***The Importance of Being Earnest* Audio Introduction**

Thank you for booking tickets to an audio-described performance of *The Importance of Being Earnes,* by Oscar Wilde directed by Max Webster.

The running time is approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes, including one 20 minute interval.

Touch Tours will precede the audio-described performances, an hour and a half before the start time. Patrons attending a touch tour should meet staff in the Lyttelton Theatre foyer seating area.

This introduction will be repeated live fifteen minutes before the performance begins. This allows us to give you extra information about the production, if needed. This will also enable you to familiarize yourself with the headsets.

Please note that this production contains strong language and smoke and haze.

**Some background**

In the printed program, Sharon Marcus describes Oscar Wilde’s notorious celebrity, and how his art was used to condemn him in a Victorian society where homosexuality was illegal.

‘Soon after *Earnest* opened,’ Marcus writes, ‘Wilde found himself embroiled in a series of trials that culminated in his being sentenced, in May 1895, to five years in prison under laws that criminalised sex between men. Testimony at those trials presented Wilde’s art, especially *Dorian Gray*, as evidence of his sexual interest in men, and revealed that Wilde, married to a woman and the father of two sons, also had many liaisons with working-class men. … Wilde filled *Earnest* with knowing winks to people, places, and things that became the stuff of newspaper headlines when the trials began only six weeks soon after the play had opened.’

Marcus quotes contemporary reviewers of the play, who wrote that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was ‘an iridescent filament of fantasy’ and Wilde ‘an artist in sheer nonsense’. This production leans heavily into this spirit – it’s an extravagant celebration of fantasy, farce, and queer sexuality.

**Set, characters and costumes**

As we take our seats, the Lyttleton stage is obscured by a red velvet theatre curtain. A holdall-like, brown leather handbag is hovering in the centre of the drapes, picked out in a spotlight. The curtain is framed by a proscenium arch, about 6 metres wide and 5 high. It has white marble-looking pillars, decorated with ornately carved edging and rings of gold. The space all around the arch is dark. The stage has a patterned and shiny wood floor – with large diamond shapes defined by lines in various shades of brown.

The story follows two young high-society bachelors – Algernon (Algie) Moncrieff and his friend, Jack Worthing. We move from the metropolitan opulence of Algie’s London town-house to the verdant pastoral idyll of Jack’s country residence, including its garden and morning room. In each location, colours are vivid, and costumes over-the-top Victorian, with corsets cinching the waists of women and men alike. Made from of opulent fabrics – jacquards, silks, velvets, dresses have large bustles, and three piece suits are worn with cravats or ties.

There are eight named characters, and a multi-ethnic ensemble of five, often dressed in drag. The play opens in the dreamlike space of a London ball with a grand piano set in a black void, its keys to the left. All viewed through the proscenium arch, men in sumptuous off-the-shoulder dresses whirl around, entwined with women in tailcoats.

At the centre of it all is **Algie**, initially found draping himself across the gleaming lid of the grand piano, resplendent in a hot pink silk dress, split open at the front to reveal a pair of white hot-pants. Neon-pink stockings are pulled up beneath towering black high heels. The V-neck corset bodice of his dress has a trail of pink roses cascading up one shoulder, and diamond jewels drip around his neck and from his ears. Hot pink opera gloves stop just beneath his toned biceps, and he looks out at us from amid the crowd with purring, languid self-satisfaction.

Algie is a black man with a thin moustache, his afro-textured hair cropped to give the appearance of a side-parting. Back in his town house, he dresses in an exquisitely tailored brocade suit, its black background woven with lush green ferns and grapes, interspersed with sprigs of blue flowers. Beneath, a white waistcoat and shirt, and a dark green tie. He wears a gleaming pair of black heeled boots, ending in a sharp point, and under them, we occasionally glimpse the hot pink stockings he wore the night before. Where his town-wear is dark and heavy, his three piece country suit is the reverse. He’s in pure white, apart from a ribbon of brown around the rim of his Panama hat, and a pair of laced brown-accented brogues. When he takes the jacket off, he reveals a sheer organza shirt with billowing sleeves that end in tight cuffs. A frothy cravat is tied around his neck, studded with rhinestones, and a diamante brooch glitters from the lapel of his waistcoat.

The main room of Algie’s elegant town house is created by three tall cream-painted panelled walls, decorated with distressed mirrors and pieces of art, encased in gold frames. There’s a fireplace in the left-hand wall, its grate filled with impressive multi-coloured flowers, and more flowers sit at each end of the mantlepiece. There’s a door to the right of the fireplace, and another in the right-hand wall, directly opposite. Also in the right-hand wall, towards the front, is a hidden door, which only the butler uses.

There are large double doors in the centre of the room’s back wall, also painted cream, and decorated with dainty swirling filigree pattern. A small blue swan is painted on each door’s upper panel, facing each other, to create a heart shape. When open, the doors offer a view through to the corridor, where the piano now sits on the right with its stool and keys just visible. Set on top of the piano is a particularly impressive vase of flowers. The back wall of this corridor has a sash window draped with thick beige curtains - a blue sky visible beyond with a couple of white fluffy clouds. Inside the main room, attached to the wall on either side of the double doors, are brass candle holders each with 2 flickering candles.

The main room is elegantly furnished – with Victorian-period furniture, all with gold-painted frames and legs – their fabrics in shades of gold and cream. There’s an upright golden armchair on the left, with a round-topped side table set with a small vase of flowers and a handbell. Further into the room, just to left of centre, is a cream-coloured chair, also with a side table set with a single flower and a tea tray. Just to right of centre is a bronze-coloured chaise longue, its head to the left, with a couple of gold scatter cushions. Set up to the head of the chaise is another side table with its own vase of flowers and a decanter of sherry with glass. A final, cream-coloured chair sits in the front right corner, with a small side table set with a small vase of flowers.

Two ornate crystal chandeliers hang over head on either side of the room.

Algie’s long-suffering butler, **Lane**, is dressed in pristine livery: a black tailcoat, white waistcoat, and white bow-tie, with white gloves. He’s a sallow man with a thin moustache, his brown hair combed into a neat parting.

**Jack** bounds in to call on his friend. He’s a blushingly posh white man, with a swoop of blonde hair and a handlebar moustache. He has the long, bony limbs of a young colt, with about as much grace – his legs tending to buckle from time to time. Jack’s in a tweed three-piece suit – brown, but with threads of blue brightening up the check pattern. He has a matching blue cravat, and a blue flower bursting from his buttonhole. Later, in the country, he’s in ostentatious all-black mourning attire – spiced up with a couple of fabulous elements. A gigantic silk bow flops in place of a bow-tie, and his top hat has a black veil that drapes down to the back of his knees. He hides his eyes behind a pair of round-framed dark glasses. His three piece country suit is a simple cream-linen, with matching cream Oxford shoes. He has a burnt-orange tie, matching the ribbon tied around his Panama hat, and his shirt has a pattern of soft green and orange foliage.

Jack has designs on **Gwendolen** Fairfax, Algie’s cousin. She’s a young black woman, with a habit of posing with her arms raised, as though she’s waiting for somebody to paint her as a classical goddess. In London, Gwendolen wears a hot-pink two-piece riding habit, made of jacquard silk. Tied around her neck, a pink and white striped bow stretches from shoulder to shoulder. Her black afro-textured hair has been fashioned into round balls, as though spheres of hair have been fused together around her head. A lavender top-hat covered with silk balances atop the globes, a pink velvet ribbon around the rim. She has a pair of armless eye-glasses attached to her cinched waist by a gold chain, and lace fingerless gloves. In the country, she’s in another two-piece – a peach linen set with a short sleeved jacket. The jacket has a deep v, revealing a succession of gold necklaces, each longer than the last. Now, the globes of hair have been released, and they trail a long pony-tail of spheres down her back, a peach straw hat sitting jauntily on her head. She has white lace gloves, and the same eye-glasses attached to her skirt as before.

Gwendolen is accompanied by her mother, the indomitable **Lady Bracknell**. A tall, statuesque black woman, she walks unhurriedly with a silver topped black cane, her chin raised in disdain. Lady Bracknell speaks with a slight Jamaican accent, and there are nods to the then-colonised Caribbean tropics in her outfits. Her hair is bound in a terracotta silk head-wrap, over which she wears an enormous yellow straw hat, about half a metre in circumference. Her mesh gloves are also yellow, as is her corseted dress of heavy silk, with lace covering the bodice and concertina fabric pleated around the hem. Over it, she wears a sky-blue silk sash across her torso, fastened in a rosette at her hip. Glittering brooches are attached to the length of the sash. Lady Bracknell’s tropical influences blossom in the country sunshine. The straw hat is gone from her head, and her terracotta head-wrap, with pink and yellow peonies attached to it, towers high, suggesting splendid locks encased beneath. Brilliant diamond earrings dangle above collarbones left bare by her off-the-shoulder dress. The dress itself has short, puffed sleeves and a corset waist. It’s sky blue, with a print of large pink and white roses blooming amidst closed buds and green leaves. The fabric is hitched up on one side, revealing a silk terracotta petticoat beneath.

The garden of Jack’s country residence is still framed by the proscenium arch, and just a metre or so back from it, there’s a bank of short green grass which rises steeply to a couple of metres before giving way to a panoramic summery-blue sky dotted with white clouds. Arranged across the grass bank are 5 multi-coloured rose bushes set within mounds of tall grass and wild flowers. There’s an ornate metal white-painted love seat by the rose bush on the far right, with a metal watering can by its side. Set on a strip of wooden floor at the front, on either far side are a couple of marble plant pots showing off healthy-looking ferns and other flowers in bloom. Just to left of centre is a white, round-topped garden table with 2 matching chairs pulled up to it. The table is set with a number of leather-bound books.

Amidst the flowers of Jack’s country estate is his young ward, **Cecily** Cardew, a pink-cheeked English rose. Her blonde hair is trussed up, with tendrils framing her round face, with its small, often pouting lips. Cecily’s blowsy dress, a red floral print, has an absurdly large bustle festooned in 0white ribbons. The frilly skirt, worn over a large hoop, doesn’t quite reach her ankles, showing white stockings and white lace up boots.

Cecily’s tutor is **Miss Prism**. She’s a thin-lipped matron, bony and pale, who wears her grey hair beneath a frilly lace cap. Her austere dress, of narrow black-and-white vertical stripes, covers as much flesh as a dress could reasonably be expected to – and she wears lace white gloves at the end of its long sleeves, for good measure. Miss Prism’s top is fitted, with black buttons leading up to a black velvet bow tied at her neck, and a frilly white lace shawl. The skirt balloons out over a large hoop, and on it rests a small black coin purse, attached to her waist by gold chain.

The pair are joined by the bashful Reverend Canon **Chasuble**. About Miss Prism’s age, he’s a clean shaven white man with a gentle manner. His white hair is neatly combed and parted to the side, and he wears the attire of a country vicar, black trousers and a black shirt, with a white dog-collar at his neck.

They’re waited on by the decrepit butler, **Merriman**, played by the same actor as Algie’s servant Lane. He wears a grey powdered wig, which slips around on his head, a bit big for him. His dusty livery is old-fashioned and provincial in shades of brown – a faded velvet frock coat over a striped brown waistcoat and brown breeches. He summons everyone to dinner with an ever-larger procession of hand-held gongs.

The story moves from the garden to the morning room. Two impressive staircases, one on either side, run up to the rest of the house. The far side of each staircase has a carved filigree patterned balustrade. Tucked at the sides in front of each is an antique white marble bust set on top of a short column. The back wall of the morning room is lined with bookshelves, packed with leather-bound tomes. The back wall of the room offers views out on the rose garden from earlier. There’s a tall narrow window on either side, and in the centre of the wall, a set of double doors, with glass panes. Standing on a plinth on each side of the double doors is a life-size white Romanesque marble statue – of a naked muscular bearded man. Next to the statue on the left is a step ladder that provides access to the books on the upper shelves.

The morning room is furnished with a mahogany, round-topped table in the centre, displaying a silver bowl of fruit. There’s a bright-yellow chair by the side of the table. Pink-covered, 2-seater sofas are set on either side, nearer to us.

**Cast & Production Credits**

Algernon Moncrieff – Ncuti Gatwa

Lane/Merriman – Julian Bleach

Jack Worthing – Hugh Skinner

Gwendolen Fairfax - Ronkẹ Adékọluẹ́jọ́

Lady Bracknell – Sharon D Clarke

Cecily Cardew – Eliza Scanlen

Miss Prism – Amanda Lawrence

Reverend Canon Chasuble – Richard Cant

Ensemble – Shereener Browne, Jasmine Kerr, Gillian McCafferty, Elliot Pritchard, John Vernon

Composer – DJ Walde

Sound Designer – Nicola T. Chang

Lighting Designer – Jon Clark

Set and Costume Designer – Rae Smith

Director – Max Webster

Writer – Oscar Wilde

**Section 4: The Access mailing list and upcoming performances**

Our National Theatre at Home streaming platform has a wide range of audio-described productions available including *Till the Stars Come Down, The House of Bernarda Alba*, and *Dear Octopus*. You can subscribe to the service for a monthly fee or rent productions one at a time. To find out more, and stream the productions with audio description, visit <https://www.ntathome.com/audio-described-and-british-sign-language.>

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We hold an allocation of tickets for members of our [access list](https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/access/access-list) for every show. If any performances listed on our website are shown as “Sold Out”, tickets may still be available: please log in to your NT account to access tickets, or call the Box Office access line on 020 7452 3961.