

InsideOUT

PRODUCED BY THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

October 2008

NOISES OFF



By Michael Frayn
Directed by Kent Thompson

Oct 3 - Nov 1

The Stage Theatre

Box Office 303.893.4100



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Synopsis

LLOYD: *That's what it's all about. Doors and sardines. Getting on — getting off. Getting the sardines on — getting the sardines off. That's farce. That's the theatre. That's life. —Noises Off*

The play opens on a third-rate acting troupe trying to get through its final rehearsal of the farce *Nothing On* before opening night. The director, Lloyd, is short on patience; the stage manager, Tim, can't stay awake, and the cast has trouble remembering their lines and blocking (movements on stage). They barely make it through the dress rehearsal and they still have weeks of touring. The ensemble stumbles through performances with Dotty, who forgets where she put her last plate of sardines; Brooke, who constantly loses her contact lenses, and Selsdon, who can't find his liquor bottle. Behind the scenes action exposes the multiple mixed-up love affairs between cast and crew and the rising panic as each actor tries to stay out of the way of the other. The chaos on and offstage escalates, culminating in a meltdown of the entire plot of *Nothing On* as the curtain descends.

SELSDON: *When all around is strife and uncertainty, there's nothing like a good old fashioned plate of curtain. —Noises Off*

Theatrical Terms Used in the Play

Noises off —sounds which are meant to be heard from off stage

Blocking —actors' movements on stage, including exits and entrances

Dress rehearsal —a complete rehearsal, in costume, usually the last one before opening night

Paint store —a working place backstage for a scenic artist

Property (prop) —any object used on the stage, except scenery, lights and costumes

Prop room —a storage place, and sometimes a workshop for properties

Play within a play —a simulation of a dramatic performance as part of a play

Scenery dock —a place in the theatre, usually near the stage, where scenery is stored

Stalls —British: the orchestra seats in a theatre on the ground floor closest to the stage which command the highest price

Technical —a rehearsal of scenes at which the technical personnel (lights, scene changes, costume changes) practice all their operations usually in conjunction with the actors' rehearsal of business, cues and movement

Green Room —a lounge offstage where actors may rest between scenes

House —an auditorium or other area open to the audience in a theatre; hence “an empty house,” a “full house,” a “good house”

Go on —to make an entrance

Go off —to exit the stage

Workshop —short for drama workshop where a play is being tried out or actors trained; also, a place backstage where equipment such as scenery and properties are made, repaired, etc.

Beginners —in British usage, a call to summon the actors to take their positions on the stage when the curtain is about to rise. In the United States the call is “Places.”

Bowman, Walter Parker and Ball, Robert Hamilton. *Theatre Language*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961.

The Playwright

*Michael Frayn is the giant who bestrides the British arts ...
a quiet, modest and essentially private man.* —The Sunday Times, London

Michael Frayn is a noted English social satirist and critically acclaimed newspaper columnist, novelist and playwright. First and foremost a humorist, Frayn has also been applauded for his effective blending of serious and comedic elements in his work.

Frayn was born in 1933 in Mill Hall on the northwestern edge of London. His father, Thomas Allen Frayn, was a sales representative for an asbestos company and his mother, Violet, was a shop assistant. Soon after his birth, his parents moved to Ewell on the southern fringe of London. His mother died when Frayn was thirteen and his father later remarried. He attended Kingston Grammar School, where he developed a talent for satire by imitating his teachers to amuse his fellow students. Upon graduating from high school in 1952, Frayn was drafted into the Royal Army and was required to attend a course in interpreting Russian at Cambridge University. He was eventually commissioned as an officer in the intelligence corps, where he served until discharged in 1954. Frayn then enrolled in Emmanuel College, Cambridge University, where he studied philosophy.

After graduation in 1957, he worked as a reporter and columnist for the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper, writing a satirical column that gained wide popularity. In 1962 Frayn left the *Guardian* and began writing humor columns for the *London Observer* where he worked until 1968.

His first novel, *The Tin Men*, was published in 1965 while his first play, *The Two of Us*, was produced in the West End in London in 1970. Frayn has continued to work as a columnist, novelist, playwright, as well as working as a screenwriter for the British Broadcasting Company. Frayn's first marriage to Gillian Palmer, a psychotherapist with whom he had three children, ended in divorce in 1989. In 1996, he married author Claire Tomalin. Frayn has received numerous awards for his work, including the 1986 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best new foreign play for *Benefactors* (1984) and the 2000 Tony Award for best play, *Copenhagen*. In 2003 he was awarded the Whitbread Award for best novel and Great Britain's Commonwealth Writers Prize for best book, *Spies*.

Between 1973 and 1989 Frayn took a break from publishing novels to focus on his plays, essays and screenplays. His plays, like his novels, are generally characterized by their recurring elements of farce and social satire. *Alphabetical Order* (1975) is set in the clippings library of a provincial newspaper where the new librarian turns a chaotic workplace into a carefully organized system. In the process she attempts to impose her super organization on the lives of her fellow employees. In *Donkeys' Years* (1976) a group of men at their twentieth college reunion find themselves regressing to their undergraduate behaviors, which include heavy drinking and sexual liaisons. A pair of writers meets while on assignment in Cuba in *Clouds* (1976) and the female reporter and novelist engages in all kinds of hanky-panky with her fellow journalist, an American professor and a Cuban government official. Set amidst a sales conference held in a hotel in Germany, *Make and Break* (1980) concerns a salesman who is consumed by his job and suffers complete alienation from human emotion. One of Frayn's most critically and commercially successful plays, *Noises Off* (1982) is a comedy that borrows from the best (or is it worst?) traditions of British farce. The play traces the progress of a troupe of actors from the last dress rehearsal through the subsequent run of a typical British sex farce.

During the 1980s and 90s Frayn's plays began moving away from the satirical and farcical. *Benefactors*, set during the 1960s, concerns a liberal minded architect as he struggles to live up to his high ideals. The plot follows the architect, his wife and another married couple as their personal and private lives become entangled in the fifteen year span of the play. *Copenhagen* is based on the historical meeting in 1941 between Werner Heisenberg, Nazi Germany's most prominent physicist, and Niels Bohr, a physicist and Jewish refugee from Nazi-occupied Denmark. The play addresses the much debated question of what actually happened during their meeting, particularly in regard to the moral dilemmas and research of the two scientists. Frayn has also translated a number of plays from the nineteenth century Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. These include *The Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya*, among others. Frayn's play, *Wild Honey* (1984) is based on an unfinished manuscript by Chekhov titled *Platonov*.

Michael Frayn's (work) shows his interest in the common foible, the typical character. In an important sense, he is the celebrator and the inquisitor of ordinary life."—Mosely Merritt ¹.

1. Mosely, p. 182.

<http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-literary-criticism/frayn-michael>

Mosely, Merritt. *Understanding Michael Frayn*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

Frayn on Frayn

The idea for *Noises Off* occurred when I watched (my play) *The Two of Us* from the wings. It was funnier from behind than in front, and I thought “One day I must write a farce from behind.” I didn’t know if actors would be able to perform it.... I just had to try to remember where all nine actors and all the characters in *Nothing On* were at every moment. I often felt that I had come to the end of the bytes in my brain, that I had exceeded the capacity of my memory store.

Michael Frayn interviewed by Denise Warrell.
“Viewing a Farce from Behind.” *Time*,
January 30, 1984.

Noises Off is about an anxiety everyone has, that he may make a fool of himself in public, that he may not be able to maintain his persona, that the chaotic feelings inside may burst out, that the whole structure may break down. I suspect people are seeing the kind of disaster they fear may happen to them, but one that’s safely happening to these actors.

Michael Frayn interviewed by Benedict Nightingale. “Michael Frayn: the Entertaining Intellect.” *New York Times Magazine*,
December 8, 1985.

I think embarrassment is a very deep emotion, something that many people fear. *Noises Off* is about embarrassment; it’s about actors trying to fend off their appalling embarrassment at being unable to go on, of being unable to continue, and that is a problem in life for all human beings, of struggling on and trying to keep their act together.

Michael Frayn interviewed by John L. DeGaetani. *A Search for Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*, p. 77-78.

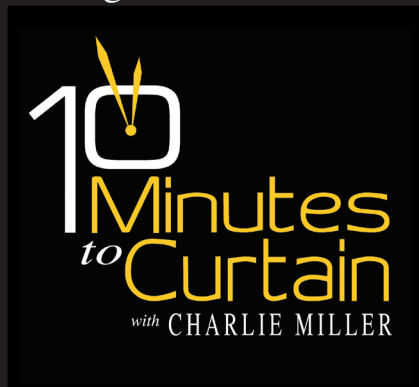
I sometimes feel that the skill of audiences is not always sufficiently noted. Some theatergoers arrive late; some of them comment on the performance aloud and wait for the laugh lines to cough. But the surprising thing really is how few behave like this, and how many understand the conventions and are prepared to abide by them. To find two, or five, or ten good actors to perform a play is difficult: to find 200, or 500 good people to watch it, night after night, is a miracle.

Michael Frayn, “Introduction,” *Plays: One*,
p. xi-xiv.

DeGaetani, John L. *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

Page, Malcolm, ed. *File on Frayn*. London: Methuen Drama, 1994.

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The British Love Affair with Sardines and Hot Water Bottles

DOTTY: *And I take the sardines. No, I leave the sardines. No, I take the sardines.*—Noises Off

The mention of sardines in this play sets the audience into bursts of laughter or, at least, giggles. Actually, these little fishes can be a staple of a British menu; they are heart healthy and as a non-predatory fish low on the food chain, there is no fear of mercury contamination. A British friend says they are used in sandwiches and can be served as an appetizer on toast, or “instead of dessert.”¹ During World War II canned sardines were readily available instead of the “rationed meat, bacon and cheese.”²

ROGER: I mean, you know, I’m standing out there, with this hot water bottle in my hand.—*Noises Off*

The British love hot water bottles! The Twenga Co., UK website lists more than 28 kinds of hot

water bottles or covers, from heart shaped or personalized ones to faux fur covers.

There is even a museum devoted entirely to the history of hot water bottles. Located near Melksham, Wilts, the Hot Water Bottle Museum is housed in an old hot water mill “active as recently as 1887 and restored to full working order by the Night Comfort Society.”⁴ There are samples from all over the world, including ones from America used during Prohibition to store liquor and transparent Japanese bottles for the display of miniature tropical fish.

1. Melcher, Rosemary. April 2, 2008.

2. O’Donnell, Kim. “A Mighty Appetite.” *The Washington Post*. March, 2008.

3. wiki.answers.com

4. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi-qn4158>

<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi-qn4158>

O’Donnell, Kim. “A Mighty Appetite.” *The Washington Post*. March, 2008.

A Brief History of Farce

“God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.”
— Corinthians, I:27

In 1987 Benedict Nightingale, an established London drama critic, wrote an article about the closing of *No Sex Please, We’re British*, a farce that had run for 6,761 performances—approximately 19 years. “No comedy, musical, thriller or straight play has run remotely as long in London.”¹ At any given time as many as four such farces may be running successfully in the West End, an embarrassment to Americans who think London theatre begins and ends with such venerable institutions as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Court, the Barbican or the National Theatre.

Farce is an exaggerated form of comedy that takes its impetus from fast action, visual effects

and convolutions of plot; the more complicated and illogical the better. Its heroes are clowns or become clowns in the course of the action; it is their foibles and stupidities that are the major source of humor.

Farce is one of the oldest forms of comic drama. It is the predecessor of high comedy, having evolved from the primitive slapstick and folk dramas of the ancient Greeks. As early as the fifth century BC, farcical playlets full of foolishness and bawdy humor were being performed and inspired such writers as Aristophanes (445-385 BC) who borrowed their jokes, antics and broad hilarious style for such plays as *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs*. However, the word “farce” derives from the Latin “farcire” meaning “to stuff”—a reference apparently to the padding used to exaggerate the bellies and bosoms of the ancient actors.

The Greek farces influenced the Roman writers

of comedy, especially Plautus (c. 251-c. 184 BC) whose plays influenced the musical farce *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*. But they also found a rich source of inspiration in the peasant farces that were performed in the marketplaces of Southern Italy. These Atellan farces (named for Atella, the town of origin) or “fabulas,” consisted of improvised skits using such stock figures as the drunk, the glutton, the fool or the coward as portrayed by a troupe of actors wearing flamboyant or obscene costumes and masks. The improvisations were strung together by comic plot devices such as mistaken identity, masquerade, female impersonation and/or intrigue.

Boisterous, farcical comedy was a popular component in the mystery and miracle plays performed in European marketplaces during the Middle Ages. In 16th century Italy the *Commedia dell’arte* revived many of the characters, techniques and traditions of the Atellan rustic farce. Traveling troupes spread this revival throughout Europe. In England they influenced Shakespeare who included elements of commedia farce in such plays as *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In France Molière borrowed a great deal from commedia and elevated farce to the level of high art.

Farce continued to be popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Farcical sketches often preceded a long tragedy or melodrama as a curtain raiser and became part of the vaudeville shows popular in France, England and the United States. W. S. Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame), George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde were writing the full-length classics of farce.

In France delightful works were created by Labiche, Courteline and Feydeau. They kept the inherited stock characters and situations, but their characters took on the manners of the Victorian period. Drawing room, salons and hotel bedrooms became the preferred environments. Sex, marriage and money were the motivating factors of the plot and the members of the “haute bourgeoisie,” the upper middle class—lawyers, physicians, civil servants and others with a certain authority and position in society to uphold—were the characters doomed to being made ridiculous.

A bedroom farce is a kind of light comedy,

concentrating on the sexual pairings and recombinations of characters as they move through improbable plots accompanied by slamming doors and stuck windows. *Noises Off* is a parody of the bedroom farce *Nothing On*.

Most British sex farces poke fun at British society; as in the Victorian period their target is “the persistent remains of a class structure that prolongs privilege, inequities and moral complacency.” 2. A number of them have regional settings such as the Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Wales, Scotland—implying that life is the same in most regions, full of selfishness, corruption and fooling around. In the 1970s, sexual frankness and swearing increased in farce in the works of Joe Orton and Harold Pinter, perhaps as a reaction to British prudishness or to the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, that monument to censorship.

In the 20th century farce came to the side of the “little man” embodied best in the art of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. Chaplin in particular represented the downtrodden person “alone against an unusually unkind world, who survived on his wit and agility like the tricky servants of the commedia. His outwitting maneuvers were usually physical and, though he got knocked down, he picked himself up, dusted himself off and started all over again.” 3. Physical resilience also was shown in the work of the Marx Brothers. Their energy was potentially aggressive and destructive as they attacked society’s sacred cows. They expressed anger at what people could not understand, control or do and their insecurities at the difficulty of functioning in a complicated world. Later 20th century farceurs include Woody Allen (*Play It Again Sam*, 1969); Mel Brooks (*The Producers*, 1968) and Neil Simon (*Plaza Suite*, 1969).

Television farce is embodied in the situation comedy or sit com, though “Saturday Night Live” still uses the skit or revue formula. “Married...with Children” focused on a dysfunctional family whose father “lacked the character to succeed in life.” 4. “I Love Lucy” put Lucy in improbable situations while “Three’s Company” was a reworking of bedroom farce where two women shared an apartment with a supposed gay male. Other well-

rated TV shows of the 1970s and 80s that employed farce were “M*A*S*H,” “Get Smart,” “Frasier” and “3rd Rock from the Sun.” Today’s TV offerings are meager compared with the previous decades but include “The Simpsons,” “My Name is Earl,” “Two and a Half Men” and “Family Guy”.

Comedy is the clash of character. Eliminate character from comedy and you get farce.
— William Butler Yeats

1. Nightingale, p. 1.
2. Bernal, p. 309.
3. Harrop and Epstein, p. 144.
4. transparency.com. p. 2.

Bernal, Albert. *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

Harrop, John and Epstein, Sabin R. *Acting with Style*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982.

Nightingale, Benedict. “Theatre: England’s Endless Love Affair with Farce.” *New York Times*. Mar. 27, 2008.

The Encyclopedia of World Drama. Vol. 2. New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1972.

Questions and Activities

Study Questions

- 1) *Noises Off* is considered a farce. Define farce and cite a couple of examples that support your definition. What theatrical conventions are used to elevate the farce?
- 2) The production uses the convention of play-within-a-play. How do the actors show that they are playing a character and when they are playing the actor?
- 3) Properties (props) are used throughout the farce. What is the purpose of the sardines and the flowers? Are there any other props or costume pieces that serve the humor in the production?
- 4) After seeing the play, describe the similarities and differences of each act in the DCTC production of *Noises Off*.
- 5) Why is the timing so important in the second act? What are some of the problems that might happen if the timing is off?
- 6) Make a list of the characters, the roles that they perform and the relationship that they have with the other characters? What are some of the problems these characters face and how does it inform what is happening in the play-within-the-play?
- 7) The stage managers have a multitude of tasks and roles that they perform in the show? List their responsibilities and how they perform them.

Activities

I. Write a Farce

- A. Materials: Pen or pencil; paper
- B. Write a short farce about a misunderstanding that happened at school. Take a single moment in time and embellish it to create a short scene that will last no longer than five minutes.
- C. Be sure to include these farcical elements.
 1. The setting. Make sure that the setting has at least three doors and some mechanical problem.
 2. Exaggeration. Whatever you choose for the situation, make sure that you exaggerate it.

3. Characters. The characters are also exaggerated and there is usually a moment of mistaken identity.
4. Props. Use at least three props.

CO Standards

Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.

Reading and Writing 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

II. Preparing and Performing the farce

- A. Materials: A short scene generated from the above exercise or a previously published play.
- B. From the short farce that was written in the previous exercise or working from a published script, discuss what it would take to produce a short performance.
- C. Brainstorm a list of duties that are required for the performance to happen. Include director, actors, stage managers, and designers (set, lighting, costume, props, and sound).
- D. After about thirty minutes of planning, discuss the successes and the challenges that were faced.
- E. Raising the bar
 1. The groups have discussed the creative side of a production, what else would be needed to make the play happen.
 - a. Explain that each group has a budget of \$50,000 for their production. List all of the jobs that you will need and how much you will be able to pay each employee. Create a balance sheet and make sure that you do not go over budget.
 - b. Raising the bar-Part II
 - i. What happens if you increase the budget?
 - ii. What happens if you decrease the budget?

CO Standards

Theatre 1: Students develop interpersonal skills and problem-solving capabilities through group interaction and artistic collaboration.

Math 6: Students link concepts and procedures as they develop and use computational techniques, including estimation, mental arithmetic, paper-and-pencil, calculators, and computers in problem-solving situations and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems.