PLAY GUIDE

NOISES OFF
BY MICHAEL FRAYN
DIRECTED BY MEREDITH MCDONOUGH
ABOUT THE NOISES OFF PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts, and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play’s meaning and relevance.

Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions and to analyze and relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. These can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

Noises Off student matinees and this play guide address specific EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

• Students will identify or describe a variety of roles needed to produce a dramatic performance.

• Students will analyze the use of repetition in creating humor.

• Students will explain how a variety of perspectives creates greater insight into a field or endeavor.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Steven Rahe, Director of Education, at 502-584-1265 ext. 3045.

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**NOISES OFF: PLOT SUMMARY**

*Noises Off*, a British farce about putting on a farce, provides humorous insight into the onstage and offstage challenges of producing a play. What’s a farce? *Noises Off* is a superb example: a high-energy comedic romp involving highly improbable events, impeccable timing, misunderstandings and mistaken identities.

Structured in three acts, the play’s first act introduces the cast and crew of *Nothing On*, the play within *Noises Off*. The night before opening, the actors are struggling to get their entrances and exits and innumerable plates of sardines in the right place at the right time. The late hour and increasing tensions begin to reveal the fraught interpersonal relationships between the characters. The first act leaves you wondering: will they get it right before opening night?

In a dramatic transformation of space, the second act of *Noises Off* takes place backstage during a midweek matinee of *Nothing On*. The show has been touring for a month and the actors’ dysfunctional relationships are starting to take their toll on the production.

The final act takes place during the closing night performance of *Nothing On*. The play and the characters’ relationships are barely holding together. Mishap after mishap piles up as the characters attempt to untangle the disastrous performance and arrive at some sort of rational, salvageable end.

**NOTHING ON: PLOT SUMMARY**

*Nothing On*, the play within *Noises Off*, is a standard silly British bedroom farce. Roger Tramplemain, the estate agent in charge of renting the Brent’s lovely country house, has invited Vicki for a romantic rendezvous. Roger Tramplemain claims that the house is his own and believes that it will be empty. Whoops – it is anything but! Mrs. Clackett, the housekeeper, is planning to spend her afternoon off at the house relaxing, eating sardines and watching television. Then, the owners, Philip and Flavia Brent, secretly return to have their own mischievous romantic rendezvous – they’re not supposed to be in the country because they are avoiding paying their taxes. The two couples narrowly miss running into each other several times. The final moments reveal even more surprise guests: an elderly burglar and a wealthy Sheikh who is interested in renting the property. Dare we say it? Hilarity ensues! Much of the humor of *Nothing On* is sparked by mistaken identities, the slamming of doors, and sexual innuendo.

**NOISES OFF: CAST**

**TIMOTHY ALLGOOD** An overworked stage manager, carpenter and anything else that needs to be done for the touring production of *Nothing On*. He is chronically exhausted and sleep-deprived. He understudies the roles played by Selsdon and Freddy.

**BROOKE ASHTON** Cast in the role of Vicki in *Nothing On*, Brooke is a young, inexperienced actress often in search of a missing contact lens. She is part of a love triangle with Lloyd and Poppy.

**BELINDA BLAIR** A reliable, good-natured actress who is protective of Freddy. She plays Flavia Brent in *Nothing On*.

**LLOYD DALLAS** The director of *Nothing On*. He is a temperamental, yet charismatic man, and part of the love triangle with Poppy and Brooke.

**FREDERICK (FREDDY) FELLOWES** An insecure, overthinking actor gets a nosebleed at the first hint of violence and needs to know his motivation. He is double-cast in *Nothing On* as both Philip Brent and the Sheikh.

**GARRY LEJEUNE** Cast in the role of Roger Tramplemain the estate agent, Garry often leaves thoughts dangling and doesn’t finish his sentences. His romantic interest in Dotty drives him to repeatedly attack Freddy.

**SELSDON MOWBRAY** An elderly overly dramatic actor with an inconvenient drinking problem.

**POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR** As the assistant stage manager for *Nothing On*, Poppy is emotional and prone to outbursts. She is also Brooke’s understudy, which further complicates the Lloyd-Poppy-Brooke love triangle.

**DOTTIE OTLEY** A late-middle-aged actress cast in the role of Mrs. Clackett. She is very forgetful, but mostly good-natured.

**NOTHING ON: CAST**

**MRS. CLACKETT** (played by Dotty Otley) The housekeeper for the Brent’s home.

**ROGER TRAMPELEMAIN** (played by Garry Lejeune) An estate agent looking to rent Flavia and Philip’s house, on a date with Vicki.

**VICKI** (played by Brooke Ashton) Works for the tax authorities and is on a date with Roger.

**PHILIP AND FLAVIA BRENT** (played by Frederick Fellowes and Belinda Blair) Husband and wife owners of the country home; they live out of the country in order to avoid paying taxes. They are secretly visiting their home for their anniversary.

**BURGLAR** (played by Selsdon Mowbray) Elderly man breaking into the Brent’s house.

**SHEIKH** A wealthy Arab man interested in renting the house.
Sitting backstage in London’s West End in 1970, Michael Frayn was struck with a sudden revelation. As he watched his first professional theatre production from the wings one night, the playwright realized that he had the best seat in the house. “It was funnier from behind than in front,” Frayn explained, “and I thought that one day I must write a farce from behind.” Twelve years later, he did just that—and the result has been lauded as one of the funniest plays of the twentieth century.

Noises Off is Frayn’s enduringly uproarious depiction of what goes on (and what goes wrong) backstage during a theatrical performance. The play chronicles the rocky final dress rehearsal and subsequent disastrous performances of a sex farce called Nothing On. As the cast and crew of a third-rate touring company attempt to negotiate the farcical demands of the play—within-the-play—fast entrances and exits, cases of mistaken identity, clothing quickly doffed and donned—a hilarious parade of madcap backstage mishaps threatens to derail the proceedings altogether. Leading actress Dotty Otley can’t remember her blocking. The whiskey-slinging elder statesman Selsdon Mowbray is constantly disappearing. Ingenue Brooke Ashton keeps losing her contact lenses, newbie Frederick Fellowes just wants to know his motivation, and backstage love triangles threaten to become love trapezoids (which threaten to come to blows).

A feat of precise timing and comic agility, Noises Off manages to serve as both a send-up of the modern sex farce and a valentine to the form, mocking its triviality while simultaneously delivering an extremely well-crafted example of the genre. The New York Times has called the play “the most dexterously realized comedy ever about putting on a comedy.” It is also one of the most-produced. It premiered in 1982 at London’s Lyric Theatre and quickly transferred to the West End, where it ran until 1987 with five successive casts, winning Frayn the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Comedy. Meanwhile, in 1983 the play opened in the U.S. to popular and critical acclaim on Broadway, where it earned a Tony® nomination for Best Play. In the ensuing decades, it has been translated into dozens of languages and revived throughout the world, becoming a staple of the contemporary theatre repertoire.
Actors Theatre’s production will be helmed by Associate Artistic Director Meredith McDonough, who says she’s always dreamed of directing Frayn’s comic romp. “It’s been in my top five, always,” she confesses. “I think it’s because it’s so funny and ridiculous, and also because it’s a love letter to the theatre.”

Of the play’s lowbrow but finely calibrated humor, she reflects, “It’s so rare when you can find something that’s that funny, but not at anyone’s expense. It isn’t mean or nasty. It displays the best parts of clowning, farce, and physical comedy. Most directors I know want to do the play.”

Given its laugh-a-minute pace and rigorous physical demands, *Noises Off* requires an ensemble of gifted comic actors. “I basically have cast the funniest people I know,” says McDonough. “Most of the actors in the show are people I’ve worked with before, people I know are spontaneous and wildly creative, and who have kind of a wacky sense of humor.” Frayn’s script will put them through their paces, and will put their comic chops on full display. The play’s stage directions, especially in a backstage second act of nearly balletic proportions, read almost like choreography, describing page after page of precision-timed movement. It’s the kind of script that demands exacting attention to detail and inexhaustible athleticism from its performers—even as it takes its audience on what feels like a breathless, effortless ride.

Indeed, the set, seen from multiple vantages before the night is through, reveals itself eventually for what it really is: a playground (or a minefield?) for physical comedy. Will someone fall down those stairs, trip over that threshold, tumble over that couch? Yes, yes, and yes.

McDonough also emphasizes that you don’t have to be a “theatre person” to get in on the joke—the play’s raucous pratfalls will appeal to pretty much anyone with a pulse. For Frayn, the far-reaching popularity of *Noises Off* was never hard to understand: embarrassment is a universal emotion. “It’s amazing how many people find public speaking terrifying, even if it’s just in front of family and friends at a wedding,” the playwright once said. “And an audience is an intense version of the world around us. We all feel we might break down—and we sometimes do. So when we see it happening to those idiots on the stage in a farce, it’s a release of the tension.”

However you explain it, one thing’s for sure: audiences should come prepared to smile their faces off. “It’s just pure hilarity from start to finish,” says McDonough. “Whoever you are, wherever you come from, the play’s goal is to make you laugh, and laugh, and laugh. I truly can’t think of a better way to kick off our 50th Anniversary Season—or to celebrate the strange, strange work we do.”

—Sarah Lunnie

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—Meredith McDonough, Associate Artistic Director and director of *Noises Off*
BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE BACKSTAGE
COMEDY:
STAGE MANAGING
NOISES OFF

Paul Mills (a.k.a. Pablo) Holmes, Actors Theatre's Production Stage Manager, embarked on his 22nd season working with Actors this autumn by leading the stage management team for Noises Off. That means he has been notating the actors’ complicated moves, coordinating the show's needs and a million details during rehearsals, and will call all of the technical cues (lighting, sound, scenic changes) during performances. He’s also a veteran of the show's comic madness, having orchestrated its hijinks from backstage during Actors’ production 15 years ago. As good fortune would have it, he also stage managed the play at Pennsylvania’s Totem Pole Playhouse just this past summer. Literary Director Amy Wegener asked Pablo what he loves about his important offstage role working on this boisterous backstage comedy.

Amy Wegener: So, Pablo, are you excited to dive into the 2013-2014 Season with this masterpiece of farce?
Pablo Holmes: I’m tickled to death that this is how we’re kicking off our 50th Season, with this perfect theatrical gem. The virtuosity that it takes to do Noises Off is a great expression of the fact that Actors has been doing this for 50 years…and just look at how well we do it.

AW: From a stage manager’s perspective, what’s most fun about working on Noises Off?
PH: The thing I enjoy is that we have to try and figure out how to time a series of really intricate moves—it’s like choreography, which I love to watch—and an actor has to arrive at exactly the right place at the right moment for seven different things to happen. If they get behind in any way, it’s a house of cards that will start to fall down. What’s fun for me is to learn how to watch rehearsals, to write down all the details so that we can help the cast. I love the detail work that it takes to put together this giant puzzle, and the satisfaction when everything lands where it’s supposed to.

For instance, there’s a wonderful sequence with an axe that gets passed around, and just as it’s swinging up, the next actor grabs it. You watch this axe flying around and you think: oh my gosh, are they going to catch it? There are several tightly-orchestrated bits in the play like that, and if we do them right, the audience will be just delighted.

AW: Do you have any favorite bits of comic business in the show?
PH: There’s a tumble down the stairs that I think is pretty skippy. I love the passing of the axe, and there’s a sequence that has to do with a cactus plant that is really outrageously funny.

AW: It seems you’re really juggling two plays, because the audience watches both the play-within-the-play that the troupe is performing, Nothing On, and what happens backstage during a performance in Noises Off’s famous second act.
PH: The thing about Act Two is that the cast is actually performing Nothing On, while the audience watches the action that unfolds behind the set. What makes everything funny is that despite all the backstage shenanigans, they never miss an entrance—maybe they just barely make an entrance, or dive through the door, but they’ve made the entrance on cue. That’s part of what makes it hilarious. When you’ve got it perfectly timed, the audience is left breathless.

AW: It’s kind of rare to see characters in a play who are stage managers. What do you think of Tim and Poppy, the stage management team in Noises Off?
PH: Well, I’m crazy for Poppy. I think she’s a nut job, working so hard to be efficient and to do the right thing, and yet she’s sleeping with the director—that aspect of the play’s stage management world is so foreign to me that I just giggled. Also, they do things differently in England than we do, so these stage managers are also company managers, and they’re understudying the actors. So the fact that Tim also has to act onstage makes you realize how tiny this little troupe is.

AW: Do you think of the play as a tribute to the theatre, or a send-up, or both?
PH: It’s a valentine to the theatre, and to companies and actors everywhere who adore doing plays, and it captures the passion with which we produce plays and believe in them. The fact is that theatre is never going anywhere. It’s never going to end. There will never not be a writer who wants to hear their words in front of a live audience; there will never not be people who want to see plays. So here we are doing Noises Off, which is such a celebration of theatre, and the spunk and the go-get-’em and the silliness of it all.

I think Noises Off sends the theatre up, and wraps it in a great big ribbon at the same time. It says: this is what we do for a living—isn’t it crazy? But aren’t you just having the best time of your life?
BRIDGEPARK
BUILDING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN STAGE AND CLASSROOM

The following exercises combine creative drama, theatre concepts and core content to connect the theatre experience with drama activities in your classroom.
By exploring drama as a mode of learning, students strengthen skills for creative problem solving, imagination and critical thinking.

AT YOUR DESK ACTIVITIES

1. The set is a major design element of Noises Off because we see both the onstage and backstage perspectives of Nothing On. Research previous set designs on the internet. Then design and build a model of your version of the set, as if the production will appear in your own school’s theatre. What are some special aspects of your school’s performance space that you will need to take into account? How will you solve the challenge of showing both the onstage and backstage perspectives of the set for Nothing On?

2. The humor in Noises Off builds upon itself as we see the actors in Nothing On struggle to perform their show. Think of a time in your life when an incident set off a series of accidental shenanigans, where the scene was blown out of proportion to the point of ridiculousness. Imagine and embellish the circumstances if you like. Now, write a description of your real or imagined incident, and share with a partner or the whole class.

AWAY FROM YOUR DESK

1. Physical comedy is a key ingredient in the humor of Noises Off. Have your students walk around the room and explore ways they can make their bodies humorous. Play silly or playful music and instruct them to lead with different parts of their bodies or exaggerate certain movements. Try leading with your forehead, your elbow, the tips of your fingers, or even your kneecaps. Encourage them incorporate their whole body into the movement. How does leading with their forehead affect the rest of their body? Why are some movements funnier than others? What types of characters or circumstances spring to mind as you observe these funny physical walks?

2. Noises Off is a comedy about putting on a play, and many of the jokes relate to the difficulties of producing live theatre. Have your students divide up into groups. Working together, challenge each group to create one list of as many things they can think of that could go wrong during a live show. Have each group pick their favorite, most hilarious idea, and invite them to consider what it might take to perform their planned comic mishap in front of an audience. Some elements might include: setting (falling set piece), characters (late entrance), relationships (angry actors), dialogue (forgotten lines)? Have students begin to create and rehearse their scenario. Once the ideas are flowing, encourage them to share their orchestrated hijinks with the rest of the class. Have observers consider revisions and adjustments with the goal of making the moment funnier.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Pre-Show Questions

1. Can you think of words, expressions or ideas that are specifically British? Because *Noises Off* was written by an English playwright and is a British farce, some of the language and humor written into the script may not be as obvious to American audiences. How do you think this will affect the production? What are some ways that you think the director, designers, and actors can help an American audience understand the British cultural jokes and references within the play?

2. In *Noises Off*, we gain insight into how a theatrical company of actors, stage managers and a director rehearse and tour a play. What sort of behavior or activities do you expect to see while the actors are rehearsing the play-within-the-play? How might that shift when the characters are actually performing the play-within-the-play, both onstage and backstage?

Post-Show Questions

1. In *Noises Off*, we see actors portraying actors performing in a play. What vocal and physical changes did the actors make to show which character they were playing when? Were you able to keep the characters straight when they were switching back and forth between characters? Why or why not?

2. The humor in *Noises Off* uses the rule of three, where you set up an expectation with the first two examples and then break the pattern with the last example. The structure of the play is even divided into three acts. Can you identify moments within the play where an expectation was set up and then broken? Did you find those moments amusing? Why or why not?

WRITING PORTFOLIO

Narrative: CCRA.W.3

*Noises Off* gives the audience insight into some of the difficulties of putting on a theatrical production. Have you ever struggled to put on a show (a play, concert, or class presentation)? Describe the situation, giving as many details as possible. What challenges did this performance present? Why? How did you prepare for the performance? Did the performance go off without a hitch, or terribly? What will you do differently or the same next time?

Argumentative: CCRA.W.1

Michael Frayn, the playwright of *Noises Off*, has revised the script of *Noises Off* several times since its 1982 premiere to make it more contemporary. Why do you think it’s important to keep the script updated? What benefits and complications do you think might occur?

Informative: CCRA.W.2

Write a review of the performance of *Noises Off* that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. What parts of the play (the actors’ performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were most effective? Which parts were least effective? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance.