

Cultural Daily

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Noises Off at A Noise Within & Other Fun & Games

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 2nd, 2018

It takes a special kind of comic sensibility to appreciate Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*. A British one is highly recommended, because Frayn's play is full of it, meaning that it helps to have some familiarity with British accents, sentence structure and expressions (there's a helpful glossary in the program). The British enjoy this particular kind of slapstick, a bit more than Americans generally do.

To love-love-love *Noises Off*, as you'll discover if you catch the current production at Pasadena's A Noise Within, you'd better be prepared for a lot of silly nonsense, pratfalls and women running around in luscious underwear while frumpy housekeepers mess up telephones and send plates of sardines flying about for no good reason at all except that it's funny.



Deborah Strang in *Noises Off* at A Noise Within.

Follow me here: This is a comedy about another play called *Nothing On* that is being given a production within *this* production by a small and not entirely disciplined British company. It is fraught with all the things that *will* go wrong when these "English" actors take on the daunting staging of this comedy-within-a-comedy. Plates fly, clothes fly, pants drop, contact lenses pop out, and doors slam. (Do doors ever slam.)

It's a type of theatre swiped from the popular turn-of-the-20th century French *boulevardier* comedies (translation: giggly, saucy, distracted stuff). But too much of a good thing can cause surfeit. In more ways than one. *Noises Off* started out as a fund-raising skit that grew, and it shows. Too many doors, too many sardine jokes, too many minor catastrophes, too many lip-smacking moments. However, there is a central idea here that *is* highly original: *Noises Off* is a comedy in three acts that catches three frenetic beginnings of *Nothing On*'s Act One, from three different perspectives: rehearsal, backstage and performance.

Spoiler alert — they will not be described here. Even though the play dates back to 1982, it has been subjected to tweaks and rewrites since. Revealing more might ruin the fun for some of the uninitiated and other visitors from Mars.



I-r, Erika Soto, Jeremy Rabb, Emily Kosloski, Deborah Strang, Jill Hill, Geoff Elliott and Apllo Dukakis, with Kasey Mahaffy standing in the doorway in *Noises Off* at A Noise Within. with

Playwright Michael Frayn, you see, has packed more knock-down-drag-out comic events in this play than there may be angels on the head of a pin. After a while they do tend to collide and run into one another much as the actors do. A lot of people find this excruciatingly funny, which accounts for this play's inexhaustible popularity. Other people, myself among them, find that a little of this can go quite a long way.

As we all know, comedy is tragedy that happens to other people. Watching somebody slip on a banana peel is only funny to the onlooker. Actors playing comedy must handle its unraveling as a *real* total disaster for it to be funny. The actors at A Noise Within are adept, experienced and admirably skilled members the theatre's core company. The guilty party here is Frayn. He has simply packed his play with way too much of a good thing — too many complicated strategies, too many collisions, too many disasters, too much repetition and too many laughs (if there is such a thing) until they tend to cancel each other out. They all might be funnier if they came as single spies, but — with a nod to Shakespeare — they come at us in battalions.

If this too-much-of-a-muchness presents overwhelming challenges even for such talented directors (and Noise Within founders) as Julia Rodriguez-Elliott and husband Geoff Elliott (who also plays the director of the play within the play), it also has its champions. A lot of happy people can't get enough of it, and many of them were in the audience at Saturday's opening.

In fairness, the technical aspects of this Noise Within production are up to its usual high standards, from Fred Kinney's revolving set and Ken Booth's lighting, to Angela Balogh Calin's sly costumes, and the numerous props that miraculously manage to change hands without crashing. These come courtesy of prop masters Sydney Russell and Erin Walley.

The experience? A giddy, rowdy over the top *tour de force* by the ensemble wherein one celebrates the fact that the actors got through it without breaking any bones. For the company, it is the joyous celebration of the end of another happy season by taking on a challenge: a play so tightly woven that it defies singling out the individuals in it, except for the inimitable Deborah Strang as the really dotty maid Dotty, and a couple actors in two isolated smaller parts who deliver the kind of authenticity that compels attention. They are Apollo Dukakis as a classic bungling burglar who enjoys his drink and misses his cues, and Rafael Goldstein (last seen here as Henry V) as a conscientious assistant stage manager whose job it is to rescue — or try to — all the *gaffes* dished out by the incompetent *prima donnas* in the cast of the play within the play.

Frayn may be guilty of too much ingenuity for the play's own good and, in this production, a few too many moments do slip overboard. But *Noises Off* has its market or it would have been silenced long ago. And if this sort of no holds barred farce is your kind of humor, and the notion of seeing *Nothing On* or *Noises Off* at Noise Within tickles your fancy, GO.

Top image: The cast of Nothing On and Noises Off at A Noise Within.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Noises Off*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

WHEN: Next Thursday only, 7:30pm; Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2pm & 8pm;

Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Exceptions: No 7pm performance Sundays, May 6 & 20. Ends May 26.

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available online at www.anoisewithin.org or by phone at 626.356.3121. Student Rush (with ID) one hour before any performance, \$20.

All tickets remaining are *Pay What You Can*, cash only, at the box office on day of performance after 2pm; limit of two per person. *Sunday Rush* May 13, 7 pm only, all tickets remaining, \$25, available online after 12am on day of performance with code SUNDAYRUSH or at the box office after 2pm. Groups (10 or more): Adults, \$25-\$50 each, up to 35% off; students from \$18.

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