The Importance of Being Earnest
Summer Reading Assignment

This summer you will read The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde. As you read the play, pay particular attention to your personal response to the character of Lady Bracknell. Then, read this packet of information about the different ways the character of Lady Bracknell can be performed and therefore interpreted.

Your y can be found at the end of this packet. This assignment will be due the first week of school.

Themes within 'The Importance of Being Earnest'

Some of the major themes of the play may be summarised as explorations of:

- the hypocrisy of social etiquette of the time (particularly of the upper classes)
- ambivalent views on marriage (linked to the first theme)
- the layers of deceit between the characters and its effects on their relationships

These subjects were handled with a flippant charm that initially endeared Wilde to English society, but this same society would go on to shun and vilify him within months of the play’s first performance.

Character Interpretation in 'The Importance of Being Earnest'

Lady Bracknell

There have been many performances of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' since the first production in 1895. The character of Lady Bracknell is particularly challenging for actresses as it has come to be seen as something of a test of their ability. The delivery of the line ‘A handbag?’ in particular is often seen as a measure of how successful the characterisation has been.

The Theatre Collections' files of reviews are particularly revealing of how actresses over the years have approached the role and they offer students tips and ideas on how they might explore it for themselves.

Perhaps the most famous actress in the role of Lady Bracknell of the early half of the 20th century was (Dame) Edith Evans in the 1939 production at The Globe Theatre with John Gielgud as John Worthing. Various reviews attest to the power of her performance, e.g:

'Miss Evans gives the law to the young suitors with all the clang and finality of a last trump'. (Ivor Brown) and:

'The depth of horror she gets into her voice when she learns that John was found in a cloakroom at Victoria Station (the Brighton line) was so funny it made one regret that nowadays few actresses dare to play with their voices...Her voice is upholstered so that any phrase, harsh or drawling, comes from the comfortable heart of Lady Bracknell’s arrogance.' (Unknown source).

There are some key words in these reviews that can be used as the basis of character explorations, such as ‘horror’, ‘harsh’, ‘drawling’ and ‘arrogant’. Isabel Janes toned the role down somewhat in the 1968 production at the Haymarket emoting ‘startled dignity’ with ‘a growling drawl.’ (Eric Shorter, Daily Telegraph, 9 February 1968.)
Try scenes with these words in mind and explore how the emotions and effects can be conveyed to the audience. Vary the speed of line delivery (‘drawling’) to explore the character’s arrogance.

**Accent**
Jonathan Miller directed Irene Handl as the character in the 1975 production at Greenwich. The result was rather startling to some reviewers:

'Miss Handl adopts a German accent and some very bad manners...she resembles nothing so much as a bothersome Yiddish mama.' (Jack Tinker, Daily Mail, 21 March 1975.)

Other reviewers were more accepting:

'Irene Handl is not in loveable cockney mode but instead is playing a formidable German Jewess ...Nothing in the text denies this: there is no reason why (by marriage) Lady Bracknell should not be a German lady inclined to throw up her hands in mild despair.' (Sheridan Morley, Punch, 21 April 1975.)

Another review described how:

'Before the famous ‘A handbag?’ Miss Handl slowly makes the sound ‘phutt. ‘ Jews will recognise that this Semitic noise speaks volumes: that’s a real problem, how can we get over it? It is the essence of practicality.' (Nicholas de Jongh, The Guardian, 21 March 1975)

These reviews indicate to students how a different approach to the text can be revealing of character. Students can try their own approaches to using different accents - as long as they can be justified by the text.

**Vocalisation**
(Dame) Judi Dench tackled the role at the National Theatre in 1982 at the relatively young age of 47.

'Physically, she makes no concessions to gorgondom; she is trim, and immaculately preserved. What terrifies is her vocal manner, which is hard and fast and dismissive ... Really, we were there to hear how she said 'A handbag?' She does it quietly, as if morally outraged, thoughts on the French Revolution already fermenting.' (Robert Cushman, The Observer, 18 September 1982.)

'Whereas Edith Evans brayed the famous "A handbag?" Miss Dench, hands trembling, can hardly get it out in the horror of the revelation just made to her.' (Francis King. The Sunday Telegraph, 19 September 1982.)

'In place of Edith Evans’s bitonal croak, she slowly removed disapproving spectacles. The question came as a whisper of horror. She then tore up her satisfied notes about the foundling’s wealth and position.' (John Barber, The Daily Telegraph, 17 September 1982.)

Again, the reviews show how different approaches to vocalising the text affect the audience.

**Physical expression**
Dame Maggie Smith played the role at the Aldwych Theatre in 1993.

'The lips are set in a grim, thin line. The eyes forever swivel, flit and speak wordless, disapproving volumes...her head held high and to one side, rains down contempt. ‘A handbag?’ Dame Maggie murmurs, not in outrage, but the tones of a gentlewoman discovering a condom within church precincts.' (Nicholas de Jongh, The Evening Standard, 10 March, 1993)
Another reviewer described:

'Lips pursed in permanent disapproval, voice sweeping on each perfectly crafted nuance, she builds it with a miracle of timing and a masterclass in the serious business of high comedy.' (Jack Tinker, The Daily Mail, 10 March 1993)

Another noted:

'Her Lady Bracknell legislates with her chin: pointing it in grandeur, dropping it in calculation and withdrawing it in indignation'. (John Lahr, The New Yorker, 4 March 1993)

**TASK:**

What impression did YOU form of Lady Bracknell?

Pick FIVE key episodes in the text and explain briefly what opinion you have of Lady Bracknell at this point and why. Textual quotations should be integrated with your response.

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