERNON

The very same. My Uber X delivered me here, posthaste. My reputation precedes me, I hope? Jack usually describes me as a financial liability with no impulse control.

CECILY

He describes you as a moral hazard! He said you were banned from three separate Apple stores!

(She steps closer, inspecting him like a piece of art.)

You look much more handsome than I expected for someone with so many behavioural detentions. It's almost a relief. It would be so embarrassing for me if my future husband didn't look good in photos.

ALGERNON

Detention is merely a structured nap, my dear. And you must be Cecily. Jack told me you were a sweet, simple girl obsessed with flashcards. He completely omitted the fact that you possess an absolutely terrifying amount of personal style.

CECILY

(Beaming)

I know, right? I dictate my own reality, Ernest. Jack thinks I'm studying Greek roots, but I've actually been documenting your entire life in my notes app because honestly, we are two peas in one very attractive pod.

ALGERNON

My life? I didn't realize I was being written about in the suburbs.

CECILY

Oh, yes. We've been engaged for exactly two months. The announcement trended locally.

ALGERNON

Engaged? For two months? I feel like I would have remembered RSVPing to that.

CECILY

Don't be silly. Why would you need to be there? I entered it into my calendar app on Valentine's Day. Look.

(She forces her phone into his face.)

I even wrote out our first several arguments, your public apology text, and the exact font we're using for the graduation party invitations. It's a very clean serif. I think it highlights my bone structure.

ALGERNON

You're a magnificent psychopath, Cecily. I'm entirely devoted to you.

CECILY

Good. Because I could never love anyone whose name weren't Ernest. It has a certain gravitas. If your name were something common, like Dave, or Mike, I don't think I could survive the compromise. I mean, imagine the captions. Gross.

ALGERNON

(Suddenly nervous)

Ernest. Right. Yes. A beautiful name. Extremely stable. Excuse me for just a moment, Cecily. I need to find the school registrar and see if they accept credit cards for immediate, legal name amendments on the student roster.

(He grabs his bag and dashes down the path.
CECILY sighs happily and pulls out her phone to film another quick video.)

CECILY

He's exactly as toxic as I hoped. Truly, my life is a masterpiece!

(JACK enters from the opposite side. He's dressed entirely in black athletic gear. He approaches CECILY and wipes a fake tear from his eye with a silk handkerchief.)

JACK

Cecily. Miss Prism.

(He looks around.)

Oh, Miss Prism isn't here. Good. The burden of grief is best carried in small groups.

CECILY

Jack? Why are you dressed like that? Was there a flash sale on athleisure?

JACK

(Lets out a dramatic sigh)

Cecily! A tragedy has struck our family. My brother. My poor, troubled brother Ernest is no more. He has met a sudden and devastating end.

CECILY

What?

JACK

He passed away last night in the city. A tragic accident involving an electric scooter, a live stream, and a total lack of situational awareness. He's been completely cancelled by mortality.

CECILY

Jack, that's impossible! He's not cancelled, he's inside right now! He just went in to find the admissions office!

(JACK blinks, breaking his mournful performance.)

JACK

What? Who went inside?

CECILY

Your brother Ernest! He's here! He arrived via ride share ten minutes ago! He's completely fine and his hair is perfect.

JACK

(Suddenly panicked)

Ernest is here?! No, he isn't! He can't be here! He's dead, Cecily! I just told you, he died in a horrific tragedy!

CECILY

Well, he must have re-spawned, Jack, because he's literally walking out of the building right now.

(ALGERNON returns, wearing a freshly purchased Manor School varsity sweater over his designer clothes, looking incredibly pleased with himself.)

ALGERNON

Brother Jack! You're back! I've just paid off the school bursar to overlook my lack of transcripts. Aren't family reunions wonderful?

(JACK springs over to ALGERNON, whispering frantically through gritted teeth.)

JACK

What are you doing here?! You're supposed to be a corpse! I just killed you off! You died on an electric scooter!

ALGERNON

(Whispers back, cheerfully)

Well, I survived the crash! The paramedics praised my core strength. It was a miracle of modern wellness.

JACK

You're ruining my entire narrative! I'm in deep mourning! Look at my black tracksuit!

(CECILY walks over, completely oblivious.)

CECILY

Honestly, Jack, your communication skills are sub-par. First you say he's dead, then he's standing here wearing school merch. It's very draining for my mental peace. Ernest, tell him he's being toxic.

ALGERNON

He's being incredibly toxic. Dying without my own permission is something I would never do.

(JACK glares at ALGERNON with homicidal rage and clutches his hand. He squeezes it so hard that it sends ALGERNON to his knees.)

JACK

I'm going to murder you for real, Algy. Mark my words. I'm going to delete your entire existence from the cloud.

(BLACKOUT.)

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haywardb@hotmail.com