**The Importance of Being Earnest**

UK (1952): Comedy

## Motion Picture Guide Review

Oscar Wilde’s wittiest play took fifty seven years to get to the screen but was well worth the wait. The play is based on a pun, and Wilde took it to the limit. Director writer Anthony Asquith was true to the original and made only the most minor alterations. It’s a warhorse of a story, and there isn’t a theater anywhere that hasn’t done it at least once. This film more than does the play justice; it’s a delight from start to finish.

## Synopsis

Enterprising bachelors. A wealthy bachelor (Michael Redgrave) has a best friend (Michael Algernon) who is poor as a church mouse but lives on credit. The long suffering valet (Walter Hudd) seems to be employed largely to convince the wine merchant that Algernon will eventually pay the bill. Jack is rather mysterious about where he lives in the country, keeping it from Algernon. While in town, he resides at the Albany, a very proper address, but Algernon is desperate to know where Jack goes when he’s not in London.

Jack is in love with Algernon’s cousin (Joan Gwendolyn). We learn that Jack uses the name of Jack when at his country home where his ward (Dorothy Cecily) lives and is studying under the tutelage of a spinster (Margaret Rutherford) who specializes in taking care of young people. Rutherford has her bun set on the local vicar, (Miles Malleson) but theirs is a Victorian love, fraught with double entendres (of a nonsexual kind).

Mistaken identities. Algernon learns of Jack’s ward and presents himself at the country home as Jack’s fictitious brother, Earnest. It seems that Jack employs the guise of having to bail his “brother” out of trouble every time he wants to go to the city, so Cecily, having been brought up with wild tales of this fictitious man, falls instantly in love with Algernon. Gwendolyn, who lives in the city, thinks that Jack is really named Earnest. She dearly loves the name and would never marry anyone without that name. Jack arrives at his country home dressed in mourning. He thinks it’s about time he got rid of the Earnest persona, so he is appalled to find Algernon already at the house masquerading as the young rakehell.

When both women think they are engaged to the same man, they play one of the most hysterical scenes in motion pictures. When the two women have tea together, Cecily deliberately puts several sugar cubes into Gwendolyn’s cup and hands her a large slab of cake, just after Gwendolyn has told her that cake is out and that “the best people only have bread and butter these days.” [sic.] Gwendolyn’s mother and Algernon’s aunt, Lady Bracknell, tries to put a stop to romance in another comic scene in which she enquires about Jack’s qualifications and wealth. “Do you smoke?” she says. “Yes, I do,” [sic.] replies Jack. “Good,” answers Lady Bracknell. “A man should have an occupation of some sort.” [sic. The quotations are paraphrase.]

True love and identity found. When Lady Bracknell learns that Algernon is enamored of Cecily, she asks that Jack give his permission to let her wed the young man. But Jack won’t unless Lady Bracknell gives her permission for him to marry Gwendolyn.

It’s a stalemate until Lady Bracknell recognizes Miss Prism as the governess who lost Algernon’s brother many years ago. Prism admits that she’d written a book and put it in one bag while she had the child in another. By mistake, she switched the bags, and the child was left at the railway station. Since we learned earlier that Jack had been found in a railway station and adopted by a rich man who provided him with his wealth (as well as the job of supervising Cecily, the late benefactor’s niece), we are not surprised when Jack shows Lady Bracknell the large handbag, and it is identified as the very one the woman was carrying when she made the unfortunate switch.

So Algernon and Jack are actually brothers! Now, the question is what was Jack’s Christian name? In a book of army records they and discover that his name was Earnest; and so Jack, as is the usual custom, had been named after his father. The film ends with the three couples united.

## Critique

Almost flawless. Director writer Asquith made no pretense of doing anything but photographing a play and begins the film with a couple entering a stage box and sitting down for the curtain’s rising. Then it’s pell mell into the frothy story of manners and morals that Wilde wrote in the late 1890s.

Stylish, sunny, and as nonsensical as any work can be (at least, on the surface), *The Importance of Being Earnest* takes potshots at the pretentious people of the era, cloaking them in badinage containing some of Wilde’s very best epigrams and bon mots. If it had been taken all the way cinematically, this would have been a major screen classic. As it is, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is as close to flawless as you can get.

Outline of MPG Review

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*Performer Character*

Michael Redgrave Jack Worthing

Michael Denison Algernon Moncrieff

Edith Evans Lady Bracknell

Joan Greenwood Gwendolen Fairfax

Dorothy Tutin Cecily Cardew

Margaret Rutherford Miss Prism

Miles Malleson Canon Chasuble

Richard Wattis Seton

Aubrey Mather Merriman

Walter Hudd Lane

Ivor Barnard

The Importance of Being EarnestUK (1952): Comedy

Production Credits

based on the play by Oscar Wilde

Producer Teddy Baird

Director Anthony Asquith

Screenwriter Anthony Asquith

Cinematographer Desmond Dickinson

Editor John D. Guthridge

Composer Benjamin Frankel

Art Designer Carmen Dillon

Costumes Beatrice Dawson

Capsule Review by Leonard Maltin

Review

Oscar Wilde’s peerless comedy of manners set in Victorian England is given admirable treatment by most able cast.

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