

“This is the most sure-fire show I could think of,” James said, adding it was at one time considered the funniest play in English. “It has no message. It’s pure frivolity.”

The show — originally written in 1941 by an English corporal and revised a couple of years later — features a diverse cast of characters led by American former actress Penelope Toop. She is married to Rev. Lionel Toop, the vicar of a local parish in the fictitious village of Merton-cum-Middlewick. A Russian spy, gossiping churchgoer, cockney maid, incompetent police sergeant and shocked bishop join in the mix, and chaos and confusion ensue.

At one point, according to James, “there are four people onstage dressed as clergyman, and one of them is the Russian spy, and they have to figure out which one he is” — though it’s glaringly obvious to the audience, as the spy doesn’t try to conceal his accent.

A true British comedy

True to British tastes of the 1940s, James said, the play is “really a ticklish little comedy” full of muted innuendo rather than blunt sensual references or situations.

“It’s not sexy, it’s titillating,” he explained. “Anytime something is about to get out of bounds, someone stops it.” With two American characters, it also utilizes the “yanks in Britain” gag, which contrasted loud wise-cracking Americans with the subdued citizens and settings of mid-century England.

“It was its own genre after the war,” James said. “The yanks were so different than the repressed British. They were brash and had a different sense of humor.”

For instance, the nosy parishioner, and show’s antagonist, is shocked and appalled by the supposed scandal of Penelope wearing trousers in public. However, Penelope is not portrayed in a negative or demeaning light, but rather as misunderstood.

“She’s an actress who married a vicar,” James said. “The vicar is mild-mannered and proprietous; that’s the conflict in the household. That conflict is inflamed by a spinster parishioner who thought she should have married the vicar.”

Justin Germond, of Hammond, who plays Sgt. Towers — the law-enforcing character who enters the plot near the



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTOS

ABOVE: From left: Bob Goldberg, Patricia VonVintage and Barry Sears run through a scene from ‘See How They Run.’ **BELOW:** From left: Patricia VonVintage, Barry Sears and Justin Germond work on the play ‘See How They Run’ at the Astor Street Opry Company.



end and resolves the situation — said the play has a “healthy mix of it all” in terms of comedy.

“The movement is heavy, but that is not the sole comedy,” he said. “A lot of the physical comedy is more of an embellishment. The dialogue alone is already funny by itself. And the movements and the actions taken enhance it.”

Barry Sears, an Astoria-based chiropractor who plays the Russian spy, added, “You want to act like this is all normal. You want to try to sell it like this is real, but what the hell, the world’s gone mad.”

Comedy as music

Because of the outlandish humor woven into the show, part of James’ directing process was educating the cast on the right tone, tempo and inflection to deliver a joke in the appropriate style.

“You have to teach people how to be funny,” he said. “Not everyone knows how to be funny. Not everyone has good timing. During the course of doing a play, everyone has to come around to it.”

“See How They Run” comes from a difficult genre, one that is unfamiliar to modern casts. The show also contains numerous period-specific references

that may not resonate broadly with people today. The cast had to become well-versed in how to deliver the lines to make the humor easily understood and enjoyed by contemporary audiences.

“I think of comedy as music,” James said. “You sell a joke with tempo and tone. Inflection is what makes us understand things. It’s not a concept everyone grasps immediately, deciphering what word is important.”

Patricia VonVintage, who recently assumed the role of executive director at the opry company, plays the role of Penelope, and she described the show as “very different than any play I’ve ever done.”

Because of James’ educational approach to directing, she feels she is being taught the reasoning behind various theater techniques for the first time.

Additionally, she said, “doing a British comedy as opposed to an American comedy is the most drastic difference to me, because in the past I’ve been a primarily physical actress. Now I’m learning an entirely different way.”

A roller coaster

She is not the only cast member whose understanding of the play, and theater in general, has developed through James’ educator-approach to the rehearsal process.

“He walks us through it a lot of the time, so we make sure we all sound like we’re from the same play,” said Jaysea Williams, who is playing the bold, brassy cockney maid, Ida. “It would be easy for us to all sound like we’re from different plays, but it’s part of making it cohesive.”

Germond, who has worked with James twice before, said he enjoys the process since the director has “a mind and ear and eye for the script and how he deciphers it.”

While audiences may be in for a bit of a history lesson when attending “See How They Run,” the show is brimming with enough slapstick and hilarious characters to keep them enthralled.

“It starts out a nice pace and then, you kind of go on a ride,” VonVintage said. “You are definitely on the roller coaster, and the roller coaster gets faster and faster. By the end of it, I feel like I’d be sitting on the edge of my seat, wondering what is going to happen next.” 