

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Noises Off

Michael Frayn

Garrick Theatre

27 September 2019–4 January 2020

Jeremy Herrin first directed *Noises Off* for a production that opened on [Broadway](#) in 2015. So much is he in love with what might well be the best farce of the last half-century that the director started from scratch and produced something just as good for the [Lyric Hammersmith](#) in the summer.

The surprise is that rather than merely transferring that version to the West End, Herrin has not only partially recast the show but also reconsidered almost every element, making minor tweaks that together improve what seemed sublime until it is close to heavenly.

The starting points are a comedy about a hopeless repertory company touring the country with an even worse play and central trio of talentless actors and backstage staff jumping into and out of bed with each other.

The piece has stood the test of time while Lloyd Owen as (the now even more) imperious director Lloyd, Meera Syal playing dotty Dotty the well-meaning impresario with a well-nigh disappeared memory, Daniel Rigby braving the role of Garry, a familiar indecisive character type who is completely unable to finish a sentence, and Simon Rouse's dipsomaniac Selsdon reprise memorable performances.

Now, the first act, which is effectively a satire drawing on the playwright's experiences of working in rep theatre the best part of half a century ago, seems considerably stronger with every joke hitting its target at the same time as viewers recognise and sympathise with the human side of the clowns desperately trying to complete a disastrous all-night dress rehearsal.

This is effectively the setup for the kind of unrelenting humour that could leave audiences breathless with laughter. After the interval, the action moves backstage and every gag that has been set up in the first act is delivered by the dedicated team, often in dumb show. Everything has been rehearsed to perfection which guarantees immaculate comic timing.

As with any good farce, the last act, back on stage as the run of *Nothing On* reaches its last performance in Stockton-on-Tees, hits the funny bone with unerring consistency.

By this point, everyone in the cast and crew hates everyone else, all of those messy affairs that were supposed to last for the duration of the production and no longer have hit the skids early, pregnancies abound and the onstage performances have irreparably disintegrated into disarray.

The new cast brings different qualities to the production. Sarah Hadland impresses as kind, maternal Belinda, Lisa McGrillis is that 1970s staple the 'dumb blonde', Adrian Richards plays hapless ASM Tim, Anjili Mohindra mops up messes as tearful Poppy and Richard Henders portrays woebegone fainting Freddie. All fit the cast like a glove.

The result is undoubtedly the funniest production to hit the London stage in 2019. There has to be every chance that, like the original, it will run for years, primarily because the evening is so good that word-of-mouth will sell numerous tickets and, unusually for a straight (although it hardly is) play, many visitors will come back again and again to wallow in the joys of a wonderful experience that is a timely reminder that live theatre is a uniquely rewarding medium.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)