

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

What's So Funny?

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 17th, 2019

Comedy. You've heard this one before. It's what occurs when something bad happens to someone else, like slipping on a banana peel, especially if it's someone you don't know or like. And comedy comes in various grades. A is satire, B is farce, C is slapstick, D is British humor and E is whatever is left.

The Play That Goes Wrong at the Ahmanson Theatre manages, at different times, to be B, C and D plus one more, ungraded. Call it the Revenge of Inanimate Objects. Doors that won't open when they should, dead bodies that don't stay dead, doors that open when they shouldn't, window panes without panes, mantels that don't stick to walls, walls that fall and, above all, floors that threaten to cave.

So when The Cornley University Drama Society decides to put on a 1920s mystery thriller called *The Murder at Haversham Manor*, you'll know two things right away: It is an *English* comedy; anything, funny or not, will happen.



I-r, Peyton Crim, Yaegel T. Welch (lying down) & Jamie Ann Romero in *The Play That Goes Wrong* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

After a few attempts by the crew at demonstrating to the incoming audience the proficiency of this theatrical enterprise, its director, Chris (Evan Alexander Smith), apologizes for a minor box office slip-up that misled some of the lovely people in the audience into believing they were buying tickets to *Hamilton*. Not to worry. *The Murder at Haversham Manor* will be every bit as bracing.

Bracing, yes. Well, braced anyway. Especially the set. Designer Nigel Hook has seen to its every detail, so that, as promised, everything that needs to go wrong does. He gets plenty of inspired help from costume designer Roberto Surace, as well as Ric Mountjoy's lighting and, most notably from an extremely busy though uncredited prop designer. Hmm. Nigel incognito? Kudos to whomever nonetheless, and certainly to the valiant cast for keeping abreast of the cumulative misadventures to come.



Members of the cast of *The Play That Goes Wrong* at The Ahmanson Theatre. Another thing to keep in mind—or maybe not—is the complicated plot. It'll save time and effort if you don't, because it doesn't matter. Your attention will be fully engaged just keeping up with the action. No

point in taxing your brain.

And yes, of course, there is lots and lots of silly slapstick fun. While the level of the humor makes no apologies except to Shaw, Shakespeare and Stoppard (McDonagh and Orton belong in a different grade level altogether), I must warn you, again, that *The Play That Goes Wrong* is irremediably *British*. The good news, however, is that the energetic actors who make up this touring company are American and very much to be commended for the amount of physical exertion, logistical effort and precision they expend in saving this play from itself.

It tells you something that the script was written by committee—a distinguished committee of three to be exact—Henry Lewis, Henry Shields and Jonathan Sayer, all top graduates of LAMDA (the London Academy of music and Dramatic Art). That they also all are members of the well-named Mischief Theatre may account for the repeated disasters and pratfalls involved in their comedy's who's-on-first race to the finish. It's as if they couldn't stop heaping on the whipped cream. But too much whipped cream is too much you-know-what. This play is no exception.



Ned Noyes & Jamie Ann Romero in *The Play That Goes Wrong* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

When, at the top of the second half, director Chris returns for another quick chat with the audience, he can't help expressing his gratitude that so many people actually came back for more. But if there's one thing *The Play That Goes Wrong* does right, it is that it recognizes how utterly and deliberately foolish this all is and smartly saves some of its best comic routines for the second act. (Take that, all ye of little faith who left too soon.)

Oddly, one does sort of get lulled by the inanity and begin to let go and enjoy it, especially such distinguishing elements as the perpetual self-satisfied grin on the face of Max Bennett (Ned Noyes), his complicated love scenes with the posturing Sandra (Jamie Ann Romero), and the frantic efforts by the dedicated stage manager Annie (Angela Grovey) to do whatever she can to hold the performance together to the end.



l-r, Angela Grovey, Yaegel T. Welch and Jamie Ann Romero in *The Play That Goes Wrong* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

As mentioned earlier, Act Two has its wickedly perilous moments when a good deal of the unraveling plot (the one I hope you've ignored) loses its underpinnings in an upstairs private room. No spoilers from me here, but if you find yourself thinking of heading for home or the nearest sushi bar after Act One, don't. The best really *is* yet to come...

In the end, I do confess that all this can be a bit too much of a muchness and that some events tend to wear out their welcome. Now and then, here and there. But think of how good you'll feel bragging to friends who left early about all the fun *you* had in Act Two. And think how pleased you'll be about staying around to applaud this cast's breathless ambition, sequence memory and sheer stick-to-it-iveness. The same goes for cool director Matt DiCarlo (recreating Mark Bell's Broadway direction, as if that wouldn't be a bit of a drag).



l-r, Peyton Crim, Scott Cote, Evan Alexander Smith & Ned Noyes in *The Play That Goes Wrong* at The Ahmanson Theatre.

I suppose it is only fair to report one more little thing: the two (or ten?) people seated directly behind me noisily and very annoyingly would not stop laughing. Wouldn't you just know it?

As they say, it takes all kinds.

Top image: The cast of The Play That Goes Wrong at The Ahmanson Theatre.

Photos by Jeremy Daniel

WHAT: *The Play That Goes Wrong*

WHERE: The Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Added 2pm show August 8. NO 6:30pm show on August 11. Ends August 11.

HOW: Tickets: \$30–\$135 (subject to change). Tickets available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org or by phone at 213.972.4400 or in person at the CTG Box Office at the Ahmanson. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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