

Michael Frayn's

NOISES OFF

Directed by
Julia Rodriguez-Elliott
& Geoff Elliott

May 21–June 9, 2019



Pictured: Ensemble. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.



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All the best,

Alicia Green
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Pictured: Donnla Hughes, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2016. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

The characters in *Noises Off* are all involved in a theatrical production of a fictional play called *Nothing On* in some capacity. Here is what a playbill for *Nothing On* might look like

Actor	Role in <i>Nothing On</i>	Company (These are fictitious bios of the actors who are in the "Play within the Play")
LLOYD DALLAS A temperamental, yet charismatic man. Part of a love triangle with Poppy and Brooke.	The Director	Lloyd studied English at Cambridge and stagecraft at the Salisbury. A commonwealth scholarship took him to Princeton where he spent his time commuting to New York. On his trip, he saw Lee Strasberg and Tallulah Bankhead at a party on East 10th Street. Since that trip, Lloyd has directed plays in most parts of Britain, and won the South of Scotland Critics' Circle Special Award in 1968. In 1972, he directed a highly successful season for the National Theatre of Sri Lanka. In recent years Lloyd has become best known for his brilliant series of Shakespeare in Summer productions in the parks of the inner London boroughs.
DOTTY OTLEY A middle-aged actress who is very forgetful, but mostly good-natured. She has a backstage romance with Garry Lejeune, over whom she becomes insanely jealous. This causes problems both on and off stage.	Mrs. Clackett: the housekeeper	Dotty makes a welcome return to the stage to create the role of Mrs. Clackett after playing Mrs. Hackett, Britain's most famous lollipop lady ('Ooh, I can't 'ardley 'old me lolly up!') in over 320 episodes of TV's <i>On the Zebras</i> . She was born in Malta, and trained at the Estelle Birkwood School of Drama and Allied Arts and went on to the Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage, where she gained invaluable experience as an assistant stage manager in successful productions of <i>As You Desire</i> and <i>Starched Aprons</i> . She understudied for Bee Duffell in <i>Haddock's Eyes</i> at the New Lindsey Theatre, Notting Hill Gate, as well as Margaret Lockwood in <i>Peter Pan</i> at the Scala. She was followed by The King's Theatre, Peebles for a season, and then the Duke's Players at Lyme Regis for the better part of two seasons. This in turn led to a prolonged stay in Australia, where she enjoyed some of the biggest successes of her career. When she gets the time she intends to write her memoirs.
GARRY LEJEUNE He often leaves thoughts dangling and doesn't finish his sentences. His romantic interest in Dotty drives him to repeatedly attack Freddy.	Roger Tramplemain: the estate agent	Garry has won the Rose Bruford Medal for Effort twice. His many successful tours have brought him to Weston-Super-Mare only once before, when he was starring in <i>The Adventures of a Window Dresser</i> . He has made innumerable television appearances, but is perhaps best known as Cornetto, the ice-cream salesman who stirs the hearts of all the lollipop ladies in <i>On the Zebras</i> . He recently made his big screen debut in <i>Up the Virgin Soldiers</i> , for which he was nominated as Best Male Newcomer under Forty in any British Low Budget Comedy Film by readers of the <i>Sun</i> newspaper.
BROOKE ASHTON Brooke is a young, inexperienced actress often in search of a missing contact lens. She is part of a love triangle with Lloyd and Poppy.	Vicki: the ingenue	Brooke is probably best known as the girl wearing nothing but "good, honest, natural froth" in the Hauptbahnhofbrau lager commercial. However, she has enjoyed a flourishing stage career, extending from a widely acclaimed <i>Dandini</i> in Hull to six months in the <i>Lebanon</i> with <i>Pixie Pearls</i> . Her television appearances range from the Girl at Infants' School in <i>On The Zebras</i> to Girl in Strip Joint in <i>On Probation</i> . Cinemagoers saw her in <i>The Girl in Room 14</i> where she played the Girl in Room 312.
FREDDY FELLOWS An insecure, overthinking actor who gets a nosebleed at the first hint of violence and always needs to know his motivation.	Philip Brent and the Sheikh	Freddy comes from a theatrical family: his parents were a popular specialty dance act of the thirties and forties called The Funny Fellows. He taught at a prep school near Hayward's Heath before bowing to family tradition and joining the Osmosis Players. He had successful seasons in Nairobi, Ventnor, and Southwold. He is happily married, and lives near Crawley, where his wife breeds pedigree dogs.
BELINDA BLAIR A reliable, good-natured actress who is protective of Freddy.	Flavia Brent: Wife of Philip Brent	Belinda has been on the stage since the age of four, when she made her debut in <i>Sinbad the Sailor</i> at the Old Croydon Hippodrome as one of Miss Toni Tanner's Ten Tapping Tots. She subsequently danced her way around the country as well as internationally in shows like <i>Zippedy-Doo-Da!</i> and <i>Here Come Les Girls!</i> A damaged tendon led to her first parts in straight plays such as <i>Good Time Girl</i> , <i>Ladies of the Night</i> , and <i>Ring Twice for Rita</i> . She is married to playwright Terry Housemonger. They have two sons and three retrievers.

SYNOPSIS

It is only hours before the opening of *Nothing On*, a British farce, and the touring company performing it is hurriedly running through a final dress rehearsal in the Grand Theatre in Weston Super Mare before the first audience arrives.

ACT ONE: During the first act, we are an audience to this production of a play within a play. The *Nothing On* cast is loveable, but mainly inept. However, we cheer for them under our breath and hope that they can pull it together and get the show on the road. Dotty, the actor playing Mrs. Clackett, can't remember her entrances and exits. Garry, playing Roger, the male love interest, can't remember his lines. And Brooke, playing Vicki, the female lead, is constantly posing and primping, without any understanding of what the play is about or what she is doing. Trying to pull this all together into some semblance of a presentable show is the director, Lloyd Dallas, who is sitting in the darkened auditorium shouting out directions and trying to get everybody ready for opening.

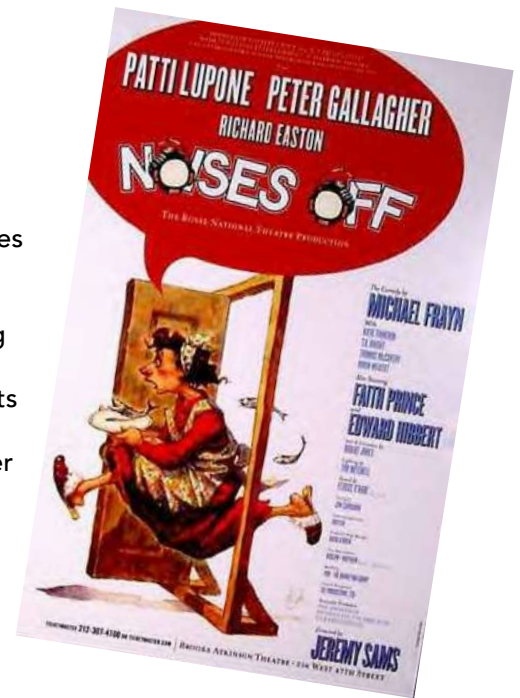
ACT TWO: Four weeks later. Welcome to a view of the backstage of the production of *Nothing On*. The quality of the show has deteriorated over four weeks of the tour. Garry and Dotty are in the middle of an unhappy love affair. Poppy, the assistant stage manager, is pregnant, and Selsdon Mowbray, an actor in his late sixties, is trying to stay sober between scenes. Add to this, a visit by director Lloyd, who sneaks backstage to comfort his "overly excited" lover, Brooke. Lloyd ends up having to save his play from total disaster. We watch the company, who is in a continual state of agitation, as they take their

offstage differences to high levels of physical comedy all the while trying to make their entrances and exits on stage. The chaos and disorder carries over into the play, causing missed entrances, flubbed lines, and general hilarity.

ACT THREE: Things are even more frenetic. It is a month later, and the tour is reaching an end. We, the audience, are out front again, watching a performance of *Nothing On* that has reached the point of complete and hilarious deterioration. The business of performing the show has become subordinate to the business of solving personal problems offstage. Dotty refuses to come out of her dressing room. Garry is now drinking Selsdon's whiskey. Scenery collapses and props explode. The actors compete to sabotage one another's performances, giving and taking verbal and sometimes physical cracks at each other both backstage and on stage. Normal rules of theater etiquette don't apply anymore. Ultimately, however, they pull off the show—in some semblance. ■

Source: "Insights: A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival: Noises Off." *Utah Shakespeare Festival*. Ed. Bruce C. Lee. 2011. Web.

IMAGE: Poster for the 2001 Broadway revival of *Noises Off*, starring Patti Lupone and Peter Gallagher



THE “PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY”

Meta-Theatre: defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms as “any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretense.” The meta-theatrical device of a play-within-a-play “works as a valid means to make an audience think about the fictionality of real life and the reality of fiction; and, if its form is that of the mock rehearsal, the formula enables the playwright to point out the flaws and enhance the virtues of the theatre while commenting on the state of the theatre of his time.”

Noises Off is one of the most famous examples of the “play-within-a-play” tradition, which is itself one example of **meta-theatre**.

Other Examples of Meta-Theatrical Works

Hamlet by William Shakespeare—Hamlet believes that his uncle, Claudius, is responsible for the death of his father, the late king of Denmark. In a plan to confront Claudius, Hamlet employs a group of actors to perform a play called *The Murder of Gonzago*, in which a king is murdered by his nephew. According to Hamlet, the “purpose of playing” is to “hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature,” and thus, the action of the play reflects real-life events. Hamlet renames the play *The Mousetrap* saying that “the play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of a king.”

A Midsummer Night’s Dream by William Shakespeare—One of the several plots of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* follows a group of “mechanicals”—local craftsmen—as they rehearse a play for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Their process is fraught with difficulties—not least of which is that their lead actor, Bottom, has had his head replaced with that of a donkey. However, in the final scene of the play, they perform *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe* to the delight of Duke.

The Beggar’s Opera by John Gay—*The Beggar’s Opera* tells the story of a notorious highway man, Macheath, and does so in the form of a play-within-a-play. At the



Pictured: (left) Geoff Elliot, (right) Kasey Mahaffy, *Man of la Mancha* 2017. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

start of the play, we are introduced to a narrator—apparently the writer of the play we are about to watch—who then interrupts the action towards the end of the play, saving Macheath from the gallows and offering the audience a happy ending.

Six Characters In Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello—In Pirandello’s satirical and surreal exploration of theatre-making, a director and his cast of actors are interrupted during a rehearsal by an unnamed group of six people who want their story to be performed. As the play progresses, the lines between reality and fiction become blurred, not only for us the audience but for the characters themselves.

Man of La Mancha by Dale Wasserman, with lyrics by Joe Darion and music by Mitch Leigh—This musical also has a play within a play structure. In the late 1500s, historical author Miguel de Cervantes is thrown into prison by the Spanish Inquisition, where he presents a play with the help of his fellow prisoners as Don Quixote De La Mancha. ■

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **MICHAEL FRAYN**



Michael Frayn

Michael Frayn is an English playwright, novelist, and translator, currently living outside of London with his wife Claire Tomalin, who is an English biographer and journalist. He is best known as the playwright for the farce comedy *Noises Off* (1982), and the dramas *Copenhagen* (1998) and *Democracy* (2003). His novels, *Towards the End of the Morning* (1967), *Headlong* (1999), and *Spies* (2002), have also received critical acclaim, making Frayn one of a handful of English language writers to succeed in both drama and prose fiction.

Frayn was born in Mill Hill, London on September 8, 1933. His father, Thomas Allen Frayn, was a sales representative for an asbestos company, and his mother, Violet Alice Lawson Frayn, was a shop assistant. Frayn was educated at the prestigious Kingston Grammar School until age twelve when the death of his mother left the family with some financial hardships. He was transferred to a public school where he was very successful academically, particularly in the areas of writing and music. Later, during his two years of National Service, Frayn learned Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists. He went on to study philosophy at Emmanuel College in Cambridge and graduated in 1957. After graduation, Michael worked as a reporter and columnist for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. He established a reputation as a satirist and comic writer and began publishing novels.

By 1970, Michael had published three popular novels, *The Tin Men*, *The Russian Interpreter*, and *A Very Private Life*. His journey as a playwright was not as easy. He wrote a number of rejected scripts and even produced an evening of his own short plays that was not received well by the audience or critics. However, Frayn kept writing. In 1982, with the publication of *Noises Off*, Michael Frayn earned his third Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy of the Year. The first two were *Alphabetical Order* (1972) and *Make or Break* (1980), both are typical English office comedies. *Copenhagen* (1998) won Michael his fourth Evening Standard Award for Best Play of the Year in 1998, as well as the 2000 Tony Award for Best Play.

In addition to his extensive playwrighting and fiction career, Michael Frayn is noted to be one of Britain's foremost translators of Chekov: he adapted *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Frayn has also written screenplays for the films *Clockwise*, starring John Cleese, *First and Last*, starring Tom Wilkinson, and the TV series *Making Faces* starring Eleanor Bron. ■

Source: Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre. Web.

"Theatre is what we all do all the time in life—we're both performing and being the audience."

—Michael Frayn



MICHAEL FRAYN TIMELINE

- 1933:** Michael J. Frayn is born on September 8th, in Mill Hill, London.
- 1957:** Frayn graduates from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, with a degree in Moral Sciences (Philosophy).
- 1965:** Frayn writes his first two novels *The Tin Men* and *The Russian Interpreter*.
- 1967:** Frayn's novel, *Towards the End of the Morning*, is published.
- 1968:** Frayn's novel, *A Very Private Life*, is published.
- 1970:** Frayn writes *The Two of Us*, a set of four one-act plays.
- 1973:** *Sweet Dreams* is published (novel).
- 1977:** Frayn writes his first full-length plays, *Alphabetical Order* and *Clouds*, as well as his first farce, *Donkey's Years*.
- 1978:** Frayn translates Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and writes the farce *Balmoral*.
- 1979:** Frayn translates Tolstoy's *The Fruits of Enlightenment*.
- 1982:** Frayn writes *Noises Off*, which premieres at the Lyric Hammersmith, winning the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy. It transfers to the Savoy Theatre in London's West End, where it runs for five years.
- 1983:** *Noises Off* opens at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway. Frayn translates Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.
- 1984:** *Benefactors* opens at the Vaudeville Theatre, winning both the Evening Standard and the Olivier award for Best Play. Frayn also writes *Number One*, a translation of Jean Anouilh's *Le Nombri*, as well as *Wild Honey*, a translation of a previously unnamed Chekhov play.
- 1986:** Frayn translates Chekhov's *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* and writes the screenplay for the film *Clockwise*, which stars John Cleese. *Benefactors* opens at the Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.
- 1987:** Frayn revises *Balmoral*.
- 1989:** Frayn publishes *The Trick of It* (novel) and *First and Last* (play).
- 1990:** Frayn translates Trifonov's *Exchange* and writes *Look Look* (screenplay).
- 1991:** Frayn writes and publishes *A Landing on the Sun* (novel) and *Audience* (play).
- 1993:** Frayn writes and publishes *Now You Know* (novel) and *Here* (play).
- 1995:** Frayn translates Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, renaming it *La Belle Vivette*.
- 1998:** Frayn writes *Copenhagen*, which is staged at the National Theatre in London. It runs for over 300 performances and wins the Evening Standard award for Best Play.
- 2000:** *Copenhagen* opens at the Royale Theatre on Broadway and wins the Tony Award for Best Play. *Noises Off* is revived by the National Theatre in London.
- 2001:** The National Theatre's production of *Noises Off* transfers to the Piccadilly Theatre in London's West End, where it runs for two and a half years. A simultaneous production opens at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.
- 2003:** *Democracy* premieres at the National Theatre, winning the Evening Standard and Critic's Circle awards for Best Play.
- 2004:** *Democracy* transfers to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.
- 2008:** A collection of Frayn's introductions to his plays is published as *Stage Directions: Writing on Theatre 1970-2008*. His most recent play *Afterlife* is performed on the Lyttleton stage at the National Theatre.
- 2009:** Frayn publishes *Travels with a Typewriter*, a collection of travel pieces that he wrote for various newspapers during the 1960s and 70s.
- 2010:** Frayn publishes a memoir about his father entitled *My Father's Fortune: A Life*.
- 2011:** Sheffield Theatres announce The Michael Frayn Season, which features productions of *Copenhagen*, *Benefactors* and *Democracy* as well as a series of readings. *Noises Off* is also revived at the Old Vic theatre this same year.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF **FARCE**

The word “**farce**” is derived from the Latin word “**farciare**” meaning “to stuff.” This is a reference to the first farces which were written as short comic “fillers” for an evening’s entertainment, “stuffed” between two longer, more serious plays. According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, farce is “a kind of comedy that inspires hilarity mixed with panic and cruelty in its audience through an increasingly rapid and improbable series of ludicrous confusions, physical disasters and sexual innuendos.”

“That’s what it’s all about. Doors and sardines. Getting on—getting off. Getting the sardines on—getting the sardines off. That’s farce. That’s the theatre. That’s life.”

—Lloyd Dallas, *Noises Off*

The early Greeks and Romans were the first in recorded history to use farcical techniques, and the subject matter and techniques they developed have remained constant to the present day. Early examples of farce in Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence still amuse us in modern updates like *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The term “farce” was first used in the Middle Ages to designate interpolations made in the church litany by the clergy. Later it came to mean comic scenes inserted into church plays.

Elements of farce, as with all genres of comedy, can be traced back to Aristophanes’ comedies of Ancient Greece and Plautus’ of Ancient Rome, which frequently featured lewd humor, physical comedy, and grotesque characters. There are also similarities within the short Kyogen plays that originated in Japan in the 14th Century. However, it wasn’t until the mid-16th Century and the advent of the Commedia dell’Arte in Italy that farce, as we know it, really began to take shape. With its slapstick comedy, stock characters, and frequent themes of mistaken identity and adultery, it is easy to see the influence that Commedia dell’Arte has had on farce.

The term “stock” in the theatre refers to successful things that are kept and reused—a kind of recycling. Stock plots involve misunderstandings, confusing twins, disguises, hiding, and chases. Stock characters are cartoonish exaggerations of real people. We see these types of characters in sitcom television shows today. There is an abundance of physical humor which runs the gamut from sight gags such as spilling a drink, to slips and falls, and finally to physical assault. In farce, the audience is asked to accept the convention that no real harm results from such mock violence. In classical farces a double-slatted paddle that made an exaggeratedly loud noise called a slapstick was often used to punish miscreants. The term slapstick humor is still with us, but actual slapsticks tend to appear only in period farces. ■

Source: “Farce.” *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*. Cambridge U Press. Web.

COMEDY VS. FARCE

Noises Off is a prime example of farce cited in many modern-day discussions of the genre. Frayn's play perfectly matches the following definition: "a comedy that depends on an elaborately contrived, usually improbable plot, broadly drawn stock characters, and physical humor. Most farces are amoral and exist to entertain."



Commedia dell'arte masks

WHAT IS **COMEDY**?

In comedy, truth is central.

Comedy is rooted in reality.

Comedy draws characters from life.

In comedy, humor is used in the service of truth.

Comedy relies on intelligence and wit.

Loss of dignity makes a character's actions humorous.

Comedy requires complicity amongst the audience.

Comedy deals with unusual people in real situations.

WHAT IS **FARCE**?

In farce, truth is incidental.

Farce throws logic and probability out the window.

Farce is full of cartoon-like characters.

Farce relies on physical rather than intellectual humor, and all elements (especially plot and character) are grossly exaggerated for comic effect.

In farce, humor is used for its own sake.

The purpose of farce is to create big laughs as often as possible without any claim to logic or any progression towards meaning or message.

Farce deals with usual people in unreal situations.

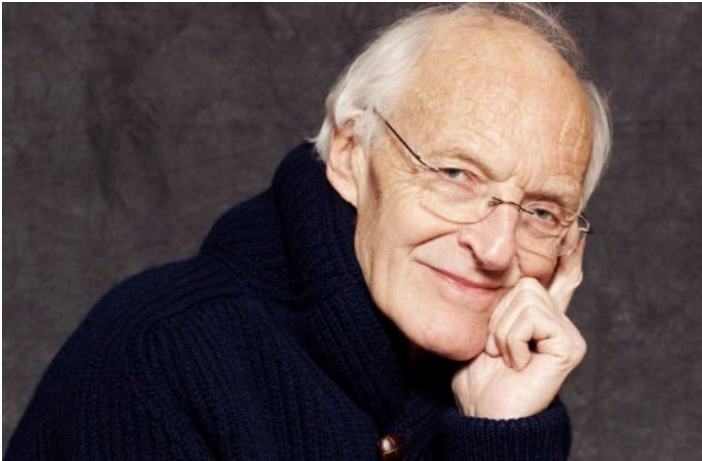
Farce provides a wonderful outlet for the stress of modern life.

Subjects for farce include any form of pretentiousness, sex, morals, religion, and sanctity of death. In other words, farce demands that nothing be taken seriously including lust, marital infidelity, and contempt for the social classes.

The well-kept secret of farce is that an audience can laugh at people suffering in ludicrous situations while they avoid the consequences suffered by the characters.

Source: *Noises Off* Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre. Web.

“FARCE SEEMS TO **GATHER FARCE** AROUND IT”



Michael Frayne. Photo: Jillian Edelstein

“After the play had opened at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1982, I did a great deal more rewriting, and went on rewriting until Nicky Henson, who was playing Garry, announced on behalf of the cast (rather as Garry himself might have done) that they would learn no further versions.

The play transferred to the Savoy Theatre and ran until 1987 with five successive casts. For two of the cast-changes I did more rewrites. I also rewrote for the Washington production in 1983, and I rewrote again when this moved to Broadway. When the play was revived at the National Theatre in 2000 I rewrote yet again. Some of the changes were ones that I’d been longing to make myself—there’s nothing like having to sit through a play over and over again to make your finger itch for the delete key—while many more changes were suggested by my new director, Jeremy Sams.

What vicissitudes it has been through in other languages I can mostly only guess. In France it has been played under two different titles (sometimes simultaneously in different parts of the country), and in Germany under four. I imagine that it’s often been freely adapted to local circumstances, in spite of the prohibitions in the contract.

MICHAEL FRAYN CHARTS THE PROGRESS OF *NOISES OFF* FROM ITS INCEPTION IN 1977.

In France, certainly, my British actors and the characters they are playing turned into Frenchmen, in Italy into Italians (who introduced a ‘Sardine Song’ between the acts). In Prague they performed the play for some ten years without Act Three, and no one noticed until I arrived.

Farce seems to gather farce around it. One Christmas in Sicily two different touring productions, one lawfully contracted, one not, like husband and lover in a farce, turned up in Catania at the same time to their mutual surprise; lawsuits followed. In 2000, re-reading the English text that had been in use for the previous 15 years, I discovered a number of bizarre misprints, and I suspect that directors around the world had been driven to some quite outlandish devices to make sense of them. Now the present director, Lindsay Posner, with even more scrupulous scholarship, has discovered a few more, and I don’t like to think how many Roger Tramplemains in the past 11 years have been exiting into the bedroom cupboard and emerging dutifully but inexplicably two lines later from the linen cupboard.” ■

Source: Frayne, Michael. “Noises Off: A Brief History.” *Noises Off*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. Print. Modern Plays.

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE IN **NOISES OFF**

The Commedia dell'Arte style of performance began in Italy during the 16th century during the height of the Renaissance and flourished for 200 years. It influenced such literary giants as William Shakespeare and Molière, and is also the first performing art form to use women in the female roles.

STOCK CHARACTERS

The key to creating a Commedia character is to remember that Commedia characters are **stock characters**. This means that in every scenario or story they're in, the characters remain the same: they have the same attitude, the same look, the same drive, the same physical action. Each stock character of Commedia has a distinct set of attributes—characteristic speech, gestures, props and costumes—that became standard to the portrayal of the character over time.

Here are descriptions of some key Commedia characters:



PANTALONE
The lecherous old man

Director, Lloyd Dallas

Description: A rich and greedy miser. He is obsessed with money. He is always after women and thinks he's good at it. He is gullible and often tricked.



Innamorati
The Romantic Leads
Description: In traditional Commedia, the romance between the innamorati is the driving plot of the show—it may be a story of lovers separated by circumstance, or it could be a tale of

different characters competing for the affections of the innamorata. This love story is at the heart of the play and it is the thing that prompts the other characters to take action.



COLUMBINA
The house maid

Mrs. Clackett

Description: Her name means "Little Dove." She has a quick wit, she is vain, and she is never in love. She is often spiteful, and is usually the smartest character on stage.



Isabella

Brooke/Vicki
(both on and off stage)

Description: She falls into the Innamorati class of Commedia characters. She is generally portrayed as sensuous and feeble minded. Men constantly fall hopelessly in love with her. She is typically a prima donna.

Source: Price, Lindsay. "Create a Commedia Dell'Arte Character." *Theatrefolk Blog: The Drama Teacher Resource Company*. 5 June 2015. Web.

Photos: SAND Maurice. *Masques et bouffons (Comedie Italienne)*. Paris, Michel Levy Freres, 1860

THE SIMPSONS: AN EXAMPLE OF MODERN COMMEDIA CHARACTERS



All you need to do is turn on any television sit-com, and you will see plenty of examples of Commedia-like stock characters. Think of *I Love Lucy*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld*. Each of these shows revolves around four or five main characters, each of whom assumes a Commedia role.

As an example, let's take a close look at the characters in *The Simpsons*:

Mr. Montgomery Burns	Pantalone: Miserable old man who cares only about his money.
Chief Clancy Wiggum	Il Dottore: Holds an authoritative position, but is a gluttonous buffoon.
Bart Simpson	Harlequin: A fool of low intelligence, unless it comes to pranking people.
Lisa and Marge Simpson	Columbina: The beautiful intelligent one who solves all of the problems.
Homer Simpson	Zanni: The dumbest of the dumb. Tries to come up with schemes, but they rarely work out.
Moe Szyslak	Brighella: A coarse, scheming, low-level merchant. He is thieving, mean-spirited, and occasionally violent—especially to characters who are lower in station than him.

Source: Commedia D'Oh Arte: How Have the Characters of the Simpsons Been Influenced by the Stock Characters of Commedia dell'Arte?" N.p., 7 June 2014. Web.

PHYSICAL COMEDY IN COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE: LAZZI



Lazzi can be identified as:

- Short scenes between multiple characters that act as comic interludes throughout a Commedia play.
- Reoccurring gags, which repeat throughout the acts and build upon each repetition, ultimately resulting in a resolution of some sort.

Many lazzi involve reactions, props, costumes, exits, entrances, or any other stage business. Lazzi can be divided into major categories such as comedic violence, trickery, word play, and body humor. Since dialogue in Commedia productions was traditionally improvised, it was easy to incorporate current events and local scandals to the story and the lazzi.

The entirety of Act 2 in *Noises Off* is lazzi-like. While the play is performed "onstage," we, the audience, have a privileged look at the backstage antics as they erupt into physical comedy. Specific props, including a bottle of liquor, a hatchet, a bouquet of flowers, and a cactus plant, as well as various costume mishaps all contribute to the act's lazzi-esque mayhem.

Commedia in Performance

The Commedia actor is a physical actor. The personality of each Commedia character is grounded in its stock pose, gesture, and movement. In Commedia, bigger is better, but what that really means is that the characters want something so much that they must move in an exaggerated fashion to get it: the character's want is connected to the movement.



What should actors strive for in a Commedia performance?

1. Commitment to action—The characters act on their thoughts. This means that a character's movement and physical action is directly connected to their thought process.
2. Truth in size—Commedia characters are larger in size, but should not come across as fake or cartoon-y. For example, *The Simpsons* can still move the audience, even though the characters are somewhat absurd.
3. An understanding of the characters' drives—All Commedia characters want something, and they want it desperately. They do not have subtle drives—they then to want things like love, money, or food.
4. Physical commitment—Good Commedia actors commit to clean, big gestures and actions. These actions do not have to be huge acrobatics, but actors should make definite choices about their bodies and how their characters move as well as how they stand still.
5. Mastery of Masks—Sometimes, Commedia characters appear onstage in masks. Experienced Commedia actors focus the masks. This means that they work with the mask in such a way that the mask looks like it is part of the face. If they aren't in mask, good Commedia actors make interesting use of props and body positions to create the "mask" of the character (i.e. if a lover has a fan, or Pantalone has a money bag, that's their mask, and how actors use those props helps to express character traits). ■

Source: Price, Lindsay. "Create a Commedia Dell'Arte Character." *Theatrefolk Blog: The Drama Teacher Resource Company*. 5 June 2015. Web.

COMMEDIA DRIVES: **LOVE, FOOD AND MONEY**



In the broadest sense, the plots of Commedia boil down to quests for **love, money, and food**. The motivation for any Commedia character is to go to the ends of the earth to obtain one of these three things. And since the cast of Commedia characters are a mix of high status and low status characters, you can be sure every Commedia story involves a clash of characters.

LOVE/LUST

Examples from *Noises Off*

Backstage:

- Lloyd wants Brooke—Poppy wants Lloyd—Tim wants Poppy
- Garry wants Dotty, and Dotty flirts with every other man to make Garry jealous

On Stage:

- Vicki wants Roger—and spends most of the play in her undergarments trying to seduce him into the bedroom
- The Brents keep trying to get into a bedroom—but the business of the estate keeps interfering

Commedia can be downright obscene and is NOT for the faint of heart! In Commedia, there is always someone who lusts after something: after a person, after gold, or after food.

FOOD

One of the ongoing gags in *Noises Off* is Selsdon Mowbray's love of the drink. Selsdon's love of drink leads Tim, Poppy, and the rest of the cast to go to great lengths to keep the bottle away from him—they try hiding it, but ultimately, they indulge in it themselves.

MONEY

Frayn incorporates the traditional Commedia quest for money into *Noises Off* in two ways:

1. Lloyd Dallas consistently bemoans the fact that he has no money.
2. Lloyd Dallas gives money to Tim on three separate occasions to purchase flowers for Brooke. Each time an actor sees Tim holding the money, he or she immediately asks, "Is that for me?" ■

Source: Price, Lindsay. "Create a Commedia Dell'Arte Character." *Theatrefolk Blog: The Drama Teacher Resource Company*. 5 June 2015. Web.

QUIET IN THE WINGS BY DON LEAVIT

In William C. Young's *Famous Actors and Actresses on the American Stage*, Sir Laurence Olivier is quoted as saying, "Acting is illusion, as much illusion as magic is, and not so much a matter of being real" ([New Providence: R.R. Bowker LLC, 1975], 885). Acting is, essentially, make-believe, the art of telling a story by presenting, or representing, a world that does not, in fact, exist, yet mimics reality. The illusion, then, is the sum of all the individual parts, from the performances of the actors to their costumes, the sets, and all of the other components that contribute to the whole.

When it is well done, the effects can be intoxicating. In the biography, *Olivier*, by Terry Coleman ([New York: Henry Holt and Co. 2005], 416), the actor likens a performance in front of a live audience to the most intimate of human experiences. It is incredibly gratifying to know that you have performed well; that an audience has accepted you in a particular role; that they have laughed because of you, and cried because of you; that they have experienced love or hate for your character; that they have paid for the privilege and then cheered and applauded you. The feeling is difficult to replicate in other professions; small wonder that those who "catch the bug" find it so difficult to pursue alternative careers.

There is great emotional security in acting, as well. A friend once described it as an escape from the chaos of reality, in which the elements of a life are well controlled and well defined: human interactions and confrontations are choreographed; problems, conflicts and their solutions, or at least resolutions, are scripted and directed. Unlike real life, which is improvisation at its best (or worst), the actors in a play take comfort in knowing what to say and when; what's going to happen next; and how the illusion they've created is going to end.

Protecting that illusion is perhaps the first law of theatre. From my earliest days as an actor, three inviolable rules were driven into my head: never break character; never peek out from behind the curtain; and never make noise backstage. Some of my fondest memories of rehearsals from my youth have me backstage, my fellow cast members and me talking and laughing while an exasperated director, desperate to move the rehearsal along, shouts from the house, "Quiet in the wings!"

The fact is it's a very different world backstage, where the chaos of real life stands in stark contrast to the scripted illusion taking place out front. Backstage, you'll

find all of the behind-the-scenes rigors of a theatrical production—sets need to be moved, costumes changed, props taken and replaced—mixed with the very human trappings of the people involved, including egos, nerves, stresses, and personal dramas. A good stage manager can control the chaos, and, indeed, the professionalism of a cast and crew can often be determined best by how they behave off-stage rather than by how they perform onstage. Still, it is nothing short of a miracle that the chaos that reigns behind the curtain rarely bleeds into the performance.

It is exactly that contrast between real chaos and scripted order that attracted playwright Michael Frayn to the story that would become his hit farce, *Noises Off*. According to Frayn, the idea first occurred to him in 1970 while watching a production of his play, *Chinamen*. Standing backstage, Frayn says, "It was funnier from behind than in front and I thought that one day I must write a farce from behind" (Barbara K. Mehlman, *CurtainUp*, <http://www.curtainup.com/noisesoff.html>). The result is *Noises Off*, the name of which is a theatre term that refers to commotion off-stage.

Theatre is a perfect setting for farce, which in modern texts is defined as a comic genre depending on elaborately contrived, often improbable plots, broadly drawn characters and physical humor. *Noises Off* is actually a farce about a theatre troupe performing a farce—what Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., a theatre arts professor at Loyola Marymount University, calls a "meta-farce." In other words, the audience watches actors create an illusion of actors creating an illusion, and the play explores what happens to the illusion when the almost farcical chaos found backstage does intrude on the scripted farce onstage. The play becomes, according to British critic Michael Billington, "a very funny comment on the fragility of farce itself, where split-second timing and a calculated, well-rehearsed spontaneity can be blown apart by a missed entrance or a recalcitrant prop." (*Michael Frayn: Critical Perspective*, www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth114#)

The farce-within-the-farce is called *Nothing On*, a fairly run-of-the-mill British comedy fraught with mistaken identities and sexual innuendo. The *Noises Off* audience gets to see *Nothing On* at three different stages of its production: act one shows us a final dress rehearsal in complete disorder, and a frazzled director trying desperately to maintain control; act two takes us

QUIET IN THE WINGS CONTINUED...

backstage of a performance halfway through the run, where the personal struggles of each company member threaten to disrupt the play; and act three moves us to the end of the run and a production of a play so plagued by chaos that it now only vaguely resembles the scripted play being attempted in the first two acts. As the production crumbles around them, the performers desperately cling to the illusion until the very last line: "When all around is strife and uncertainty, there's nothing like a good old-fashioned plate of curtain!"

Noises Off is beautifully constructed, and audiences respond enthusiastically to this chance to glimpse an accurate, albeit exaggerated representation of what's really going on off-stage. However, to call this a behind-the-scenes exposé of live theatre is too simplistic; the real point of *Noises Off* is the conflict between illusion and reality, and the comedy that can be found when chaos disrupts order. Audiences laugh at the absurdity of it all, and they laugh again when the disaster they know is coming finally, inevitably, occurs.

The madness works, of course, because of the fictional performers' dedication to their craft. These are actors—perhaps not very good actors, but dedicated *artistes* nonetheless. These people love the theatre, and they act because they are driven by the exhilaration that can only come from being onstage, from the intimate connection they form with their audience. They desperately want to be successful, which for an actor means being liked by the audience, and it is very funny to watch them fail due

to the obstacles they create for themselves.

The security actors feel onstage also eludes the fictional performers, whose insecurities become more evident as chaos disrupts illusion. Frayn himself spoke of this in his introduction to *Frayn Plays: One*, where he makes note of the fact that the actors in *Noises Off* have "fixed the world" by learning roles and rehearsing responses. "The fear that haunts them is that the unlearned and unrehearsed—the great chaos behind the set, inside the heart and brain—will seep back on the stage. The prepared words will vanish; the planned responses will be inappropriate. Their performance will break down and they will be left in front of us, naked and ashamed" ([London: Methuen, 1985], xiv).

There is a magical moment in act three when it becomes apparent to the audience that the performance of *Nothing On* cannot be saved, and still the fictional performers soldier on, refusing to give in, refusing to abandon illusion. Even the frazzled director inserts himself into the mounting chaos in a vain attempt to salvage the illusion he thought he had created. In the end, the real performers of *Noises Off* are secure in their knowledge that the chaos the audience has so graciously laughed at has, itself, been a well-scripted and orderly illusion. ■

Source: Leavitt, Don. "Quiet in the Wings." *Insights: A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival: Noises Off*. Ed. Bruce E. Lee. Utah Shakespeare Festival, 2011. Web.

I'LL ADMIT IT: **ACT 2 IS PERFECT** BY ROBERT BURGAN

My title seems to imply something about Act 1 and Act 3 of Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*. Okay, it does. But before you decide what that is, let me write a bit about the perfect Act 2.

That discussion must start with form in general and farce in particular. Theatrical form allows organization, structure, cohesiveness, and a view of our world, our humanness. Farce is in a sense a challenge to form; farce mates chaos to organization, disarray to structure, and divisiveness to cohesiveness and promotes a view of our world that gives prominence to the follies of our humanness.

I once heard farce described as a comedy about the things that go wrong on the worst day of your life.

In Act 2, the cast and director of *Nothing On* (the play the characters in *Noises Off* are presenting) want to be a success—it is very important to them to be professionally successful. They will face a terrible obstacle in accomplishing that professional goal—the fact that it is more important to them to be personally successful—if you will, a happy private life battling a successful professional life.

Battles are known for their disarray, especially for those on the front lines. Actors on the front line of the theatre are in a battle to subdue an audience. These actors are obsessed with the disarray of their private lives and are—since this is a comedy—deliciously vulnerable. That vulnerability will lead to chaos, and that chaos is the essential ingredient of farce.

As Frayn writes in his introduction to his collected works, *Plays: One*: "The actors in *Noises Off* have fixed the world by learning roles and rehearsing their responses. The fear that haunts them is that the unlearned and unrehearsed—the great chaos behind the set, inside the heart and brain—will seep back on the stage. The prepared words will vanish; the planned responses will be inappropriate. Their performance will break down, and they will be left in front of us naked and ashamed."

And now Act 2. To begin with, the perspective we have on this world dramatically (pun intended) changes: literally by 180 degrees. So, we begin with the playwright insisting that we see not the scenic illusion of the theatre but rather the scenic reality, backstage—the construction site if you will. He furthers our insecurity about the illusion of structure and order by taking the disorder beyond the proscenium to the house calls that bring us to our seats. As Lloyd, the director of *Nothing On* says, "The curtain will rise in three minutes—we all start for

the gents. The curtain will rise in one minute—we all come running out again. We don't know which way we're going!" (Michael Frayn, *Noises Off* [New York: Samuel French, Inc.], 83). There is chaos on stage and chaos in the audience.

If chaos is one essential element of farce, then certainly anarchy is its companion. In *Noises Off* the authority figure that anarchy rebels against is the director of *Nothing On*, Lloyd Dallas, whose credits include a "highly successful season for the National Theatre of Sri Lanka" and "his brilliant series of 'Shakespeare in Summer' productions in the parks of the inner London boroughs." Poor Lloyd soon discovers in Act 2 that madness is everywhere in the production he struggles so determinedly to guide in Act 1. His production becomes a nightmare. And Frayn even manages—in Act 3—to have Lloyd enter the anarchy as it becomes complete and he becomes in mid-performance one of the characters on stage in his own production.

The personal problems lead to an acceleration of recrimination ("Freddie have you even thought of having a brain transplant") (88) and an acceleration of mistrust, which Frayn is masterful at orchestrating both verbally and physically. And that may be the key. Frayn understands the essential element of writing for the theatre: it is for the stage, not for the page.

Frayn's orchestration of the verbal and physical comedy in Act 2 is most obvious in his stage directions. Unlike any other play I know, there are, in fact, more stage directions than dialogue, more specific things for the actors to do than specific things for them to say. A typical example: "Garry snatches the flowers from Dotty. She snatches them back. Lloyd parts them with the axe. He gently takes the flowers from Dotty and hands them to Frederick while he gives the axe to Belinda [who] uses the axe to keep Dotty and Garry apart. Frederick hands the flowers to Poppy, who believes (each time the flowers are passed onto her) that the flowers are meant for her."

The simultaneity of the verbal and physical farce becomes a tennis game in which the play is the net and we (the audience) are the ball. This orchestration of physical and verbal comedy, which Frank Rich, the principal theatre critic for the New York Times when *Noises Off* opened on Broadway, calls "one of the most sustained slapstick ballets I have ever seen...ingeniously synchronized" (*Hot Seat* [New York: Random House, 1998], 281), would be merely a writing exercise if Frayn had not built it on an inspired comic premise (ironically inspired when he saw the events backstage at a production of one of his own plays).

I'LL ADMIT IT: **ACT 2 IS PERFECT** CONTINUED...

And what does this praise for Act 2 say about Act 1 and Act 3? Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor is a trip on an airplane. The best part of our journey is high up in the air, traveling above the clouds, enjoying the exhilaration of flight. To get to that we need the take-off; to return from that we need the landing. Act 1 of *Noises Off* is exactly the right take-off: we sense the increasing momentum as we approach lift-off, we anticipate that moment with enthusiasm. Frayn prepares us as he entertains us and entices us with the world he's created. And for the landing, Act 3 resolves the dramatic questions and deposits us at a new destination.

And thus, order and harmony are restored. Or are they? This is, after all, a farce; and sometimes our plane trip ends with a new adventure that begins with getting someone else's luggage, and having clothes that don't fit and—I'll let your comic imagination work out the details of this hypothetical farce.

The popularity of farce should be noted. Farce—second only to the musical in terms of popularity—is as vital to the theatrical body as blood is to the human one. Some scholars dismiss farce as somehow a lesser theatrical form. Columbia University's Dr. Albert Bermel noted that "general critical literature about farce is scarce. . . . The best discussion of the psychology of farce is in *The Life of The Drama* (1984) by Eric Bentley" (*The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, ed. John Gassner and Edward Quinn [New York: Crowell, 1969], 265). But farce continues (as it has for over 2,000 years) to give us both entertainment and insight. When we have in our theatrical firmament a play so "ingeniously synchronized" as *Noises Off*, we have undeniable and vital proof of (to use Frank Rich's phrase) "a forceful argument of farce's value as human comedy" (Rich, 281). ■

Source: Burgan, Robert. "I'll Admit It: Act 2 Is Perfect." *Insights: A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival: Noises Off*. Ed. Bruce E. Lee. Utah Shakespeare Festival, 2011. Web.

INTERVIEW WITH **NOISES OFF** SET DESIGNER FRED KINNEY



What are some inspirations for the set design?

The inspiration is an English Manor House.

What do you want the audience to see with the set?

I want the audience to feel like they are backstage, because one of the main purposes of the play is to see what goes on backstage during a play. Also, most of the humor happens backstage—as any actor can tell you!

What is the challenge with designing a set for such a well-known play?

The biggest challenge doing a beloved play is that the audience often has a preconceived idea about the production and how the set/costumes/design should look.

How does that collaboration among designers work? Is it ever difficult?

The designer of any show should always work with the director and other designers throughout the process so that everyone is on the same page. Without communication between the designers, the director's vision could be lost.

What was the most difficult element of production? Why?

All the doors that are required! There are a lot of them and a ton of door slams, which means they must be sturdy. On top of all that, the whole set must turn around. Let just say things need to be perfect.

How does the design relate to this season's theme of "Entertaining Courage?" Which design elements are courageous, and which are entertaining? Both?

The scale and challenging design of the set are courageous. As for entertainment, the rotation of the set and physicality of the production should be entertaining.

What was it like designing this play for a thrust stage?

When compared to a proscenium a thrust is more sculptural, as a result in a thrust the sight lines are more extreme.

How do you know at the end if the design is successful?

When the producers hire you back. It's complicated to know if the set completely worked for the show. Is the director happy? Am I happy? Are you happy?

What is the difference between a farce and a comedy?

Generally, a farce is more about the physical humor, sight gags, and the "reality" of the world. In *Noises Off* this can be seen by the number of doors on stage. We see a great deal of comedy when the exits and entrances escalate and become absurd. When you think about it, life is about the things that slam in our faces.

■

THAT TIME **SOMETHING WENT WRONG...**

Jeremy Rabb (Frederick Fellows)

We were five minutes into a Saturday matinee of *Endgame* when a patron started snoring. Rhythmically. Extremely loud. It turned out he was an older gentleman seeing the show by himself, with no friend or family member to nudge him awake. Geoff and I were in the midst of a rapid-fire dialogue that very much depended on listening closely to one other. Needless to say, the snoring made it more difficult. Plus, the audience was distracted and giggling nervously. If that weren't bad enough, the play runs 90 minutes without intermission, so this had the potential to make the rest of the afternoon interminable for everyone in the building, except perhaps for the sleeping gentleman. As I tried to focus, Geoff suddenly stopped and announced in the same tone of his character, "Someone wake that man up!" It immediately diffused the situation and the audience laughed. After an usher took the cue and roused the man awake, Geoff and I were able to pick up where we had left off. Thankfully, the man stayed conscious for the rest of the show.

Erika Soto (Poppy Norton-Taylor)

Well. Once during *You Never Can Tell*, without my knowing it, my skirt came undone and fell around my ankles!

I basically pants-ed myself! I remember my eyes nearly popped out of their sockets and I bent down, grabbed my skirt, pulled it up, and waddled off stage! Looking back at it, it was hilarious.

Rafael Goldstein (Tim Algood)

It's from high school, and I'm not sure how funny it is:

I was in a production of *Tartuffe* at LACHSA. The guy playing Valere wanted to have some alone-time with a girl he was seeing during one of the performances. He went outside after his first scene and, during the 2nd act, slipped in some mud, spraining his ankle quite severely, minutes before he was supposed to come back on. A friend of mine who had been working the rails just so happened to fit into Valere's costume, so the stage manager grabbed him, shoved all of his lines for the 2nd act into a top hat, and pushed him out on stage. My friend handled himself well, despite being the sweatiest Valere I've ever seen.

Apollo Dukakis (Selsdon Mowbray)

During a performance of a play by the Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello called *SO IT IS IF YOU THINK IT IS* at our old space in Glendale, I was on stage with five other actors. One of the actors was playing a mother who was describing an event that had happened to her that we did not know about. In the middle of her long speech the actress "went up." This is actors' talk for forgetting your lines. She sat there for what seemed like an eternity unmoving trying to remember her next line. We, the other four actors, not knowing her story could not help her out and we all sat there in mortified silence. We all sat there waiting and praying that she would remember her line. Suddenly, she got up and walked off the stage, leaving the rest of us there speechless! To fill the silence one of the actors started to improvise (make up lines). He began to ask the first actor what he thought of what was going on in the plot of the play. Desperate, the actor just started making up all sorts of words just to fill up the void. I was fourth in line and was terrified trying to think about something, anything, to say when he reached me! Luckily, the director of the play who happened to be in the audience that night had run around backstage, met the actress and gave her the next line! Just before the actor reached me asking me what I thought about everything she walked calmly back on stage, sat down, and continued her speech as if nothing had happened! We were all greatly relieved, especially me, and laughed about it later. When I tell this story to other actors we all laugh because most actors have had similar experiences. In retrospect it can sound hilarious, but at the time it feels shocking and scary. After all the audience is right there witnessing what could be so embarrassing and disastrous to the play. However, in the great scheme of things, experiences like this are shared by most actors with great delight and they can bond us all together.

Robert Oriol (Sound Designer)

Pericles, Prince of Tyre. September 2013—my first show at ANW as a composer, a show which still holds the record for amount of music I've ever written for a single production.

It's opening night, and I'm sitting in the audience, all dressed up and very excited because this show has been a lot of work, and I'm thrilled to see it all come to fruition. The house lights go to half, at which point we should be hearing the "Welcome/No Cameras/Turn Off Cellphones" recording. The audience grows quiet as the lights dim...and nothing happens. No cellphone announcement. Just dim lights and silence. We all sit there, waiting. I see movement to my left, and it is

THAT TIME **SOMETHING WENT WRONG...** CONTINUED...

Melody, the house manager, standing in the aisle trying to get my attention. I get out of my seat, work my way past all the audience members sitting between my seat and Melody. All eyes in the theatre are now on me. Once in the aisle, I follow Melody to the booth where we find Julia with the stage manager, looking a bit panicky. Evidently the laptop that controls all the sound playback crashed as it was starting to play the first cue—the cellphone speech. So, we reboot and wait for it to load, which takes a few minutes.

Finally, it's back up and running and the show goes on as planned from that point forward. What a way to start a run. The laptop was replaced once that show closed.

Deborah Strang (Dotty Otley)

I remember laughing uncontrollably during the process of ANW's first production of *Noises Off*. It was the whole process that got to me, but what made it so memorable was the audience. I would be standing behind the door on stage, ready for my entrance, and waves of laughter would start rolling through the audience, which would cause me to laugh out loud just seconds before I would have to go onstage. Just listening to everyone in the audience enjoying the show made me start to laugh so hard, it would cause my belly to ache. This would be every performance as well! Rehearsals were even funnier than the performances because I was working with amazingly talented actors that were never short of hilarious. I would have such a good time, I had trouble remembering whether to take the sardines or leave the sardines, which isn't too far off from the action of the play. ■

ACTIVITIES & ESSAY QUESTIONS

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Analyze how elements of Commedia dell'Arte function in *Noises Off*. Use examples from the play and your knowledge of Commedia dell'Arte to support your claims.
2. Write a review of the performance of *Noises Off* that you saw at A Noise Within. What parts of the play (the actors' performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were most effective? Which parts were least effective? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance.
3. Why, in your opinion, is timing so important in comedy? Where do we see the importance of comedic timing in the production? What are some problems that may arise if the timing of the humor is off?
4. Comedy is often said to be the most effective form of social criticism. What kind of criticism do you think Frayn is making with his play? Is it effective? Why or why not?
5. The humor in *Noises Off* uses the rule of three, where you set up an expectation with the first two examples and then break the pattern with the last example. The structure of the play is even divided into three acts. Can you identify moments within the play where an expectation was set up and then broken? Were these moments effective? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

SET DESIGN:

In this activity, students will learn the importance of scenic design through a hands-on experience.

The set is a major design element of *Noises Off* because we see both the onstage and offstage perspectives of the company's production of *Nothing On*. Read the play and research previous set designs for the play on the Internet. Then, design and build a model of your version of the set.

Discussion:

What are some special aspects from the script that you needed to take into account? How did you solve the challenge of showing both the onstage and backstage perspectives of the set for *Nothing On*?

HUMOR:

In this activity, students will analyze humor as a tool in the play while telling their own stories.

The humor *Noises Off* builds upon itself as we see the actors in *Nothing On* struggle to perform their show. Think of a time in your life when an incident set off a series of accidental shenanigans, where things were blown out of proportion to the point of ridiculousness. Imagine and embellish the circumstances if you like. Now, write a description of your real or imagined incident and share with a partner or the whole class.

Discussion:

What was it that made your incident so funny? Were your classmates' stories funnier as they were, or if they were embellished? How do the various stories relate to the events that occur in *Noises Off*?

PHYSICAL COMEDY:

In this activity, students will learn the importance of the body as a tool for comedy.

Physical comedy is a key ingredient in the humor of *Noises Off*. Have your students walk around the room and explore different ways they can move their bodies. What happens when you lead with different parts of your body? (Ex.: your nose versus your stomach?) What happens when you change your speed? What happens if you crawl vs. walking on your tiptoes?

Discussion: How did leading with different body parts affect the way we viewed the character? How did it feel to lead with different parts of your body? How did walking at different speeds affect the comedy? Which combination of pace and body part did you find the most entertaining? Why?

GLOSSARY THEATRICAL TERMS AND JOBS

Noises Off is a metatheatrical play that invites the audience to see what is usually unseen to those not usually involved in the theatrical creation process. There are a number of terms and jobs that are mentioned in the production. Below are definitions of some of these terms to help you better understand the play and the world of the theatre.

THEATRE TERMS

Producer: The producer oversees the whole of the production process while supporting the creative team. They are in charge of the production budget and finances.

Writer: The writer is responsible for writing the play.

Director: The director is responsible for creating the overall vision of the production, and by collaborating with the cast and creative team, the director brings that vision to life.

Designers: The designers are responsible for the way a production looks. In theatre, there are typically scenic, costume, lighting, and sound designers.

Stage Manager: The stage manager is responsible for running of the show once rehearsals have finished. During the rehearsal process, they are in charge of running rehearsals, writing down blocking, maintaining prop lists, and making sure the actors know their lines.

Assistant Stage Manager: The assistant stage manager supports the stage manager throughout the rehearsal and performance period. They are responsible for being "on book" (having a script in hand and being ready to cue an actor in case they forget lines during rehearsal) and making sure that all the cues (lights, sound, actor entrances, and lines) are met.

Green Room: The area for the cast and crew to relax before and during a performance. It is sometimes painted green, but not always.

Wings: The areas to either side of the stage from which the actors make their entrances and exits.

Beginners: The actors who appear onstage in the first scene of a play.

Blocking: All of the moves that an actor makes onstage, including entering, exiting, walking, sitting down, standing up, and making gestures.

Calls: Announcements made to the actors or audience by the stage manager or assistant stage manager over the PA system, informing them when the performance is about to begin.

Curtain: This refers to the physical curtain that is traditionally raised and lowered at the beginning and end of the show. This term also refers to the end of an act or the end of the play.

Dress Rehearsal: (sometimes just called "dress") The final run-through of a production before it is performed for the general public. Usually, these are run under performance conditions, with full costume, make-up, lights, sound, and set.

(LX) Elecs: (short for "electricals") This term is used by the production team to refer to the lighting cues of a show.

Exeunt: A stage direction given when more than one character must leave the stage.

Matinee: A performance that takes place during the day rather than in the evening.

Noises Off: A term referring to the sound, heard offstage or backstage during a performance.

Props: (short for "properties") Items used by actors during a performance. Examples of props in *Noises Off* include boxes, bags, and plates of sardines.

Technical Rehearsal: (or "tech") The rehearsal in which lighting, sound, costumes, and sets are added into the rehearsal process. Typically, tech rehearsals are long and involve frequent stopping and starting.

Source: "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre. Web.

GLOSSARY BRITISH PHRASES

Because *Noises Off* is a British farce, some of the language, phrases, and humor are less obvious to American audiences.

BRITISH JARGON

Airing Cupboard: A built-in wardrobe that contains a heater of some kind.

Ballcocks: A mechanism found in flush toilets that controls the water level.

Beginners: The actors who appear on stage first. "Beginners, please" is used in the UK just as the term "Places" is used in the US to inform actors that the play is about to begin.

Boiled Sweets: Hard candies.

Bric-A-Brac: Miscellaneous items.

Bullion Vault: A vault holding gold or silver in bulk.

Burnous: A long cloak of rough woolen fabric with an attached hood.

Bustups: An argument or fight, also refers to a breakup.

Colloquy: A formal conversation between two people, usually full of intellectual dialogue.

Company VAT: VAT (value added tax) is a consumption tax levied on goods and services.

Curtains Raiser: A short play, usually comedic, performed before the beginning of the main play.

Distraint: The seizure and holding of a person's property as security for payment of a debt or satisfaction of a claim.

Front of House Calls: Notifications to patrons that the show will soon begin.

Holdall: (also called a "carryall") A large bag used to carry things while traveling.

Inland Revenue: The British government's tax collection agency, similar to the IRS.

Loo: A slang term for bathroom.

Madeira: An amber dessert wine from the Madeira islands.

Ministration: A task one is serving or working on.

Mullion Window: A mullion is a vertical structure that divides adjacent window units.

OAP's: Old Age Pensioners, older patrons who receive government supported income assistance.

Posset Mill: A posset is an old English drink, much like eggnog. So, a "posset mill" would be a place that served posset.

Postprandial Snooze: An after-dinner nap.

Potentate: Another word for monarch, or one who rules over others.

Prompt Corner: The offstage space from which the assistant stage manager can feed actors lines if needed.

Quid: A British pound, equal to 100 pence.

Row: An argument or fight.

Stalls: The ground-level seats in a theatre.

Tannoy: A loud speaker used for announcements.

Turbot (ter-but): A flat circular fish not at all like sardines.

WC Suite: A bathroom and shower. ■

Source: "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre. Web.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS:

Bermal, Professor Albert—**Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen.**
Southern Illinois University Press

Davis, Jessica—**Farce Classics in Communication and Mass Culture Series**
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Gordon, Mel—**Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte**
PAJ Publications 2001

Rudlin, John—**Commedia Dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook**
Rutledge Press 1994

WEBSITES:

An Interview with Michael Frayn:
<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2015/big-interview-michael-frayn/>

Creating Commedia Characters on Stage:
<http://commediadellarte10.weebly.com/physicalities-of-commedia-characters.html>

Creating Lazzi: <https://dramateachersnetwork.wordpress.com/tag/lazzi/>

Commedia Acting Exercises:
<https://www.theatrefolk.com/spotlights/commedia-dell-arte#themes-scenarios>

MEDIA

Coward, Noel. Blithe Spirit: An Improbable Farce
Classic Drama—Naxos Audiobooks, 2002

Noises Off. Directed by Peter Bogdanovich Starring Michael Caine, Carol Burnett, Marilu Henner, Julie Haggarty, Delholm Elliott, 1992

Clue—Directed by Jonathan Lynn—Starring: Eileen Brennan, Tim Curry, Christopher Lloyd, Michael McKean, 1985

(FOOTNOTES)

¹ "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." *PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre*. Web.

² Jennings, Sheila. "A Brief History of Farce." *Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program*. PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre. Web.

³ "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." *PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre*. Web.

⁴ "Commedia D'Oh Arte: How Have the Characters of the Simpsons Been Influenced by the Stock Characters of Commedia dell'Arte?" N.p., 7 June 2014. Web.

⁵ "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." *PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre*. Web.

⁶ "Noises Off Study Guide: Student Matinee Program." *PCPA Pacific Conservatory Theatre*. Web.

ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: **KEY THEATRICAL TERMS**

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within*'s performance of *Noises Off*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

blocking: The instructions a director gives the actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce, or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

ABOUT A NOISE WITHIN

A NOISE WITHIN produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 27-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 40,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 15,000 student participants to its arts education program, *Classics Live!* Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides. ■

STUDY GUIDES

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www.anoisewithin.org. The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, The Common Core, and 21st Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

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