

Lyric



# AN IDEAL HUSBAND

BY OSCAR WILDE

DIRECTED BY NICHOLAI LA BARRIE

EDUCATION RESOURCES

# OVERVIEW & CONTENTS

This education resource has been created by the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. We are committed to deepening and nurturing young people's understanding of theatre and the arts. We aim to raise the cultural aspirations of young people and make theatre accessible to all. With this in mind, this education resource is designed for teachers and drama students. This pack is written from a theatre maker's perspective and we hope it provides some interesting insights into how a production like *An Ideal Husband* is created and performed.

*An Ideal Husband* is a Lyric Hammersmith Theatre Production, in association with Bristol Old Vic.



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Acknowledgements

This pack is produced by the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre for education purposes only. It is not for commercial use.

Chiké Okonkwo and Jamael Westman.  
Credit: Helen Murray

# A HISTORY OF AN IDEAL HUSBAND

*An Ideal Husband* was first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London in 1895, during a period of major social, political, and cultural change in Britain known as the Victorian era. Understanding this context helps explain the play's focus on reputation, morality, and the hidden flaws beneath seemingly perfect lives.

Late Victorian society placed a huge emphasis on respectability. Public image mattered enormously, especially for those in positions of power such as politicians and members of the upper class. Figures like Sir Robert Chiltern represent the ideal Victorian gentleman—successful, moral, and admired. However, Wilde exposes how this “ideal” was often built on secrets, compromise, or even corruption. Scandals involving politicians were not uncommon, and the fear of public disgrace was very real.

The play also reflects the strict gender roles of the time. Women were expected to be morally pure and supportive of their husbands.

Characters such as Lady Chiltern embody these expectations, believing in absolute moral perfection. In contrast, Wilde presents more unconventional figures like Mrs Cheveley, who challenge traditional female roles by being independent, manipulative, and politically aware.

Politically, the late 19th century was a time of expanding democracy and increasing scrutiny of those in power. Issues such as financial speculation, empire, and political reform created opportunities for both success and corruption. Wilde uses the plot of blackmail and political secrets to highlight how ambition and morality often came into conflict.

Overall, the historical context of *An Ideal Husband* reveals a society obsessed with appearances but riddled with hidden truths—something Wilde cleverly exposes through drama, humour, and satire.



Chiké Okonkwo and Jamael Westman. Photo by Helen Murray

# SECRETS AND RECKONINGS IN OSCAR WILDE'S MOST PERSONAL PLAY

By Kate Hext



Cast of *An Ideal Husband* 2026.. Photo by Helen Murray.

At ten past six on 6 April 1895 two plain clothes detectives entered room 118 at the Cadogan Hotel in Knightsbridge with a warrant to arrest Oscar Wilde for ‘acts of gross indecency’. Wilde was at the peak of his fame: *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* had recently opened in the West End and were to set premiere in New York later in the year. ‘I’ll be famous,’ Wilde had told his Oxford contemporaries two decades earlier, ‘and, if not famous, notorious.’ In spring 1895 he became both.

*An Ideal Husband* opened at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket on 3 January 1895. It was his third social comedy play in the decade he was making his own. Encouraged by the new level of public attention brought by his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890,1891), Wilde craved artistic acclaim in serious drama. However he found his metier in stage comedy.

Like *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) and *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* was an immediate success. It is a comedy with a serious heart that poses questions about bad things done for good reasons, the meaning and limitations of love in marriage, and the public consequences of private acts. Wilde wrote it as he tightrope-walked between high society and dens of iniquity, leading the double life that would soon cost him everything – and it shows. The plot focuses on Sir Robert Chiltern, a dynamic and wealthy young politician, at the centre of London society. His public image as a family man of impeccable moral values is vital to his continued ascent to a ministerial position. But then a figure from the past arrives with a secret that threatens Sir Robert with professional and personal catastrophe.

The dramatic conceit of the past returning to the disrupt the present and exposure of a shocking double life were popular scenarios on the Victorian stage. The way in which Wilde brings the plot together, complete with a couple of stage tricks, in a tight four-act domestic melodrama was also familiar to theatre goers of his time. What Wilde does with these scenarios though is radical; *An Ideal Husband* lives up to its billing as ‘A New and Original Play of Modern Life’. He had learnt

from Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw that stage drama could define new styles and character types. Wilde does it in his own way: with humour. The epigrammatic dialogue of Lord Goring and Mrs Cheveley signals a modern, morally insouciant perspective on London society. Their wit skewers the values that Victorian society held dear and prepares the ground for a wholesale questioning of values that has no resolution when the curtain comes down.

On 6 April, Wilde expected the police officers at the Cadogan Hotel. He was alone, waiting with a book. They took him to Bow Street police station in a cab along Picadilly, almost past the Haymarket, where *An Ideal Husband* was to be performed for the last time that night. After two trials, Wilde was convicted and sentenced to two years hard labour for his relationships with men, or ‘acts of gross indecency’, as it was termed.

On his release from Reading Gaol in 1897, Wilde travelled around Europe, sometimes dreaming up new plays and at other times unable to imagine beyond the prison walls. In desperate financial need he edited his two final plays for publication. ‘I read a great deal, and correct the proofs of *An Ideal Husband*, shortly to appear’, he wrote in a letter, ‘It reads rather well, and some of its passages seem prophetic of tragedy to come.’ His much-revised 1899 edition of *An Ideal Husband* is the version performed this evening.

The end of Wilde’s story was to be very different from that of Sir Robert. For reasons of purported propriety *An Ideal Husband* was published without his name on the cover in 1899. The following year he died penniless in a Paris hotel room. However, Wilde’s life does not really end there because he was ahead of his time. Like all his comedies, *An Ideal Husband* is set in ‘The present’, whenever that is because he always wanted to be contemporary. Thus, the revivals and reinventions of his plays would delight him. Rising out of the notoriety that shaped his final works, these give him a vibrant afterlife.

**Kate Hext is associate professor of English literature at the University of Exeter. Her books include *Wilde in the Dream Factory: Decadence and the American Movies* (2024) and the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays by Oscar Wilde* (2025).**

# A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

**Nicholai La Barrie, Director, explains his vision for this brand new production of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* and why he has reimaged it in 2026.**

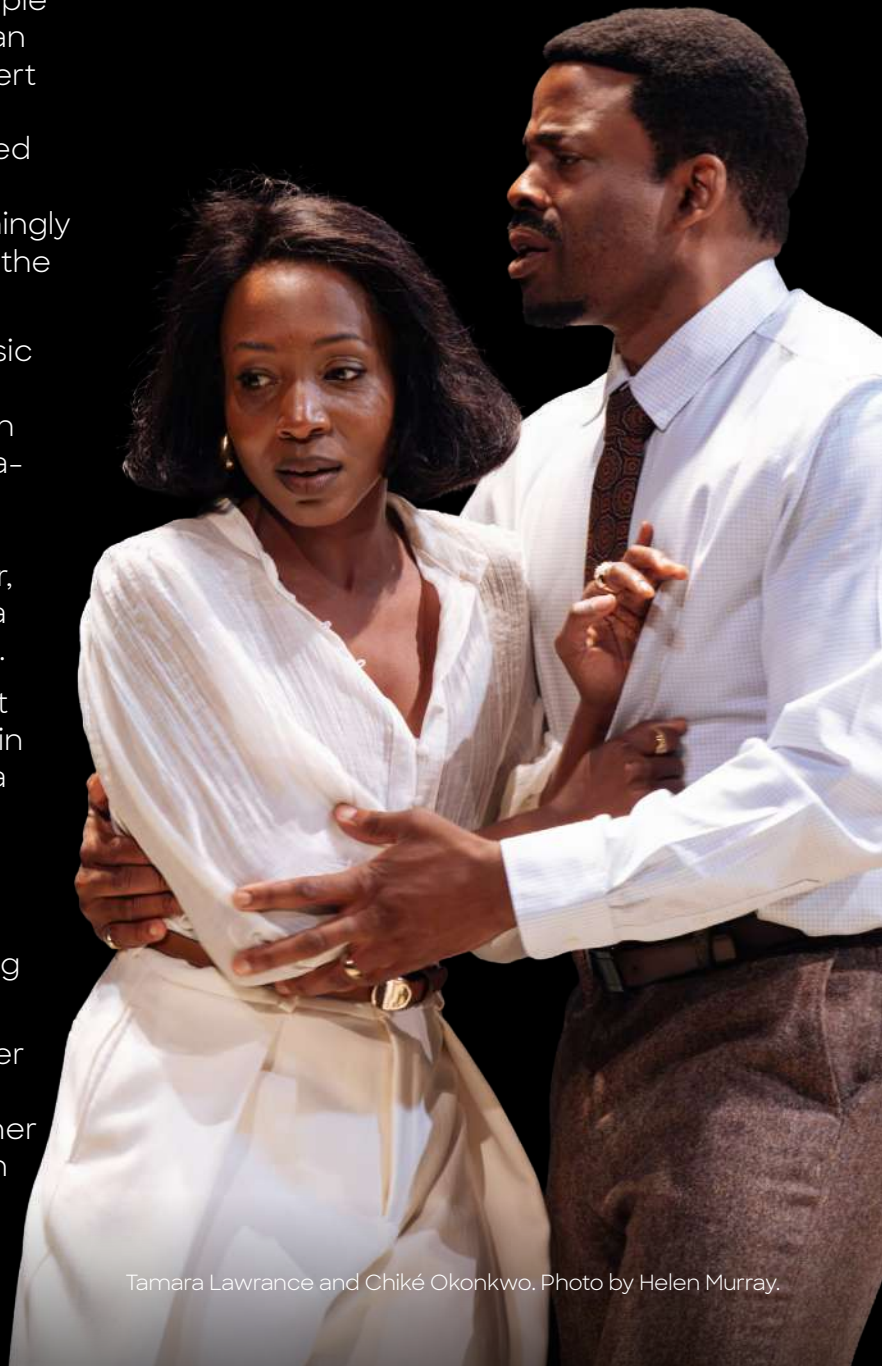
“At its heart, *An Ideal Husband* is a play about lying. Oscar Wilde poses a deceptively simple question: if we lie to the people we love, can we be forgiven and should we be? Sir Robert Chiltern spends the play running from his past, while Mrs Cheveley arrives determined to expose it. In a world built on image and performance, it is perhaps the most seemingly frivolous man in London who proves to be the most honest.

This 2026 reimaging places Wilde’s classic firmly in our present moment. Set within today’s political landscape, this production at the Lyric embraces a heightened, meta-theatrical world that is bold, self-aware, and unapologetically opulent. With an all-Black cast, we explore questions of power, respectability, and public image through a lens that feels both urgent and necessary.

The play is incredibly funny, but it is also, at its core, a love story. I’m drawn to its belief in the endurance of commitment – the idea that choosing to stand beside someone, even in their imperfection, is a radical act. In a world where truth feels increasingly unstable and loyalty can feel conditional, there is something deeply human in asking what it really means to stay.

This story feels timely. It asks us to consider the people we choose to trust, the ones we place in positions of power, and whether the ideals we demand of them are human or impossible.

It has been a joy to work with this extraordinary cast and creative team to bring this classic to the Lyric stage. Together, we hope to honour Wilde’s wit while revealing the urgency that still pulses beneath it.”



Tamara Lawrance and Chiké Okonkwo. Photo by Helen Murray.

# IN CONVERSATION

## WITH...

Hannah McLelland, Marketing Manager

**Hannah McLelland discusses her role as Marketing Manager at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre and how to create a campaign that supports a production like *An Ideal Husband*.**

**Can you describe your role as Marketing Manager at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre?**

As Marketing Manager, I'm part of the Communications and Sales team, leading production campaigns to boost ticket sales. My role spans from the initial title announcement through artwork shoots, cast announcements, content creation, and media presence, ensuring each campaign drives engagement and sales.

**When you are creating a campaign to support a production what are the main priorities?**

Knowing your target audience. Who are the people that are likely to care about the production and what new audiences can you engage. You're then able to tailor the campaign's messaging and content to these people, whilst still having a broad reach as you never want to eliminate a pool of theatre goers.

Ensuring your content is in-keeping with the theatre's branding whilst creating a visual identity of for the production. Social media and paid digital ads are where most people receive their news and advertising so we prioritise engaging, striking visuals and invest heavily in video content and high-quality poster artwork, which is also used in our Out of Home campaign (tube and train station posters).

And, of course, a huge priority is remaining within budget and tracking what arms of the campaign are performing the best and replicating that to increase ticket sales.

**How do you go about creating a concept for a campaign? How does this involve collaboration with creatives like the director and producer?**

Understanding the production is the most important thing. I aim to be involved in as many early conversations and meetings as possible so I have a good idea of the themes, tone and message of the show. It's also important to talk to the director, writer or producers as much as you can about the content ideas you have, what you imagine the campaign to look like and how we can work together to execute this. My role also works closely with the Company Stage Manager to organise filming or photography inside the rehearsal room and facilitating press interviews with cast members.

**Can you describe the vision and concepts for the campaign for *An Ideal Husband*?**

Thankfully, the director had a very clear vision for the look and feel of the show. The fashion and set were going to be a massive part of the production, almost acting as the 11th cast member, which informed us massively when designing the concept for the artwork. This production of *An Ideal Husband* is not period, it's set in present-day London, so we were able to tailor our messaging to a contemporary audience whilst also knowing that classic play audiences will be interested too, doubling our pool of prospective customers.

I knew I wanted to focus on the importance of an all-black cast in an English classic, the high-fashion, stylish look of the design and the scandalised politician storyline – all of which are very topical.

Video content always performs on digital ads so we have both high-quality and raw, authentic content being filmed, rehearsal, production and behind-the-scenes photography.

**Can you explain the photography created and how it links to the production?**

Creating the artwork was a massive project. We worked with many talented individuals to execute Nicholai's (Director) vision. Garments were sourced from fashion houses and costume stores that communicated the high-fashion backdrop of the production in one, powerful fell swoop. We had both make-up artists and hair stylist, a photographer, two assistants to him, a concept designer and members of the Comms team on hand to help.

The idea was always to have the three, central female characters on the image, showing audiences that this is a bold, contemporary take on Oscar Wilde's classic comedy and highlighting the characters who drive a lot of the narrative.

**What was your career pathway to becoming a Marketing Manager within the theatre industry?**

Like many people working in theatre, I wanted to be an actor and director. I trained at The BRIT School and studied Theatre before auditioning for drama school. I was accepted to a school up north but didn't want to leave London so decided to wait another year and audition again whilst also creating my own work. After the pandemic hit, I shifted gears, working Front of House at a theatre, and gradually moved into roles in Box Office, Admin, Fundraising, and Marketing. It wasn't my original plan, but I've learned that being in the industry, surrounded by creative people, is what I love. My journey gives me a unique perspective, understanding both the creative and administrative sides of theatre.

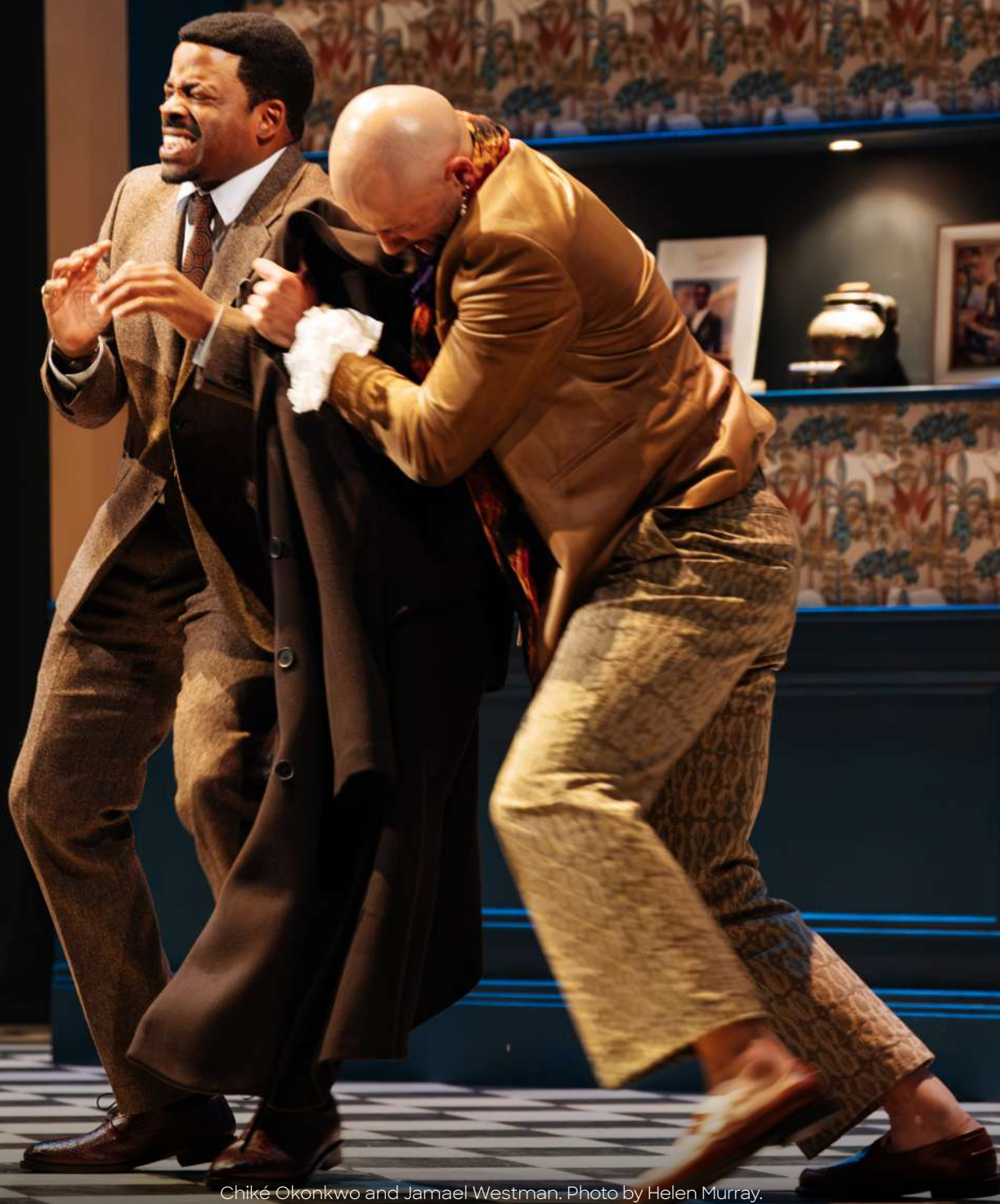
There are many ways in to the theatre industry. You won't find two people with the same pathway and that's the great thing about it. It encourages growth, new ideas and allows you to work with so many different, brilliant people.



Suzette Llewellyn and Nimmy March. Photo by Helen Murray.

# EDUCATION RESOURCES

Here are some resources to support the exploration of this production and an understanding of how theatre is created and performed.



Chiké Okonkwo and Jamael Westman. Photo by Helen Murray.

## Activity 1: Marketing

### TASK

Look at the poster for the production. If you were going to design an alternative poster for the show, what concept would you create? Have a go redesigning your own version.

**Lyric**

**07 May - 06 Jun**

**AN IDEAL HUSBAND**

**BY OSCAR WILDE**  
**DIRECTED BY NICHOLAI LA BARRIE**

Tickets from £10  
lyric.co.uk | 020 8741 6850

A Lyric Hammersmith Theatre production, in association with Bristol Old Vic

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The Lyric's 2026 Season is supported by Mark & Sarah Crosbie

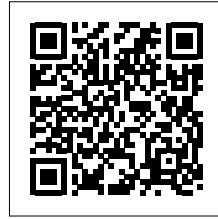
Photo by Courtney Nathan Phillip. Artwork concept by Bob King Creative

Here are links to filmed content that were created by Hannah McLelland to promote the production via social media.

**A Sneak Peek:**



**Rehearsals are underway:**



Suzette Llewellyn and Nimmy March. Photo by Helen Murray.

## Activity 2: Inside the Rehearsal Room

### TASK

Look at the pictures below and discuss the following questions:



Chiké Okonkwo and Tamara Lawrance. Photo by Helen Murray.

- 1) Describe the way the actors are using space and interaction including use of eye contact, facial expressions and gestures / body language?
- 2) What does their use of physicality communicate to the audience about their relationship?

**TIP: Use precise details when describing skills used by the actors**



Suzette Llewellyn (Lady Markby) and Nimmy March (Countess of Basildon). Photo by Helen Murray.

- 1) Describe the way the actors are using space and interaction including use of eye contact, facial expressions and gestures / body language?
- 2) What do you think is happening at this moment in the production?
- 3) If you were going to script a conversation between these two characters what might they be saying?

## Activity 3: Analysing Performance Skills



Use the QR code or click the link to watch a clip filmed in the rehearsal room.

### LINK

This is scene featuring the character Lord Goring and his valet/servant Phipps.



Emmanuel Akwafo and Jamael Westman. Photo by Helen Murray.

### TASK

Describe how the actors use performance skills in this scene to create humour.

Consider the use of vocal and physical drama skills and the use of movement, space and interaction used by the performers.

Have a go answering before looking at the model answer below.

### MODEL RESPONSE

In this scene, Lord Goring, played by Jamael Westman and his valet, Phipps, played by Emmanuel Akwafo, create humour through a combination of precise comic timing, physical comedy, and contrasting characterisation. Wilde's dialogue is already witty,

but the actors enhance the comedy through their performance choices, showing a clear understanding of how to bring text to life.

The humour in the exchange between Phipps and Lord Goring comes largely from the one-sided nature of their conversation. Lord Goring dominates the dialogue, while Phipps responds almost mechanically with "Yes, my lord." Although the line is straightforward, Akwafo's deadpan delivery transforms it into comedy. He uses vocal skills with great control, speaking in a monotone to convey boredom and disinterest, which contrasts sharply with the more animated and expressive Goring. The humour peaks when Phipps breaks the monotone briefly with, "Yes, yes, yes, my Queen! I mean my lord," using exaggerated intonation and volume to create surprise and laughter. This moment of contrast highlights his character's subservience but also shows clever comic timing.

Akwafo's facial expressions complement his vocal choices. Most of the time, his face remains neutral, which reinforces the monotone delivery, but a small, fleeting smile when he repeats "yes" three times signals a subtle comic beat that the audience notices. This quick micro-expression, disappearing as he returns to "My lord," enhances the timing and makes the scene visually funny as well as verbally.

## Activity 3: Analysing Costume Design

In this production, the costume design, by Rajha Shakiry, for *An Ideal Husband* takes a contemporary approach while reflecting the elegance and sophistication associated with the play's upper-class setting. The designs draw on modern fashion trends, incorporating sharp tailoring and luxurious fabrics to convey status, wealth, and style.

High-fashion events such as the Met Gala were used as inspiration for the costumes.. This means the costumes often feature dramatic silhouettes, eye-catching details, and statement pieces that echo the glamour and extravagance of modern red-carpet fashion.

The modern costumes:

- Highlight the characters' social status and personality traits.
- Create a visual contrast between different characters, helping audiences quickly understand relationships and hierarchy.
- Encourage audiences to connect the themes of power, reputation, and appearances to a contemporary context.

### TASK

When analysing costume design, consider how modern interpretations of classic plays can add new layers of meaning:

- How does the costume help us understand the character?
- How does it link to contemporary fashion trends and society?

Have a go answering before looking at the model response.



Aurora Perrineau. Photo by Helen Murray.

### MODEL RESPONSE

Mrs Cheveley wears an amber colour satin dress with a halter-neck top and a form fitting silhouette. The bold colour reflects Mrs Cheveley's confident and manipulative personality. Orange is a striking and attention-grabbing colour, suggesting her desire to dominate the room and influence others. It can also hint at danger and intensity, aligning with her scheming and morally ambiguous actions. The glossy, luxurious fabric reinforces her wealth, sophistication, and social status. Silk and satin catch the light, making her presence more commanding and seductive, mirroring how she charms and manipulates those around her.

The halter neck and body-hugging silhouette draws attention to her shoulders and neckline, emphasizing confidence and poise. The form-fitting silhouette highlights her femininity and allure, which she uses strategically to persuade and control other characters. The overall sleek design suggests modern elegance, indicating she is calculated, stylish, and self-aware.

This costume communicates Mrs Cheveley's dominance and manipulative nature even before she speaks and creates a visual contrast with other characters, underlining her role as a threatening, persuasive force in the story.

The contemporary, glamorous style helps modern audiences relate to her power and confidence, making her both captivating and intimidating.



Sule Thelwell, Aurora Perrineau, Nimmy March and Suzette Llewellyn. Photo by Helen Murray.



### TASK

Describe how the costumes in the images above support characterisation and explain what is communicated to the audience about status and power.

**TIP: consider elements of the costume such as colour, fabric, cut, fit and condition.**

## Activity 5: Exploring the Themes of An Ideal Husband

*An Ideal Husband* is rich with themes like morality, hypocrisy, political corruption, gender roles, and the tension between public and private selves—perfect for drama exploration. Here are some ideas that you can use to develop deeper understanding of the production and characters.

### 1. Status & Power Improvisations

Theme focus: Power, politics, social hierarchy

- Give students roles (politician, socialite, journalist, outsider).
- Improvise a high-society party scene where secrets are hinted at but not revealed.
- Add a twist: one character knows a damaging secret about another.

#### Reflection:

Who held power? Was it based on truth, status, or manipulation?

### 2. Conscience Corridor

Theme focus: Morality vs ambition (Sir Robert's dilemma)

- One student plays Sir Robert walking through a "corridor" of classmates.
- On one side: voices encouraging him to protect his reputation.
- On the other: voices urging honesty and confession.

#### Extension:

Students switch roles and explore different outcomes.

### 3. Hot Seating Characters

Theme focus: Dual identities, hypocrisy.

Students take on roles like:

- Sir Robert Chiltern
- Lady Chiltern
- Mrs Cheveley
- Lord Goring

#### Class interviews them:

- "What do you believe vs what do you show society?"
- "Is it ever acceptable to lie?"

### 4. Freeze Frames (Tableaux)

Theme focus: Public vs private selves

- Groups create two still images:

1. A "perfect" public image
2. The hidden truth behind it

Others guess what's really happening.

### 5. Debate in Role

Theme focus: Idealism vs realism

- Half the class (as Lady Chiltern-type thinkers): "People must be morally perfect."
- Other half (Lord Goring perspective): "Imperfection is human."

Students debate *in character*.

## 6. Secret Letters Exercise

Theme focus: Deception, truth, and consequences

- Students write a secret letter one character might send.
- Letters are swapped and acted out as dramatic readings.

## 7. Theme Sculpting

Theme focus: Abstract ideas (honour, corruption, love)

- In groups, students create physical sculptures representing a theme.
- Others interpret the meaning.

## 8. Alternate Endings

Theme focus: Justice and redemption

- What if Sir Robert was exposed?
- What if Lady Chiltern never forgave him?

Students perform alternative final scenes.

## 9. Tension Graph Activity: “Mapping the Drama”

- What creates tension in drama? (secrets, conflict, stakes, timing)
- Where have we already seen tension in the play?

### Step 1: Introduce the Graph

Students draw:

- X-axis = timeline of the play (Acts or key events)
- Y-axis = level of tension (low → high)

### Step 2: Identify Key Moments

Give students (or let them find) major plot points, such as:

- Mrs Cheveley’s arrival with her secret
- Sir Robert’s past being revealed
- Lady Chiltern’s moral stance
- Lord Goring’s intervention
- The resolution (truth, forgiveness, reputation saved)

You can scaffold by focusing on characters like:

- Sir Robert Chiltern
- Mrs Cheveley
- Lady Chiltern

### Step 3: Plot the Tension

Students:

- Plot each key moment on their graph
- Join points to create a tension curve

Encourage debate:

“Is this the highest tension point—or is it later?”

### Step 4: Annotate the Graph

Next to points, students write:

- What causes the tension? (e.g., blackmail, moral conflict)
- Who holds power in that moment?
- What is at stake?

### Drama Extension (15–20 mins)

Bring the Graph to Life

In groups:

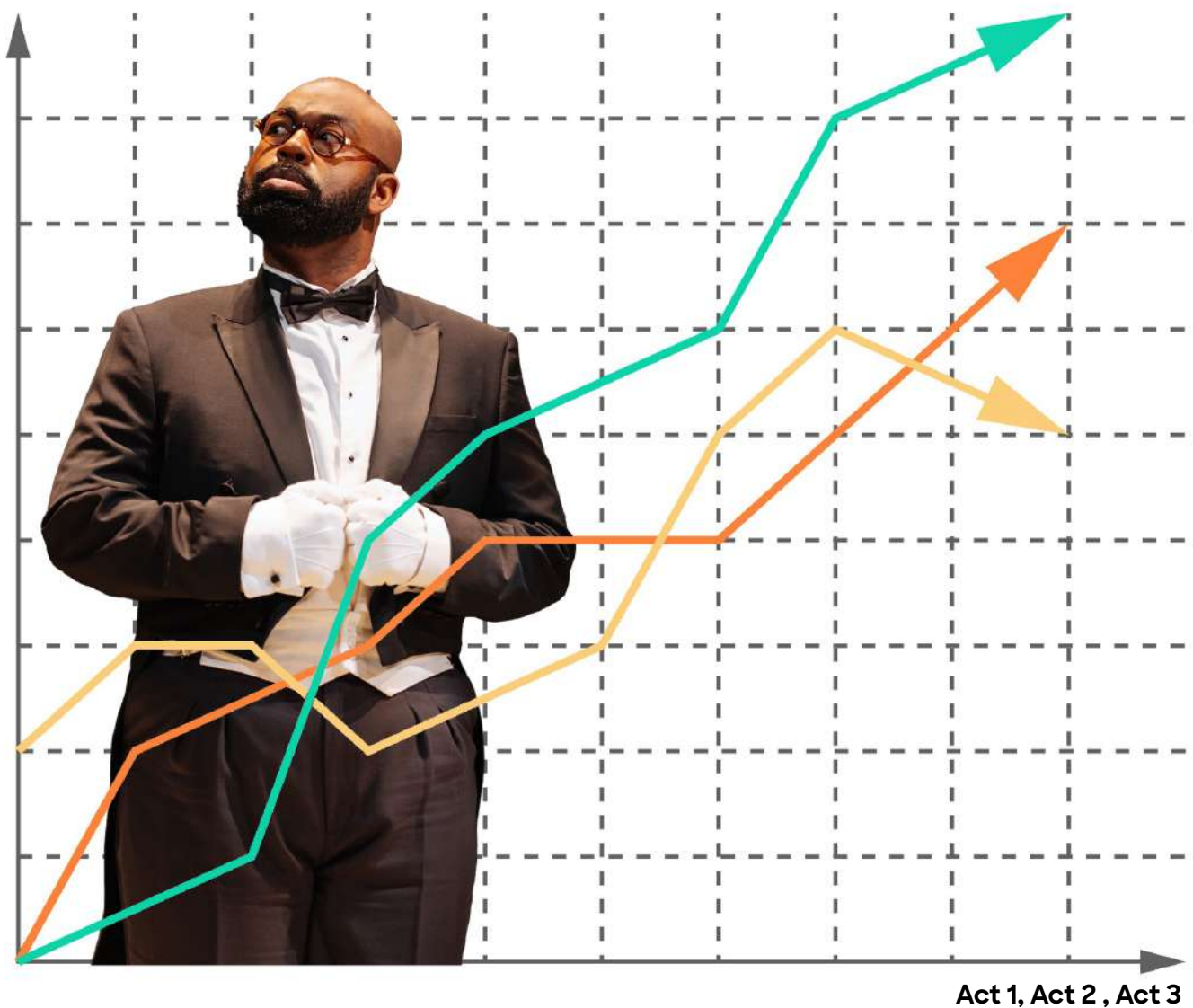
- Choose 3–4 points from the graph
- Create short freeze frames or mini-scenes showing each moment
- Exaggerate tension through:
  - Voice
  - Physicality
  - Proxemics (distance between characters)

Other students guess where on the graph the scene belongs.

Discuss:

- Where is the climax? Why?
- Does tension rise steadily or spike?
- How does Wilde resolve tension—quickly or gradually?

#### High tension / low tension



Act 1, Act 2, Act 3

Mrs Cheveley, Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern

# Acknowledgements

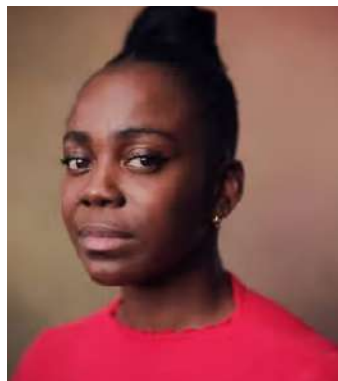
## Cast



Mason / Phipps  
**Emmanuel Akwafo**



Earl of Caversham  
**Jeff Alexander**



Mabel Chiltern  
**Tiwa Lade**



Lady Chiltern  
**Tamara Lawrance**



Lady Markby  
**Suzette Llewellyn**



Lord Chiltern  
**Chiké Okonkwo**



Countess of Basildon  
**Nimmy March**



Mrs Cheveley  
**Aurora Perrineau**



Vicomte de Nanjac  
**Sule Thelwell**



Lord Goring  
**Jamael Westman**

## Creative Team

**Writer** Oscar Wilde

**Director** Nicholai La Barrie

**Set & Costume Designer** Rajha Shakiry

**Lighting Designer** Zeynep Kepekli

**Sound Designer** Holly Khan

**Movement Director** Alexzandra Sarmiento

**Casting Director** Heather Basten CDG

**Assistant Director** Gráinne Flynn

**Intimacy Director** Bethan Clark

**Associate Costume Designer** Mariama Bojang

**Design Associate** Yimei Zhao

**Associate Lighting Designer** Ric Mountjoy

**Associate Sound Designer** Vanessa Garber

**Associate Movement Director**  
Tinovimbanashe Sibanda

Lyric

## ABOUT THE LYRIC HAMMERSMITH THEATRE

The Lyric Hammersmith Theatre produces bold and relevant world-class theatre from the heart of Hammersmith, the theatre's home for more than 130 years. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Rachel O'Riordan and Executive Director Amy Belson, it is committed to being vital to, and representative of, the local community. A major force in London and UK theatre, the Lyric produces adventurous and acclaimed theatrical work that tells the stories that matter.

BRISTOL  
OLD VIC

## ABOUT BRISTOL OLD VIC

Led by Artistic Director Nancy Medina and Executive Director Rebecca Dawson, with investment from Arts Council England, Bristol Old Vic is committed to creating opportunities for new voices and artists, and to present an increasingly diverse programme of stories that Bristol has to offer on our stages.

Bristol Old Vic is home to the oldest continuously operating theatre in the English speaking world, celebrating its 260th anniversary this year. It is also home to one of UK theatre's biggest learning and engagement programmes, working across the city through pioneering outreach projects, and one of the UK's leading artist development programmes.



Tiwa Lade and Sule Thelwell. Photo by Helen Murray.

For more information on our education work and to download, other teaching resources please visit [lyric.co.uk/young-lyric/education](http://lyric.co.uk/young-lyric/education)

Take a look at some of our previous Education Packs:

