



The Guide to Musical Theatre

ERNEST IN LOVE

Music by Lee Pockriss, book and lyrics by Anne Crosswell

Gramercy Arts Theatre (New York) 4 May, 1960 (111 perfs)

SYNOPSIS

With a mixture of fresh tunes and witty lyrics, Oscar Wilde's much loved comedy *The Importance of Being Ernest* is given new dimensions. All the mad-cap elements make this an ideal entertainment for all performing groups. Songs include, "Lost", "A Handbag Is Not a Proper Mother", "My Very First Impression" and "A Wicked Man".

STORY

Act I

The show opens on a shop-lined London street on a summer afternoon. Lane, Algernon (Algy) Moncrieff's manservant, with a marketing basket on his arm, enters. At the green grocer, he meets Perkins, Jack Worthing's manservant. Here, Perkins learns that Lady Bracknell and her daughter, Gwendolen, are coming over to Algy's house for tea later that day. The two servants are then besieged by various vendors (greengrocer, bootmaker, dancing master, tobacconist, etc.) who are all upset because they are owed quite a bit of money by both Jack and Algy. The opening number "Come Raise Your Cup" has Lane and Perkins commenting on how the rich never pay their debts is what makes the English society so special. The merchants stop their complaining and join in.

Immediately following, at Jack Worthing's living room in the heart of London, Jack is writing a letter to Lady Gwendolen Fairfax. Perkins returns and reminds Jack about his debts, but Jack doesn't seem to be too concerned about this. He is more interested in the other news Perkins has for him - Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen are going to Algy's house for tea later that day. Actually, Algy's flat would be the perfect setting for Jack to propose to Gwendolen. Jack asks Perkins about proposing marriage to a woman; unfortunately, Perkins doesn't have any real good advice since he was only engaged once - and that was a misunderstanding. Alone Jack, dresses himself for tea and sings "How Do You Find the Words" thinking of just how he will propose to Gwendolen.

In Gwendolen's dressing room, about the same time, she is there trying on a variety of hats. Her maid, Alice, has told her that Jack will be at her cousin Algy's house for tea - Perkins stopped by earlier to inform them, and Gwendolen wants to look as beautiful as possible. She, too, has been invited there for tea and is certain that Jack will propose marriage today. In fact, she must find the perfect hat - since that's the first thing a man notices about a woman. She and Alice sing "The Hat," and by the song's end, they have found the just the right hat for a marriage proposal.

The scene shifts to Algy's living room where tea is set. Lane is giving the final once-over when the doorbell rings - it's Jack who is "surprising" Algy. Algy informs Jack that his Aunt Augusta (Lady Bracknell) and Cousin Gwendolen are coming over. Jack tells Algy that he is excited about this coincidence (He has actually planned it all along.) because he has come to town expressly to propose to Gwendolen. Unfortunately, Algy

informs Jack that he will never be able to marry Gwendolen because his aunt doesn't approve of him. You see, Jack and Gwendolen both flirt with each other, and that is perfectly disgraceful as far as Lady Bracknell is concerned. Also Algy doesn't give his consent. It seems that Jack left a cigarette case at his house last time he dined there with an inscription which read "From little Cecily, with her fondest love, to her dear Uncle Jack." When pressed, Jack confesses that Cecily is actually his eighteen-year-old ward with whom he lives in his country house. (Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted Jack as a boy, stated in his will that he watch over his grand-daughter, Cecily, after he die.) Also, in the country Jack is known as Jack, but here in London as Ernest. "Jack," is a guardian - a man of very high moral standards. However, he does still like to play, so he tells people in the country that he has a brother, Ernest, who gets into the worst trouble, and Jack goes to town to rescue him. Algy actually believes him because he, too, has invented another persona - a permanent invalid called Bunbury whom he goes to visit in the country whenever he wishes to get out of town and have a bit of fun. Jack at first sees this as very distasteful and immoral; however, in the song "Mr. Bunbury" Algy tells him that the invalid, Mr. Bunbury, is a necessity just like bad brother Ernest. Jack is ready to get rid of Ernest if Gwendolen only accepts to marry him. Algy tells him that he's crazy for every man needs an Ernest or Bunbury.

Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen arrive, and after a bit of conversation, Lady Bracknell announces to Algy that she has arranged for Algy to have dinner with a young woman by the name of Mary Farquar. Algy winces at the mention of her name and simply tells his aunt that he can't join her and Miss Farquar for dinner because Mr. Bunbury is sick once again and he must visit him. Lady Bracknell goes into the music room with Algy for a little concert - Jack and Gwendolen have a chance to be alone for a few minutes. It is here that Jack/Ernest and Gwendolen admit that they love each other passionately, and Jack proposes marriage to Gwendolen. She tells him that she is ready to accept him. He sings the song "Perfection" telling her all that she is to him. Upon hearing this, Gwendolen informs him that she knew she would marry him because she's always wanted to love someone named "Ernest." Jack asks her if she would love him if his name were Jack rather than Ernest? Absolutely not! She only loves Ernest. He kisses her to stop any further analysis of the situation.

Lady Bracknell returns, and Gwendolen informs her mother that she is engaged. Lady Bracknell tells her daughter that an engagement is something that a young girl doesn't arrange by herself, so she should wait in the carriage. Gwendolen waits in the carriage while she talks with Jack. Lady Bracknell now questions Jack about his breeding, and Jack informs her that actually he didn't know either of his parents. The late Mr. Thomas Cardew found him in a black handbag in the cloakroom at the Victoria Train Station. The bag was given by mistake instead of his own. He raised Jack as his own son. Lady Bracknell is rather concerned by all of this as she sings "A Handbag Is Not A Proper Mother." If Jack/Ernest wishes to be considered as a possible husband for her daughter, he must find another mother and father because this will never do. Upon stating this, she leaves.

Jack informs Algy that he must go home to the country and straighten things out. He first needs to get rid of Ernest forever by having him "die." Algy then asks Jack what his ward, Cecily, is like and says that he'd like to meet her. Cecily is only eighteen and is excessively pretty. In fact, Jack knows that Cecily and Gwendolen are certain to be extreme friends. Gwendolen reenters and informs Jack/Ernest that from the expression on her mother's face it is evident that they will never marry, but nevertheless, she will have eternal devotion to him. She gets his country address from him, and promises to communicate daily. Listening in the corner, Algy carefully copies the address. Jack escorts Gwendolen to her carriage, and Lane brings Algy different clothes into which he gladly changes ready to go to Jack's house in the country and have a bit of fun playing "Mr. Bunbury." (reprise)

The following day in the garden of Jack's country Manor House, Cecily is watering the roses and the old spinster Miss Prism (who watches Cecily) is knitting. Miss Prism tells Cecily that she should be studying, since her guardian, Jack, has left strict instructions. Cecily wishes that strict Uncle Jack would let his wild brother, Ernest, come down. Maybe then they could all have some fun.

Effie the maid announces that Dr. Chausable, the local pastor, has arrived. Upon hearing this, Miss Prism starts to primp. After a bit of conversation, Miss Prism fakes a slight headache and asks to go for a stroll in the park with Dr. Chausable. He accepts and the two leave. Upon their leaving, Effie announces to Cecily that Jack's younger brother, Ernest, has arrived from London. Cecily is quite intrigued at finally getting to meet

him and sings "A Wicked Man." Hopefully, he'll be everything she has dreamt him to be. Effie returns with Ernest (In actuality, it is Algy posing as Ernest.) He flirts terribly with Cecily, and she enjoys it tremendously. Cecily hears Miss Prism and Dr. Chausable returning from their walk, and pulls Ernest/Algy off with her. Miss Prism, too, is flirting - basically telling Dr. Chausable that he needs to get married. In the song "Metaphorically Speaking" Prism shows Dr. Chausable how a mature woman is like a flower in full bloom. She finally has him dancing with his arms around her when Jack enters. He is all dressed in the deepest mourning announcing that his brother, Ernest, is dead in Paris. Cecily then enters and announces a surprise - his brother Ernest is here for a visit. Everyone is stunned by Ernest's "miraculous recovery" - especially Jack. Jack is quite stunned/upset, but Cecily who is completely enchanted with Algy/Ernest demands that Jack shake his hand.

Jack and Algy are left alone and Algy announces that he is ready to stay for a week. Also, he finds Cecily to be a darling. Jack insists that Algy leave; however, Algy says that if he is forced to he will wire Gwendolen to come down and see the fraudulent life Jack is leading in the country. If Algy does that, Jack will expose him to Cecily. Nevertheless, Jack is going to change from his mourning clothes, and when he returns he will arrange for Algy to leave on the next train. Algy left alone, he sings a reprise of "A Wicked Man," getting ready to not go anywhere and have a good bit of fun.

Act II

The act opens at the country manor with the two servants (Effie and Lane) in an embrace. They talk about Algy/Ernest's infatuation with Cecily, but as Effie snuggles up to Lane, she wagers that the two probably haven't gotten 'round to holding hands. In the song "You Can't Make Love" they discuss this to be so because basically all the upper class rules, regulations, manners, morals, money, titles, names, etc. make it very difficult to make love. The servants have it so much easier.

In the garden, Algy/Ernest enters and talks with Cecily who is writing in her diary. Cecily informs him that her uncle has informed her that Algy/Ernest has been called back to town. He tells her that he's not leaving just yet because he must first tell Cecily that she is the "visible personification of absolute perfection." She copies his remarks into her diary - something she loves to do. While singing "Lost" he continues to tell her how beautiful she - he's "lost in her spell." She very intently writes it down. They finally embrace, and he confesses that he is hopelessly in love with her and asks her to marry him. She says that she will of course marry him because actually they have been engaged for the last three months. You see, ever since Uncle Jack told her about his wicked younger brother she has been in love with him. She shows him a little ring on her finger she has promised to always wear as a sign of their love. She also has a box of letters from him. She both bought the ring and wrote the letters since she never met him. (She even broke off the engagement once and forgave him.) Upon hearing this, he is so overtaken with love that he kisses her. Most of all, she tells him that she loves the name Earnest. She admits that she could never love someone with a name like Algernon. Algy/Ernest goes out on some important business - to be christened by Dr. Chausable and have his name changed.

Effie announces to Cecily that Gwendolen has arrived to see her Uncle Jack. Jack is off at the rector's doing something (also arranging to be christened) so Cecily talks with Gwendolen. Right from the beginning, the two appear to be good friends. In the song "My Very First Impression," they learn about each other. They also learn that they are both engaged to whom they think is the same man - "Ernest." After a bit of tea and battle, they decide that they now hate each other and are not going to let "Ernest" go off with the other.

Jack returns and goes to kiss Gwendolen who pushes him away asking if he is engaged to Cecily. She now learns that he really is Cecily's Uncle Jack. Algy comes in and Cecily points out that he is the real Ernest. Gwendolen exposes him as her cousin, Algernon. Both women find out that they have been deceived. Jack confesses that in truth he never had a wicked brother Ernest. The girls, angry about all that has happened, bond once again and go into the house.

Jack is quite upset, but Algy is quite nonplused by it all and simply sits - eating the ladies' leftovers from tea ("The Muffin Song") Jack wants all of this to end and simply wishes that Algy would leave.

Gwendolen and Cecily have gone to the morning room of the Manor House and are both upset. Jack and Algy both enter, and after some questioning, admit that they assumed alternate identities only in the hopes of meeting the ladies. The ladies are flattered, but neither cannot get passed the fact that neither man's Christian

name is actually Ernest. Both men say that they are going to be christened that very afternoon and change their names for the ladies. The ladies are both so touched by all this that they pledge their "Eternal Devotion" (in song) to the men and the men in return.

Immediately after this, Lady Bracknell enters and learns that her daughter is engaged to Jack. She forbids it. Upon hearing about Algy and Cecily's situation she is still concerned; however, upon learning that Cecily is worth quite a bit of money gives her consent to the marriage. Jack, on the other hand, says that the engagement is out of the question because she cannot marry without his consent till she comes of age, and he under the circumstances he is not going to give his consent. Under the terms of her grandfather's will, Cecily doesn't come of age until she is thirty-five. Jack will of course reconsider if Lady Bracknell does. As far as she is concerned, this is quite out of the question. They all sing a reprise of "A Handbag Is Not A Proper Mother."

Cecily tells Jack that she can't spend all the time until she's thirty-five with a short-sighted old lady like Miss Prism watching over her. Lady Bracknell, upon hearing Miss Prism's name, is quite intrigued and wants to see the woman immediately. she hurries off to find her. With Lady Bracknell gone, the four lovers sing a reprise of "The Muffin Song" where they ponder the situation and decide that they must elope this very afternoon - as improper as it may be. They just need to find a way around Lady Bracknell.

The scene shifts to the lawn in front of the church - only a few minutes later. Dr. Chausable is preparing for the christenings of Jack and Algy. The group enters and Miss Prism comes out of the church; Lady Bracknell spots her. Miss Prism shrinks and looks for some means of escape. Lady Bracknell calls to her and demands to know where the male baby she left in her charge twenty-eight years ago is. The baby was in a baby carriage which was discovered three weeks later with no baby - just a three volume novel of revolting sentimentality.

Miss Prism admits that she took the baby out of his carriage while taking him for a stroll, and also took out the book which she was writing from her handbag. She got distracted and put the baby in the handbag and novel in the carriage. She accidentally deposited the bag in the cloakroom of the Victoria Railway Station. Upon hearing this story, Jack leaves and returns with a black handbag which Prism says is hers - it even has her initials in it. As it turns out, Jack was the baby placed in that handbag. Lady Bracknell then tells Jack that he is actually the son of her sister - thereby making him Algy's elder brother. His name as it turns out is actually Ernest. Therefore, he isn't a fraud after all and doesn't need to be re christened.

So in the end, they all end up happily together (Even Miss Prism and Dr. Chausable get together.) and all sing a finale aptly titled "Ernest In Love."

MUSICAL NUMBERS

1. Overture
2. Come raise your cup
3. How do you find the words?
4. The hat
5. Mr. Bunbury
6. Perfection
7. A handbag is not a proper mother
8. A wicked man
9. Metaphorically speaking
10. You can't make love
11. Lost
12. My very first impression
13. The Muffin song
14. My eternal devotion
15. Ernest in love

CAST: 10 men, 6 women

INSTRUMENTATION

Reed I (Piccolo/flute/clarinet), Reed II (oboe/clarinet), Reed III (bass clarinet [opt]/bassoon), piano, double bass