

THEATRE

Play within a play hilarious

Review by Deborah S. McGee

Noises Off

Seeing *Noises Off* at University Theater is like watching one of the world's best juggling acts. Director Jack Watson performs like Larry Pisoni in "The Big Juggle" at the end of Pickle Family Circus performances: so much is going on at such a mad pace, all so brilliantly balanced, that it leaves the viewer time for nothing more than a series of bewildered gasps.

A full-length comedy farce in three acts, *Noises Off* puts us in three locations with the same acting troupe at three different nights of their performances while on repertory tour. As Act One begins, we first watch Dotty Otley, or Mrs. Clackett (Diane Johnson) on stage, as dotty as her name, bumbling and confused, who confuses us as well until we realize she's talking to her director... who is that loud man sitting in the audience with us. Actually we're watching a dress rehearsal of a play called "Nothing On," a British sex farce dragging itself out for another run in the provinces.

Act II continues the play within a play, only this time we're behind the set. It's a month later in the tour of "Nothing On." We see the backstage reality of all the theatrics of the previous act, and the desperate attempts to "salvage the script." We witness even more of the backstage lovers' games and the personalities of each character within a character as they get caught, literally, with their pants down.

What a hilarious bunch they are: the aforementioned Dotty, and there's Roger or Gary Lejeune

(Marshall Davis), tax revenue agent, who can never find the right word and has what John Duncan rightly called the best pratfall in years. There's show-stopper Brooke Ashton, or Vicki (Cynthia Besteman), getting the most mileage out of a hot purple flounced dress and a black corset. Dense, wimpy Frederick Fellowes (John Leistner) can't handle anything without screwing it up royally. Veteran actor David Stuart Bull plays Selsdon Mowbray, a.k.a. as The Burglar, a stereotyped drunkard/rowdy actor. Bull performs the role with an artful economy of effort, giving glimpse of his superb talent, while not upstaging the others.

Throughout, *Noises Off* is the best of ensemble work. Other players are just as excellent: Annie McGregor is back on the University Theater stage, a University of Oregon doctoral student who directed last season's *Blood Relations* and whose roles in *Gypsy* and *Madwoman of Chaillot* are unforgettable. The woman has admirable stage command, and a finely tuned comedy sense, funny as fizz playing dizzy Belinda Blair here, a frustrated social worker type who tries to patch up everything amiss.

Then there's the belly rumbling deadpan of Tim Allgood (Rob Harriman). Marshall Davis plays Lloyd Dallas with aloof suavity, the director of the play within the play. Susan Page takes on the role of Poppy Norton-Taylor, the director's assistant who has her comic moment in the sun when she pitch hits for another character who is suddenly "incapacitated."

In short, what fools these mortals be, in the most loving, laughing sense of the word fool. Each one embodies a certain self we can become at our foolhardiest of moments. Each one appeals because she/he strongly reflects some very human trait.

Noises Off should be required attendance for all who think no 20th century work could equal that of classic theater comedy. Word for word, the script is a bawdy good read in itself. "Behind the Dressing Room Doors," a tongue in cheek description of each character, accompanies program notes. Photos of each character are on the wall in the theater lobby, with a blown-up version of each farcical program description alongside. In odd moments of waiting (two intermissions), perusal of same puts one in the perfect mood for this play, which proves the love of words is alive and well in literature.

Act III again puts the audience into the seats of an audience watching a month-later production of "Nothing On." By now, all order has totally fallen apart, but "the show must go on." The original script has been skewed so far off center, all that's left is ribaldry at its peak. Enjoy, enjoy.

It almost seems a waste to write this. *Noises Off* will most likely be a sell-out, since only four performances remain, and some will be frustrated at not getting tickets. Well, 'tis more the pity, but the truth is that Saturday night I laughed harder than at any play in my life. At the end of Act II, tears absolutely poured.

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