By MARTHA STEIMEL
Arts Editor

"The Importance Of Being Earnest" can be either rotten or wonderful and Baylor University's production of the Oscar Wilde comedy is nudging the first syllable of "wonderful."

It has style. It has the kind of elegance that started to fade when Victoria's reign ended. It is crammed with wit and crafty observations, wittily and craftily tossed out by a highly polished cast of student actors.

This is the second in the series of plays presented in the American College Theater Festival at Midwestern State University. There are three more to come after the Thursday night performance of MSU's entry, "The Shadow Box," reviewed in the Nov. 10 Record News and Times. "The Importance Of Being Earnest" was Thursday's matinee.

Great attention was given details: walking canes, wicker garden furniture, anti-macassars and even a stereopticon all were exactly right. Costuming was done with equal care, from parasols to spats. There's no doubt about it, 1895 was an elegant year when it came to clothes. There was even a complete mourning outfit, down to the black-bordered handkerchief and crape-draped topper.

All this effort would have been useless without the actors. Dick Hoosier was masterful as Jack - his timing was excellent, he used his body well. Dustye Winniford was Algernon, looking like a young satyr and behaving like an apprentice devil with drawing room manners.

This play was done entirely with British accents, product of some knowledgeable dialect coaching.

Patricia Cook directed this play. It's one that has been around for some time and one that nearly everyone has either studied or read or seen so it takes a special sort of approach and sure touch to do it with aplomb. James W. Swain did the costumes and the set designer was William Sherry.

The change from London flat to country house garden to country house drawing room was choreographed between the three acts. It was fun to watch as the ingenious set folded and unfolded to transform the stage from one place to another.

The plot of "The Importance Of Being Earnest" allows two young gentlemen each to pretend to be an Earnest who doesn't exist and each Earnest meets a highly bred young woman who is sure only a man named Earnest could be her husband. Teresa Cook and Stephani Hardy play Gwendolen and Cecily Cardew - one a product of London soirees, the other rusticating under the care of a governess.

Rev. Chasuble and his unlikely love, Miss Prism, were played by Annette Brashear and Danny Guy Ball. Tom Simmons as Merriman and Randy Brown as Lane were delightful butlers.

Nancy Parrish played Lady Bracknell, parlour-proper and devastatingly avaricious. All were totally believable.

There will be one ACT performance at 8 p.m. Friday when The University of Texas at Dallas presents "Uncle Vanya." It and all plays in the festival are done on the main stage in the Fine Arts Center at MSU and are open to the public.