Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Noises Off!
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover photo: Fredi Olster (top), Libby George, David Ivers, and Henson Keys in *Noises Off*, 2000.
# Noises Off!

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Synopsis: *Noises Off!*

It is only hours before the opening of a British adult farce, *Nothing On*, and the touring company is hurriedly running through a final dress rehearsal in the Grand Theatre, Weston-Super-Mare, before the first audience arrives.

**Act One**

During the first act, we are an audience to this production of a play within a play. The *Nothing On* cast is loveable, but mainly inept; however, we cheer for them under our breath and hope that they can pull it together and get the show on the road.

Dotty, the actor playing Mrs. Clackett, can’t remember her entrances and exits. Garry, the male love interest, can’t remember his lines. And Brooke, playing Vicki, the female lead, is constantly posing and primping, without any understanding of what the play is about or what she is doing. Trying to pull this all together into some semblance of a presentable show is the director, Lloyd Dallas, who is sitting in the darkened auditorium shouting out directions and trying to get everybody ready for opening.

Act 2, however, dashes all our hopes.

**Act Two**

For this act, we, the audience, are sitting backstage; the entire set has been turned 180 degrees. We can hear the actors performing out front, but what we see is the back side of the scenery flats, the stage manager trying to keep the action flowing and everybody happy, and the various antics of the actors offstage between their exits and entrances.

The play has been on the road for one month now, and relationships between cast members, as well as the quality of *Nothing On* have deteriorated. Garry and Dotty are in the middle of an unhappy love affair.

Poppy, the assistant stage manager is pregnant; and Selsdon Mowbray, an actor in his late sixties, is trying to stay sober between scenes. Add to this, a visit by director Lloyd, who is there first of all to comfort his “overly excited” lover, Brooke, and second to try and save his play from total disaster.

Most of the company is in a continual state of agitation, and this disorder is carrying over into the play, causing missed entrances, flubbed lines, and general hilarity.

Act 3 is even more frenetic.

**Act Three**

It is a month later again, and the tour is reaching an end. We, the audience, are out front again, watching a performance of *Nothing On* that has reached the point of complete and hilarious deterioration. The business of performing the show has become subordinate to the business of solving personal problems.

Dotty refuses to come out of her dressing room. Garry is now drinking Selsdon’s whiskey. Scenery collapses, and props explode. Practical jokes have become common, and actors are now taking verbal, and sometimes physical, cracks at each other both backstage and on stage. Normal rules of logic and response don’t apply anymore.

Ultimately, however, they carry off the show—in some semblance. The unhappy band of actors manages to get to the last line, spoken by Selsdon: “When all around is strife and uncertainty, there’s nothing like . . . (takes the plate of sardines) . . . a good old-fashioned plate of curtain!”

Curtain.
Characters: Noises Off!

LLOYD DALLAS: The director of Nothing On.
DOTTY OTLEY: Playing the role of Mrs. Clackett in Nothing On.
GARRY LEJEUNE: Playing the role of Roger Tramplemain.
BROOKE ASHTON: Playing the role of Vicki.
FREDERICK FELLOWES: Playing the roles of Philip Brent and of a Sheikh.
BELINDA BLAIR: Playing the role of Flavia Brent.
SELDSON MOWBRAY: Playing the role of a Burglar.
TIM ALLGOOD: The company and stage manager.
POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR: The assistant stage manager.
About the Playwright:

Michael Frayn

Michael Frayn, whose work is often compared to that of Anton Chekhov for its focus on humorous family situations and its insights into society, is equally at home writing newspaper columns, novels, television productions, and stage plays. However, his greatest notoriety and critical success has been from his long-running and internationally successful stage farce, Noises Off (1982). This and numerous other plays have been popular with audiences who enjoy their sharp wit and humor and by critics who enjoy their satiric social commentary.

An apartment above a liquor store in Mill Hall on the northwestern edge of London was Frayn’s first home, but his parents moved to Ewell on the southern edge of London soon after he was born. His father, Thomas Allen Frayn, was a sales representative for an asbestos company; his mother, Violet Alice Lawson Frayn, had been a shop assistant. It was while he lived in Ewell that he attended Kingston Grammar School and got his first taste of education and of social interaction, earning a reputation as someone who was quick to make jokes at the expense of others.

“After leaving school in 1952, Frayn was conscripted into the Royal Army and sent to a Russian interpretership course at Cambridge. He also studied in Moscow for several weeks, returning with the opinion that the so-called Cold War was ridiculous. East/West relations would later become a subject of satire in many of his works” (Edited by Stanley Weintraub, Dictionary of Literary Biography [Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1982], 172).

In 1954, after being discharged from the army, he returned to Cambridge to study philosophy under Ludwig Wittgenstein, who influenced his thoughts and writing dramatically. After graduation he worked as a newspaper reporter, columnist, and critic for the Manchester Guardian and The Observer in London. His social satire from this time has been collected in four books, The Day of the Dog (1962), The Book of Fub (1963), On the Outskirts (1964), and At Bay in Gear Street (1967).

“Frayn’s columns are social spoofs, often written in dialogue form and with a cast of fictional characters. The pieces usually take a popular trend or human foible and stretch it to ludicrous proportions. . . . His pet peeves are liberal-minded hypocrisy, middle-class convention, and class snobbery” (Weintraub, 173).

His first novel, The Tin Men (1965), won the Somerset Maugham Award for fiction; his second, The Russian Interpreter, the Hawthornden Prize. These were followed by Towards the End of Morning (1967), A Very Private Life (1968), and Alphabetical Order (1975).

Frayn’s first dramatic works were television plays, both aired by the BBC: Jamie, on a Flying Visit (1968) and Birthday (1969). These led to his first stage play, The Two of Us, which opened in the West End on 30 July 1970. His second play, The Sandboy, opened the next year at the Greenwich Theatre.

Frayn then shifted gears again, focusing for four years on novels and a weekly BBC comedy series, Beyond a Joke. His next play, Alphabetical Order did not appear until 1975. He followed this with four documentary films for the BBC: Imagine a City Called Berlin (1975), Vienna: The Mask of Gold (1977), Three Streets in the Country (1979), and The Long Straight (1980). Frayn describes these documentaries as “kind of filmed essays, really, with a lot of history in them” (Weintraub, 175).

His next play, Donkeys’ Year (1976) was staged in London’s Globe Theatre and was named best comedy of the year by the Society of West End Theatres. Clouds, his fifth play, debuted
only a month later at the Hampstead Theatre Club in London, followed by Liberty Hall and Make
and Break in 1980.

However, it was with Noises Off that Frayn achieved commercial and critical success in the
United States. The play opened in February 1982 at the Lyric Hammersmith in England and quick-
ly transferred to the Savoy Theatre, where it passed the 1000th performance mark. It opened in
America at Broadway’s Brooks Atkinson Theater in December of 1983 to rapturous reviews. It has
since been produced around the world, including stints in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa,
Canada, France, Belgium, and Scandinavia.

Since that time, Frayn, who lives with his wife, Gillian, outside London, has published (among
other things) the play Benefactors (1984) and the novel Headlong (1999), and has translated
numerous French and Russian classics, including Anton Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard.

“Although one cannot say that Michael Frayn’s plays revolutionized the British stage . . . , they
certainly helped to enliven it. Frayn contributed a string of lively, witty comedies with some serious
philosophical questions lurking beneath the surfaces. Like many other playwrights of the era, Frayn
experimented with dramatic structures borrowed from film and television--perhaps more a natural
result of having started his dramatic writing career in television than an attempt to find new meth-
ods of expression” (Weintraub, 178).
In William C. Young’s Famous Actors and Actresses on the American Stage, Sir Laurence Olivier is quoted as saying, “Acting is illusion, as much illusion as magic is, and not so much a matter of being real” ([New Providence: R.R. Bowker LLC, 1975], 885). Acting is, essentially, make-believe, the art of telling a story by presenting, or representing, a world that does not, in fact, exist, yet mimics reality. The illusion, then, is the sum of all the individual parts, from the performances of the actors to their costumes, the sets, and all of the other components that contribute to the whole.

When it is well done, the effects can be intoxicating. In the biography, Olivier, by Terry Coleman ([New York: Henry Holt and Co. 2005], 416), the actor likens a performance in front of a live audience to the most intimate of human experiences. It is incredibly gratifying to know that you have performed well; that an audience has accepted you in a particular role; that they have laughed because of you, and cried because of you; that they have experienced love or hate for your character; that they have paid for the privilege and then cheered and applauded you. The feeling is difficult to replicate in other professions; small wonder that those who “catch the bug” find it so difficult to pursue alternative careers.

There is great emotional security in acting, as well. A friend once described it as an escape from the chaos of reality, in which the elements of a life are well controlled and well defined: human interactions and confrontations are choreographed; problems, conflicts and their solutions, or at least resolutions, are scripted and directed. Unlike real life, which is improvisation at its best (or worst), the actors in a play take comfort in knowing what to say and when; what’s going to happen next; and how the illusion they’ve created is going to end.

Protecting that illusion is perhaps the first law of theatre. From my earliest days as an actor, three inviolable rules were driven into my head: never break character; never peek out from behind the curtain; and never make noise backstage. Some of my fondest memories of rehearsals from my youth have me backstage, my fellow cast members and I talking and laughing while an exasperated director, desperate to move the rehearsal along, shouts from the house, “Quiet in the wings!”

The fact is it’s a very different world backstage, where the chaos of real life stands in stark contrast to the scripted illusion taking place out front. Backstage, you’ll find all of the behind-the-scenes rigors of a theatrical production—sets need to be moved, costumes changed, props taken and replaced—mixed with the very human trappings of the people involved, including egos, nerves, stresses, and personal dramas. A good stage manager can control the chaos, and, indeed, the professionalism of a cast and crew can often be determined best by how they behave off-stage rather than by how they perform onstage. Still, it is nothing short of a miracle that the chaos that reigns behind the curtain rarely bleeds into the performance.

It is exactly that contrast between real chaos and scripted order that attracted playwright Michael Frayn to the story that would become his hit farce, Noises Off! According to Frayn, the idea first occurred to him in 1970 while watching a production of his play, Chinamen. Standing backstage, Frayn says, “It was funnier from behind than in front and I thought that one day I must write a farce from behind” (Barbara K. Mehlman, CurtainUp, http://www.curtainup.com/noisesoff.html). The result is Noises Off!, the name of which is a theatre term that refers to commotion off-stage.

Noises Off! is actually a farce about a theatre troupe performing a farce—what Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., a theatre arts professor at Loyola Marymount University, calls a “meta-farce.” In
other words, the audience watches actors create an illusion of actors creating an illusion, and
the play explores what happens to the illusion when the almost farcical chaos found back-
stage does intrude on the scripted farce onstage. The play becomes, according to British critic
Michael Billington, “a very funny comment on the fragility of farce itself, where split-second
timing and a calculated, well-rehearsed spontaneity can be blown apart by a missed entrance
or a recalcitrant prop” (Michael Frayn: Critical Perspective, www.contemporarywriters.com/
authors/?p=auth114#).

The farce-within-the-farce is called Nothing On, a fairly run-of-the-mill British comedy
fraught with mistaken identities and sexual innuendo. The Noises Off! audience gets to see
Nothing On at three different stages of its production: act one shows us a final dress rehearsal
in complete disorder, and a frazzled director trying desperately to maintain control; act two
takes us backstage of a performance halfway through the run, where the personal struggles of
each company member threaten to disrupt the play; and act three moves us to the end of
the run and a production of a play so plagued by chaos that it now only vaguely resembles
the scripted play being attempted in the first two acts. As the production crumbles around them,
the performers desperately cling to the illusion until the very last line: “When all around is
strife and uncertainty, there’s nothing like a good old-fashioned plate of curtain!”

Noises Off! is beautifully constructed, and audiences respond enthusiastically to this chance
to glimpse an accurate, albeit exaggerated representation of what’s really going on off-stage.
However, to call this a behind-the-scenes exposé of live theatre is too simplistic; the real point
of Noises Off! is the conflict between illusion and reality, and the comedy that can be found
when chaos disrupts order. Audiences laugh at the absurdity of it all, and they laugh again
when the disaster they know is coming finally, inevitably, occurs.

The madness works, of course, because of the fictional performers’ dedication to their
art. These are actors—perhaps not very good actors, but dedicated artistes nonetheless. These
people love the theatre, and they act because they are driven by the exhilaration that can only
come from being onstage, from the intimate connection they form with their audience. They
desperately want to be successful, which for an actor means being liked by the audience, and it
is very funny to watch them fail due to the obstacles they create for themselves. It is interesting
to note that the real actors achieve the personal high spoken of by Olivier by playing characters
for whom that same high remains always just out of reach.

The security actors feel onstage also eludes the fictional performers, whose insecurities
become more evident as chaos disrupts illusion. Frayn himself spoke of this in his introduction
to Frayn Plays: One, where he makes note of the fact that the actors in Noises Off! have “fixed
the world” by learning roles and rehearsing responses. “The fear that haunts them is that the
unlearned and unrehearsed—the great chaos behind the set, inside the heart and brain—will
seep back on the stage. The prepared words will vanish; the planned responses will be inap-
propriate. Their performance will break down and they will be left in front of us, naked and
ashamed” ([London: Methuen, 1985], xiv).

There is a magical moment in act three when it becomes apparent to the audience that
the performance of Nothing On cannot be saved, and still the fictional performers soldier on,
refusing to give in, refusing to abandon illusion. Even the frazzled director inserts himself into
the mounting chaos in a vain attempt to salvage the illusion he thought he had created. In the
end, the real performers of Noises Off! are secure in their knowledge that the chaos the audi-
ence has so graciously laughed at has, itself, been a well-scripted and orderly illusion.
Noises Off: I’ll Admit It—Act 2 Is Perfect

By Robert Burgan
From Insights, 2000

My title seems to imply something about Act 1 and Act 3 of Michael Frayn’s Noises Off. Okay, it does. But before you decide what that is, let me write a bit about the perfect Act 2.

That discussion must start with form in general and farce in particular. Theatrical form allows organization, structure, cohesiveness, and a view of our world, our humanness. Farce is in a sense a challenge to form; farce mates chaos to organization, disarray to structure, and divisiveness to cohesiveness and promotes a view of our world that gives prominence to the follies of our humanness.

I once heard farce described as a comedy about the things that go wrong on the worst day of your life.

In Act 2, the cast and director of Nothing On (the play the characters in Noises Off are presenting) want to be a success—it is very important to them to be professionally successful. They will face a terrible obstacle in accomplishing that professional goal—the fact that it is more important to them to be personally successful—if you will, a happy private life battling a successful professional life.

Battles are known for their disarray, especially for those on the front lines. Actors on the front line of the theatre are in a battle to subdue an audience. These actors are obsessed with the disarray of their private lives; are—since this is a comedy—deliciously vulnerable. That vulnerability will lead to chaos, and that chaos is the essential ingredient of farce.

As Frayn writes in his instruction to Plays: One: “The actors in Noises Off have fixed the world by learning roles and rehearsing their responses. The fear that haunts them is that the unlearned and unrehearsed—the great chaos behind the set, inside the heart and brain—will seep back on the stage. The prepared words will vanish. The planned responses will be inappropriate. The performance will break down and they will be left in front of us naked and ashamed” ([London: Methuen, 1985], xiv).

And now Act 2: To begin with, the perspective we have on this world dramatically (pun intended) changes: literally by 180 degrees. So we begin with the playwright insisting that we see not the scenic illusion of the theatre but rather the scenic reality, backstage—the construction site if you will. He furthers our insecurity about the illusion of structure and order by taking the disorder beyond the proscenium to the house calls that bring us to our seats. As Lloyd, the director of Nothing On says, “The curtain will rise in three minutes—we all start for the gents. The curtain will rise in one minute—we all come running out again. We don’t know which way we’re going!” (Michael Frayn, Noises Off [New York: Samuel French, Inc.], 83). Chaos on stage and in the audience

If chaos is one essential element of farce, then certainly anarchy is its companion. In Noises Off the authority figure that anarchy rebels against is the director of Nothing On: Lloyd Dallas, whose credits include a “highly successful season for the National Theatre of Sri Lanka” and “his brilliant series of ‘Shakespeare in Summer’ productions in the parks of the inner London boroughs” (11). Poor Lloyd soon discovers in Act 2 that madness is everywhere in the production he struggles so determinedly to guide in Act 1. His production becomes a dream—another key word in farce—more aptly a nightmare. And Frayn even manages—in Act 3—to have Lloyd enter the dream as the anarchy becomes complete and he becomes in mid-performance one of the characters on stage in his own production.

The personal problems lead to an acceleration of recrimination (“Freddie have you even thought of having a brain transplant”) (88) and an acceleration of mistrust, which Frayn is masterful at orchestrating both verbally and physically. And that may be the key. Frayn understands the
essential element of writing for the theatre: it is for the stage, not for the page.

Frayn’s orchestration of the verbal and physical in Act 2 is most obvious in his stage directions. Unlike any other play I know, there are in fact more stage directions than dialogue, more specific things for the actors to do than specific things for them to say. A typical example: “Garry snatches the flowers from Dotty. She snatches them back. Lloyd parts them with the axe. He gently takes the flowers from Dotty and hands them to Frederick while he gives the axe to Belinda [who] uses the axe to keep Dotty and Gerry apart. Frederick hands the flowers to . . .” (116).

The simultaneity of the verbal and physical becomes a tennis game in which the play is the net and we (the audience) are the ball. This orchestration of physical and verbal, which Frank Rich, the principal theatre critic for the New York Times when Noises Off opened on Broadway, calls “one of the most sustained slapstick ballets I have ever seen . . . ingeniously synchronized” (Hot Seat [New York: Random House, 1998], 281), would be merely a writing exercise if Frayn had not built it on an inspired comic premise (ironically inspired when he saw the events backstage at a production of one of his own plays). And of course there is craft, skill, and talent, topics for another article.

And what does this praise for Act 2 say about Act 1 and Act 3? Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor is a trip on an airplane. The best part of our journey is high up in the air, traveling above the clouds, enjoying the exhilaration of flight. To get to that we need the take-off; to return from that we need the landing. Act 1 of Noises Off is exactly the right take-off: we sense the increasing momentum as we approach lift-off, we anticipate that moment with enthusiasm: Frayn prepares us as he entertains us and entices us with the world he’s created. And the landing: Act 3 resolves the dramatic questions and deposits us at a new destination.

And thus order and harmony are restored. Or are they? This is, after all, a farce; and sometimes our plane trip ends with a new adventure that begins with getting someone else’s luggage, and having clothes that don’t fit and—I’ll let your comic imagination work out the details of this farce.

The popularity of farce to us—to audiences today as we begin this new millennium—should be noted. Farce—second only to the musical in terms of popularity—is as vital to the theatrical body as blood is to the human one. Some scholars dismiss farce as somehow a lesser theatrical form. Columbia University’s Dr. Albert Bermel noted that “general critical literature about farce is scarce. . . . The best discussion of the psychology of farce is in The Life of The Drama (1984) by Eric Bentley” (The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama, ed. John Gassner and Edward Quinn [New York: Crowell, 1969], 265). But farce continues (as it has for over 2,000 years) to give us both entertainment and insight. When we have in our theatrical firmament a play so “ingeniously synchronized” as Noises Off we have undeniable and vital proof of (to use Frank Rich’s phrase) “a forceful argument of farce’s value as human comedy” (Rich, 281).
Noises Off—Nothing On—Everything Goes
By Kelli Frost-Allred
From Midsummer Magazine, 2000

When Act 1 of Noises Off ended, I spent most of the intermission massaging my overworked facial muscles. After working in theatre for over twenty-five years, and after reading thousands of plays, I can say with authority that Noises Off is the most entertainingly funny piece of theatre I have ever witnessed and is “arguably the funniest farce ever” (San Diego Union Tribune, 29 July 1985). I first saw Noises Off at the Brooks Atkinson Theater on Broadway in 1984 and again at a high school in the early 1990s. Both productions were thoroughly delightful. Universal comic conventions—slapstick, sight gags, double-takes, and double-entendre—make this rollicking contemporary farce unequaled in its ability to entertain audiences.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival will continue its time-honored tradition of presenting only the best of classical and contemporary theatre masterpieces when Noises Off premieres this summer. Festival audiences will want to include this play among their selections; indeed, many of us will want to make more than one trip to Cedar City this summer, especially after seeing Noises Off. Don’t be surprised to find fellow audience members who have already seen the show, in spite of warnings that “this show could be hazardous to one’s health. Too much laughter is debilitating” (Los Angeles theatre critic Weldon Jones, 1985).

Playwright Michael Frayn (born in 1933) has produced a wide variety of successful works, including several novels, a book of philosophy, film and television scripts, newspaper columns, and plays. Orphaned as a young boy, Frayn spent a difficult childhood near London and later served in the Royal Intelligence Corps as an interpreter of Russian. He earned a B.A. in philosophy, and spent many years as a newspaper columnist, where he honed his talent for satire and parody. He once told an interviewer that “comedy is about the grimness of the world. It’s one way of looking at pain and difficulty” (Current Biography, 1985). Two London theatre groups awarded Frayn “Best Comedy” in 1982 for Noises Off. The play moved to Broadway in 1983, where one critic wrote, “I doubt whether Frayn has written anything else as funny, but then, very few people have” (ibid).

The Utah Shakespeare Festival has produced several farces, including Blithe Spirit, You Can’t Take It with You, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, and Charley’s Aunt. Festival management knows that audiences love a good farce. Farce began with the Greeks as a “low” form of comedy, or that which appealed to members of the lower classes. It was assumed they could only find humor in clowning, practical jokes, and broad physical pranks. As comedy became more refined, more intellectual, plays were built around character, dialogue, or situations. Noises Off is built around all three! Farces often include screen scenes—behind doors, inside closets, or behind screens. Noises Off includes all three!

Just what’s so funny about a play-within-a-play, which is really a farce-within-a-farce, acted by “actors acting actors acting characters”? (ibid). Just about everything. Nothing On is the farce within Noises Off.

The cast of both plays is comprised of six actors, a director, the stage manager, and an assistant stage manager. Among the nine characters are a couple of newlyweds, an oversexed realtor, an inept maid, a stumbling drunk, an aspiring young actress and her male counterpart, an intensely-neurotic theatrical director, and a distracted stage hand who falls in love with a variety of other characters. “It is not that every possible backstage disaster or onstage nightmare is covered here. . . . Instead, these are new and deviously vicious catastrophes, mounting in dread geometric progression, fueled by what may be the least compatible set of colleagues ever assembled” (Jones).

Act 1 is an embarrassing sneak-peek at the play’s final dress rehearsal, and leaves the audience certain the play will never be ready for opening night—just twelve hours off. But the introduc-
tion in Act 1 to each of the play’s characters makes for farce, the brand of comedy that mocks a never-to-be-mocked segment of society. In the case of Noises Off, the butt of the joke is the cast itself.

Act 2 takes place a month later, after the play has run four weeks. Now the audience members are transformed from viewers of a play-within-a-play to voyeurs of the cast’s backstage antics. Romances have developed between actors and stagehands, and physical pratfalls abound, the funniest of which is the sophisticated Lloyd’s fall down a flight of backstage stairs with his pants around his ankles. Those who have always wondered what goes on backstage will find Act 2 singularly enlightening, albeit exaggerated.

By Act 3, the play Nothing On has disintegrated into “a shambles, sabotaged by the cast and mostly ad-libbed” (United Press International theatre critic Frederick M. Winship, 1983). The actors can be seen once again on the set of the aging production, and the audience is hearing the same lines from Acts 1 and 2 reiterated to newly-choreographed antics by the apathetic actors. Meanwhile, the Noises Off audience has been entertained as much by the story and characters of one play as it has laughed itself silly over the story and characters of the second play. Confused? Not to worry. Good farce can be confusing, but you may take comfort in knowing that “farce is the only thespian form that requires complete surrender of the theatre-goer’s intelligence” (ibid).

There is an extra element to this production that will help you keep things straight, a secret weapon that lends an added element of zaniness to the play—the set. “The biggest star in any good production of Noises Off often is the set,” moving the cast of nine in and out of eight doors “like figures on a Swiss clock” (ibid). A staircase becomes a sort of throne for the unimaginative ingenue, Brook, who can make no adjustments to the foibles of the other actors. Even the telephone cords and bathroom doors draw laughter. Are you beginning to get the picture?

Brook deserves more commentary; she gives new meaning to the euphemism “airhead.” Her straight lines elicit gales of laughter. Why? Bad timing, and her timing gets increasingly worse as the play progresses.

An actor-friend of mine once told me about the fairy godmother of theatre, who, like Cinderella’s, grants wishes to actors. If the fairy godmother of theatre were to grant me one wish, I would ask to play Dotty Otley, the bumbling maid in Noises Off whose task of serving a tray of sardines becomes a virtual quest to keep track of the thing. In fact, the more I think about Dotty and my fairy godmother, the more I wish—