Jamie is rehearsing the role of Algernon Moncrieff in the Royal Exchange Theatre's production of THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST by Oscar Wilde. The play is directed by Braham Murray. The first performance of THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST will take place at the Royal Exchange Theatre on Wednesday 23 June.

Jamie trained at RADA. He last appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre playing Herbert Pocket in GREAT EXPECTATIONS directed by Jacob Murray. Jamie’s other theatre credits include AN INSPECTOR CALLS (National Theatre) ANOTHER COUNTRY (Arts Theatre) PLENTY (Almeida at the Albery Theatre) and SKYLIGHT (Harrogate Theatre). On television Jamie has appeared in POIROT and MIDSOMER MURDERS.

WEEK 1: 24 – 28 May

I reported to stage door on the first day of rehearsal at Noon. The first thing I did was to attend a Meet and Greet session in the rehearsal room. At this session I introduced myself and met the other actors in the cast, the members of the production team and other people who work at the Theatre. There were a lot of people in the rehearsal room! The director, Braham Murray, gave a short speech outlining his ideas about the play. Braham has seen a lot of productions of the play; some he felt have been too frivolous and camped up whilst others have taken, in his opinion the play too seriously. Ideally, Braham is hoping that this production will achieve something of a balance between the two extremes. He also told us that for this production he has decided to move the period, in which the play is set from 1895, when it was written to 1913, just before the First World War. It’s quite poignant to set it at this time as the play depicts a bright and happy time, which after the First World War completely disappeared. Johanna Bryant, the designer then showed us the set model and the space that we’re going to be performing in. It’s extremely important to keep the performance space firmly in your mind during rehearsals, as you don’t want to step onto stage for the first time during the technical rehearsal and be surprised by it. Johanna also showed us her costume drawings, which are brilliant. We also discussed wigs with Rowena, who is in charge of wigs and make up at the Theatre.

After most people had left the rehearsal room we read through the play. At the read through everyone is quite nervous, as it’s the first time that they get to speak their lines out loud. I try and have as much fun with them as possible and try not to get too het up. After the read through Braham told us that in rehearsal he’s going to start by working with us to find out what is at the heart of every scene before we then move into performance mode. Braham uses beats to analyse the character’s actions for speaking each individual line, for example a character trying to please another one or making some body else feel guilty. In rehearsals Braham also uses another term movements, which is when the actors and the director read a scene and then establish together what the character’s objectives are in it. When I’m playing Algernon in the first scene, my objective may be to keep the Butler, Lane firmly in his place.

For the rest of the week we went through the script, reading each scene and then discussing with Braham the beats and movements for each character. By the end of the week we were beginning to build up an internal structure for each scene. It’s very easy when rehearsing Wilde to end up talking like a machine gun and lose any real sense of what’s going on. This is why it’s really important to have a clear idea of what every character is thinking and doing in each scene. We also managed by the end of the week to roughly block the play.

I played the part about five years ago and I’ve spent a lot of this first week trying to get rid of the baggage I acquired from the previous production. I’ve already changed my mind a lot on how the character should be played. Algernon is obviously a free spirit, he’s probably the one character in the play that is most like Wilde himself. Like Wilde, Algernon is a great talker and is very confident. He is incredibly intelligent and has an amazing philosophy about life, which is that people should take everything serious, trivially and everything trivial, seriously! His major passions are bunbberyng and he’s very much aware that sometimes the truth can be obtained through lying. In the play it’s almost as if Algernon is wearing a mask and playing the part will be like taking part in an elaborate maskwork exercise.

Next week my main aim is to learn the lines and now that I have some idea of what the director wants, to start to develop the character. I’ll also be working on getting to grips with the rhythms of the lines which at present I’m not sure about.
**WEEK 2: 31 May – 4 June**

We started the play from the beginning and went over the work that we did last week. This time as we went through each scene if there was anything we were unhappy with including blocking we stopped and sorted it out. This week was also the first time that we went through the scenes without using our scripts. When we had become familiar with our lines we tried to quickly pick up on our cues. In a play like this it’s very important to anticipate your next line and to come in on your cue quickly, as you could throw both yourself and another actor by mistiming it. There’s also a tendency with some of the dialogue, as it is so wordy, to panic and rattle through it quickly. If you do this it makes no sense at all, it’s important to fully understand what you are saying and communicate this to an audience.

I’m still playing around with different aspects of Algernon’s character. I’ve tried to approach each scene differently to see if there is anything new I can bring to the playing of the part. Sometimes just to refresh my approach of rehearsing and playing a part, I think to myself what different actors like Cary Grant for example, would do if they were also playing the same role. I still haven’t quite worked out what sort of character Algernon is, sometimes he can be very charming and on other occasions he can be quite petulant. He’s obviously very good at telling stories and enjoys doing this.

For homework, I’ve been reading a lot about Oscar Wilde this week. In one of the biographies I read, the writer said that Oscar sought to brilliant but without any zeal. I think what he meant by this is that Oscar wanted to make his quick wittiness look incredibly easy. That’s very difficult to do because most people can’t be brilliant without working very hard. Wilde had a passion for reading and all things intellectual and philosophical, and I guess he just managed to absorb a lot of this, so that the knowledge he acquired became embedded in his unconsciousness and he could call on it when ever he wanted.

Next week I’m looking forward to rehearsing in the Theatre during the daytime to get a feel for what it will be like to perform in the space when the play opens in two weeks time.

**WEEK 3: 7 – 11 June**

Last week we were in the module for the first time and again started rehearsing the play at the beginning. We worked through all of the play before the end of the week and then spent some time working on Act 2. On Saturday morning we ran through the play for the first time.

When I’ve been rehearsing in the module I’ve been getting used to the space and working to expand my performance. It’s not that you need to act bigger you just need to think bigger and use your imagination. There’s an acting term called the *imaginative breath*, which sums all this up, it means that every time you breathe, you breathe in a bigger thought to fill the space. I’m still trying not to rush through saying the lines and by making sure that I do a proper vocal warm up, I’m hoping that I will be able to expand my voice to fill the space.

I had my hair cut this week and tried my costume on for the first time. You don’t really have a lot of control over what you wear, sometimes you may look at a costume and decide to slightly change how you are preparing to play a role to accommodate the designer’s ideas.

I’ve decided this week to stop doing research on the play. I was beginning to think that having read so many books on Oscar Wilde that I had to play the part in a certain way. It’s a good thing to do research as long as it doesn’t stop you from developing a character. As soon as you start to think that you have to get it right then it’s time to draw back from the research and go back to the world of the play. Everything that you need to play a part comes from within yourself and you can use anything to help inspire you.

I wrote a biography for Algernon to help me develop a life for the character outside the play. I also started to write a list for Algernon of how he perceives himself to be and how he is actually seen by other people. For example he considers himself to be a brilliant pianist but in reality he’s awful. This provides the character with a contradiction and provides me with something to work with for the rest of the rehearsals and during the run of the play.