

British Theatre Guide

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Noises Off

Michael Frayn

cut to the chase...

Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch

(2009)

The programme notes to this revival of Frayn's sublime comedy contain a mock academic essay on the religious/metaphysical implications of the "bedroom farce". Without going that far, I would say that Frayn's knockabout farce is also an essay on the form itself. The play was apparently "written as an intellectual exercise", which one assumes must refer to the incredibly tight formal structure that lies behind the fun. Order begetting chaos, so to speak.

An up-against-the-wall theatre company of weary, jobbing actors are in final rehearsals for a flimsy farce called *Nothing On*. Opening night is hours away, they still haven't run the thing in full, and one thing after another is thwarting the director's increasingly desperate attempts to keep things on track. The elderly classical actor is a frequently-AWOL drunk. Two others of the cast are having a tempestuous affair; while the young starlet is sporadically blinded by loss of a contact lens, and also incapable of listening to what anyone else is saying. And Frederick, the most dim-witted of the cast, must have some inner emotional motivation explained to him for each of his movements propelling the plot.

For the second act we watch the action taking place backstage as the show performs (now several weeks into its tour). The affair continues ever more tempestuous, the starlet is yet more airheaded, and inter-cast tensions are seething. Of course, everything - the searching for props, the arguments, the accidental or deliberate sexual clinches, the fist fights, the attempts to mediate - must happen in absolute silence, while everyone regularly skips off onto stage at their next cue, and tries to suppress their own feelings and resume their character's. In the final act we are facing the stage again, to see the show in its final shocking deterioration at the very end of the tour.

The play is not so much a triumph of style over substance as that of craft over variables. There is little that a company need, or could, do to put any new spin on the basic structure, premise and outcome. This means that (ironically of course) it will always be something of a sure thing. But the cut to the chase... company invest glorious energy and comic timing in their roles, and work together like a dream. In particular, the extremely difficult choreography of the second act, in which nine different personalities amidst countless comings on and off are fighting each other for multitudinous reasons, and there are at least four different things happening at any one time, is superbly executed. Shaun Hennessy as the sardonic, driven-to-distraction director is fine, particularly in the first act when piping up with comments from his seat among the punters in the stalls. And Natasha Moore is hilarious as Brooke, possibly the worst actor ever to grace the stage: not only are her movements as exaggerated as semaphore, but when things go wrong she simply continues to reel off her lines and take her positions as though all was well with the world.

The set too is impressive: obviously showing us the conventional country manor house "set" of the "play" on one side, and then revolving to give us the shoddy plywood backstage area on the other.

It could never fail to be a coup, that is, a blow to our senses, to witness this transition from one world to the other. Of course part of Frayn's aim is to blur the boundaries between the world of the "play" and that of the actors playing it. But we still retain the feeling that that invisible distinction between the two is something sacred. When by the end the "play" has completely broken down into meaninglessness, it is almost disturbing.

That is not to say it is not very, very funny. But a big theme for Frayn is order versus chaos (as may also be seen in Hampstead Theatre's current revival of [Alphabetical Order](#)); the desperate attempt to retain control in an infinitely unpredictable world. Theatre itself is the perfect setting for such a theme, as more than any other line of work it attempts to present a world that is entirely under its control. Nowhere else therefore are failures more horrendous. The sight of the director silently begging a haughty Brooke to go on at her cue, as she is on the point of walking out, is enough to make us weep with laughter, and simply weep. It is life or death because it's the play's life or death; it is poor beleaguered souls trying frantically to sustain the world they have created. It's tragedy, in other words - and we all know about how fine that line is.

Until 9th May

Reviewer: [Corinne Salisbury](#)