



UNQUIET ON THE SET

A play hits the skids in Cottage Theatre's *Noises Off*

Cottage Theatre's production of *Noises Off* is a catastrophe, but don't worry — that's exactly the point.

This comedy, written by British writer Michael Frayn and directed here by Tony Rust, takes the familiar play-within-a-play format and gives it a righteous goosing, offering the audience a farcical behind-the-scenes glimpse into a production coming apart at the seams, unraveled by secret affairs, petty rivalries, overblown egos and an assortment of faulty props.

"Noises off" is the theatrical term for sounds coming from offstage, and its cheeky appropriation for the title gives you a pretty decent indication that offstage is about to take center stage, hilariously so. This is a noisy, cluttered, rambunctious show about "the theatuh" that delights in the tumbling chaos of its innumerable moving parts.

Act One opens on the final night of rehearsals for *Nothing On*, a sexed-up farce that mirrors the actual romantic intrigues tangling up its cast. As the director (Ward Fairbairn) struggles to tame his actors — who are by turns unruly, unprepared or simply incompetent — a sense of impending disaster grows.

Act Two jumps forward in time to a mid-week matinee of the made-up *Nothing On*, now viewed from behind the scenes — basically, the stage is flipped to reveal the gears grinding almost to a halt as the relationships among the cast deteriorate in real time. The slapstick tension of immediately re-watching the same play, but from the inside out this time, bears undue comic riches, and the cast mines them exceptionally well.

Complete disaster strikes in the final act as the stage is spun frontward for yet another performance of the show, this time at the bitter end of its 10-week run. At this point, *Nothing On* scarcely resembles itself, as the script is either abandoned or used like a weapon by which the actors play out the actual scandals tearing them asunder.

Rust does a magnificent job choreographing the comic mayhem of Frayn's complicated script, which calls for equal parts rapid wit, quick changes and physical pratfalls. No less difficult are the dual roles to be filled, and the cast is on mark: Nikki Pagniano (Dottie), Kory Weimer (Frederick), Melissa Miller (Poppy), Sophie Blades (Belinda), Josh Carlton (Tim) and Mark Allen (Selsdon Mowbray).

As strong as the cast is across the board, a pair of performances calls for special mention here: Phil Dempsey is perfect as the play's leading man Gary, by turns fumbling and debonair, and forever verging on inarticulate fits of anger and panic. And Autumn Carter is fantastic as Brooke, the gorgeous actress whose narcissistic absorption keeps her, hilariously, on script. It's no easy thing to play vacancy for comic effect — the ditzzy actress has been so overdone — but Carter, ironically enough, plays dumb so smartly that it brings something new to a timeworn type.

And a big nod to Cottage Theatre's scenic crew, which essentially doubles as an ancillary cast. Led by stage manager Bill Morrill, the crew swoops in during both intermissions and completely reverses the set. It's worth sticking in your seat between acts to watch them work their magic.

All of *Noises Off*, in fact, constitutes a kind of clever magic trick, and it's great fun to watch it all unfold. As a farce, it's as lighthearted as they come — full of innuendo, visual pranks and funny about-faces — but as a stagework, it's serious business, complex and frenetic. Cottage Theatre certainly takes it seriously, and the results are enthralling. ■

Noises Off plays through Feb. 18 at Cottage Theatre; info and tickets at cottagetheatre.org or 541-942-8001.



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