



INDIANA  
REPERTORY  
THEATRE

# Noises Off

by Michael Frayn

April 24 –  
May 20, 2018

on the IRT's  
OneAmerica  
Mainstage



## STUDY GUIDE

edited by Richard J Roberts, Resident Dramaturg

with contributions by Janet Allen  
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# ***NOISES OFF***

**BY MICHAEL FRAYN**

Ever gone to a play and something went wrong? What happens when everything goes wrong? Rehearsal implosions, backstage shenanigans, and onstage disasters have the cast on life support—and the audience in stitches!

In one of the funniest plays ever written, Michael Frayn explores how offstage drama can create onstage hilarity. At once a send-up and a perfect example of the genre of farce, this delightful story follows a thrown-together cast and crew on a tour of England. As relationships form and crumble, injuries pile up, and secrets are revealed, the cast struggles—and often fails—to go on with the show. Perfect for drama clubs, theatre classes, or a unit on humor. Grab a plate of sardines and join us for one of the most enduring stage comedies of all time!

**STUDENT MATINEES** 10:00 AM on May 2, 3, 9

**ESTIMATED LENGTH** Approximately 2 hours, 30 minutes

**AGE RANGE** Recommended for grades 9-12

## **CONTENT ADVISORY**

*Noises Off* is a rollicking farce that contains strong language and adult situations. A script preview is available on request.

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## ***NOTHING ON—THE PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY***

The Grand Theatre, Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, England. Director Lloyd Dallas is desperately trying to get his cast through just one midnight dress rehearsal of *Nothing On*, a touring farce that has its first performance in less than 24 hours. Enter Mrs. Clackett, housekeeper to the wealthy Philip and Flavia Brent, who have put their house up for sale and are living in Spain. Mrs. Clackett is played by Dotty Otley, who has trouble remembering her entrances and exits, her props, and her lines. As Mrs. Clackett settles in to enjoy her afternoon off with her employers' television, Roger, a real estate agent, arrives with Vicki, an attractive young woman who works for the British tax service. They have come to the Brents' supposedly empty house for some time alone together. Roger is played by Garry, who is never quite able to finish his sentences. Vicki is played by Brooke, who is always losing her contact lenses—and the thread of any conversation.

Unexpectedly, homeowners Philip and Flavia return from Spain. Also assuming their house will be empty, they sneak in, trying to keep their presence in the country a secret for tax purposes. Philip is played by Freddie, an insecure actor whose nose bleeds at any hint of violence. Flavia is played by Belinda, the nurturing cheerleader of the company. As the rehearsal staggers along, Tim, the overworked, exhausted stage manager, tries to repair malfunctioning scenery, while Poppy, the inexperienced assistant stage manager, gets blamed for everything.

Resuming the play, Roger and Vicki find their attempted liaison perpetually interrupted, while Philip discovers a threatening letter from the tax agency. Adding to the chaos, a Burglar breaks in, played by Selsdon, an elderly actor with a drinking problem. Roger, looking for Vicki, runs into Philip, whose pants have fallen down. Philip thinks Roger is with the tax authorities, while Roger thinks Philip is a sex maniac who has done something to Vicki. Eventually, Roger, Vicki, the Burglar, Flavia, and Mrs. Clackett all converge and discover the Burglar's true identity, just as a Sheikh (also played by Freddie) arrives to buy the house, bringing Act I to a close.

Act II, which takes place a month later, finds the company performing *Nothing On* in the town of Ashton-on-Lyne. Now the audience watches the play from behind the scenery, as all the backstage jealousies and rivalries among the cast and crew are revealed.

Act III, two months later, marks the end of the tour in Stockton-on-Tees, where the cast of *Nothing On*—with the set once more facing the audience—gives a performance in which nothing goes as planned.



*Hollis Resnik in Noises Off at the IRT.  
Photo by Zach Rosing.*

# LAUGHING AT OURSELVES

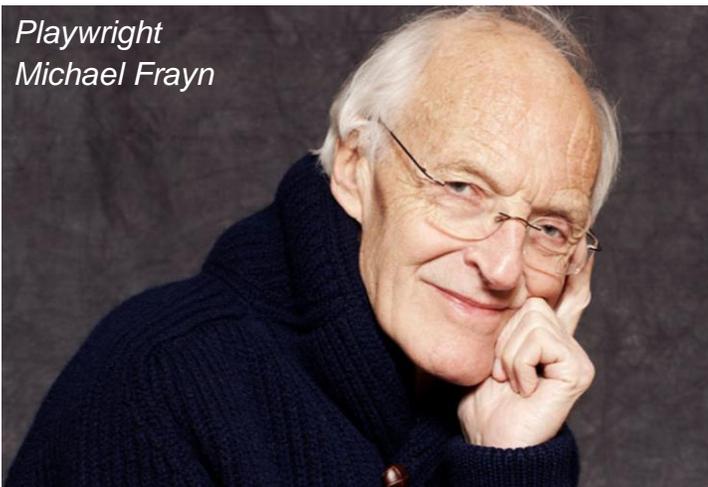
BY JANET ALLEN, EXECUTIVE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Farce is a natural outgrowth of human endeavor, and an important one. On the surface, it appears merely to be aimed at triggering laugh reflexes, which are very healthful. But on a deeper level, it allows us to see that we are not in total control of our universe—that is, the banana peel can rise up and trip even the most enlightened among us. In farce, inanimate objects seem to have minds of their own. They can turn on us in an instant, if for no other reason than to prove that we are not the all-powerful creatures we wish to be. From a societal perspective, farce is therapeutic, and may have developed to put us in our place!

In the hands of British master writer Michael Frayn, farce is something more literate. Yes, the doors and phone cords (remember those?) and sardines and bags seem to have sentient abilities; but the human characters are scrambling to outwit these objects, and each other, at every turn. Frayn's abilities as a writer are multifaceted and prodigious. Not only does he write plays in many genres, but he writes brilliant fiction (if you're looking for an interesting read, try his *Headlong*). Perhaps not surprisingly, he writes philosophy, biography, comic essays, and screenplays as well. We've done two other Frayn plays, each as different from *Noises Off* as imaginable. *Benefactors* (IRT 1990) focuses on midlife crises and a London architect's fight against urban blight. *Copenhagen* (IRT 2002) is a theatrical debate between two brilliant physicists, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, about the idea of the atomic bomb.

This is the output of a wide-ranging brain, and that is apparent even in *Noises Off* (IRT 1999), easily the most accessible of Frayn's writing endeavors. Here he focuses on a theatre company—something he knows more than a little about. The world loves to laugh at theatre artists—a fact that we, as theatre artists, sometimes rue! But we can't argue with the fact that it's easy to poke fun at our pretensions and clichés. The overwrought director, the aging diva, the beleaguered stage hand, the oblivious ingénue, the perennially sunny “fixer”: while all these stereotypes have equivalents in many businesses, they are perhaps funniest when selected from the entertainment industry for the purpose of entertaining.

Playwright  
Michael Frayn



The universe of farce is ultimately a safe one. We know that no door slam, no fall, no slap, no ripped costume will result in any real damage, so we are free to revel in mankind's pretensions and peccadillos. Perhaps that's why farce is so needed right now. In a world where safety seems to be at a premium, it's freeing to enter a world where we know everyone will come out the other side with only some bruised egos. It is a world that reminds us of our humanity—while tickling our funny bone.

# UNDERDOGS

BY DAVID BRADLEY, DIRECTOR

There are works that make you love being human and make you love and revere the humanity of other people. That is the great potential of any art.

—Marilynne Robinson  
*“The Brain Is Larger than the Sea”*

Even with a turkey that you know will fold—  
 You may be stranded out in the cold—  
 Still you wouldn't change it for a sack of gold.  
 Let's go on with the show!

—Irving Berlin,  
*“There's No Business like Show Business”*

I'm from Philadelphia. We get a lot of *Rocky* comments and comparisons. I guess I'm ok with that, because *Rocky's* an underdog, and I like underdog stories. I think a lot of people do. There's something compelling and even inspiring about watching someone try to overcome obstacles and beat the odds when it seems they have no chance.

A farce is an underdog story—except in farce, instead of David vs. Goliath, we get David vs. the doors, or the stairs, or the props (particularly if they are of a slippery, fishy variety). All those obstacles. All those things in the way of getting what you want. All those chances to fall down, screw up, topple over. Lots of reasons to throw in the towel—but in farce, no one ever does. They keep going. They go on with their particular show, whether it's love, life, or, in the case of *Noises Off*, an *actual* show.

Hollis Resnik, Ryan Artzberger, and  
 Jerry Richardson in *Noises Off*  
 at the IRT. Photo by Zach Rosing.



And ain't that what being human is all about? We go on. And sometimes we've just gotta laugh hard at what an absurd endeavor that is—especially these days. (I keep thinking of a live version of “Stairway to Heaven” where lead singer Robert Plant suddenly cries out, “Does anyone remember *laughter?*”). So we come to watch Dottie and Lloyd and Belinda and the company of *Nothing's On* give it their all. and we get to laugh our heads off as they make a glorious mess.

But I think deep down we're laughing *with* them. Because at some point, we've all *been* them—underdogs, battling the odds. We're as human as they are. They're not giving up. We're not giving up. We're all in this together. Let's go on with the show.

# THE SCIENCE OF FARCE

## BILL CLARKE SCENIC DESIGNER

Designing *Noises Off* might be called a double-binary bit of lunacy. First and most obviously, you design the show from the front; then for Act II, the same show from the back. You also design the set for the play-within-the-play, *Nothing On*, the silliness of which is amply indicated in the script. But the subtler and more challenging job is figuring out the exact spatial arrangement that allows Michael Frayn's satire to function like the perfect machine that it is. Our task is to find the key that makes it work best: for example, if two doors are either too far apart or too close together, a joke which is highly dependent on the mad dash from one to the other may fall flat. We wish you all of the fun and none of the head scratching!



*Preliminary sketches by scenic designer Bill Clarke for Acts I & 3 (above) and Act 2 (below).*



## MICHAEL LINCOLN LIGHTING DESIGNER

Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* is one of those plays that every theatre maker has heard of, if not seen or worked on. When it premiered in 1982, it was an instant classic. It is a brilliant backstage comedy, so funny that it is irresistible, even to the most curmudgeonly theatregoer. I had heard of the play, but never seen it, when I was given the opportunity in 2000 to design the Broadway transfer of London's West End production of Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*. These two plays couldn't be more different. *Copenhagen* is a dense, extremely intelligent play filled with challenging scientific language. *Noises Off* is an extremely silly play filled with ridiculousness. The fact that these two plays are from the mind of the same man is astonishing. But, when you examine how scientifically *Noises Off* is structured, you realize that only a playwright as brilliant as Michael Frayn could have written it. I'm thrilled to have my first chance to design it!



*Preliminary costume sketches by designer Rachel Anne Healy for (left to right) Lloyd Dallas (director of Nothing On), Dotty Otley as Mrs. Clacket, Frederick Fellowes as Philip Brent, & Selsdon Mowbray as the Burglar.*

# AN EXTREMELY BRIEF HISTORY OF FARCE

BY RICHARD J ROBERTS, RESIDENT DRAMATURG

Farce places exaggerated characters in improbable situations where they face outrageous obstacles. In the fifth century BCE, Aristophanes entertained the audiences of Ancient Greece with larger-than-life characters, ridiculous situations, and lots of bawdy humor. Aristophanes combined his uproarious comedy with serious social messages: In *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens and Sparta go on a sex strike until their husbands stop the war. Two centuries later, Roman playwright Plautus became the first great genius of farce, mastering the art of mistaken identity.

The genre got its name from the Old French *farce*, “to stuff,” when irreverent actors in fifteenth century France stuffed comic improvisations between the scenes of religious dramas. Soon, plays that focused exclusively on such gags were popular throughout Europe. Sixteenth century Italy developed its own particular brand of farce, *commedia dell’arte*, with its stock characters and situations enlivened by improvised *lazzi* (what today we call “bits” or “shtick”). The great French playwright Molière got his start in *commedia dell’arte*, later folding its farcical elements into the more refined strictures of French comedy to create such masterpieces as *Tartuffe* and *The Miser*. Shakespeare went all the way back to Plautus’s *Menaechmi*, with its two pairs of mismatched twins, for the plot of his *Comedy of Errors*.

(this page) John Guerrasio & Mark Mineart  
in *The Ladies Man*, adapted  
from Georges Feydeau by Charles Morey,  
produced by the IRT in 2009.

(opposite page) Greta Wohlrabe & Elizabeth Ledo  
in *Boeing Boeing* by Marc Camoletti,  
produced by the IRT in 2017.





Today when we hear the term farce, we usually think of bedroom farce, best exemplified by the work of Georges Feydeau (1862-1921). Feydeau wrote more than sixty plays, most of them big hits in Paris and around Europe. His most famous include *A Flea in Her Ear* and *The Girl from Maxim's*. Feydeau was the king of the bedroom farce, plays that focused on the comic possibilities in attempted love affairs. The settings for Feydeau's plays often feature a single room with several doors, and much of the fun comes from the characters chasing each other through those doors, often just missing each other.

Meanwhile in London and on Broadway, *Charley's Aunt* by Brandon Thomas (1892) was rolling them in the aisles and racking up long runs. The new technology of cinema quickly embraced farce, making stars of the Keystone Kops, Charlie Chaplin, and the Marx Brothers. More recently, films like *Some Like It Hot* (1959), the Pink Panther series, and *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988) have become classics, while television has given us *I Love Lucy* and *Fawlty Towers*.

Farce returned to its French roots in 1960 with Marc Camoletti's *Boeing Boeing*, adapted for London by Beverley Cross in 1962 and revised for Broadway by Francis Evans in 2008. The 1962 hit

musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* by Larry Gelbart, Bert Shevelove, and Stephen Sondheim returned once again to the Roman master Plautus, stirring together a cocktail of plot lines from several of his greatest hits with a big splash of vaudevillian slapstick. In the 1980s, two very popular stage farces focused on performers: *Noises Off* (1982) by British playwright Michael Frayn is set in the theatre, while *Lend Me a Tenor* (1989) by American playwright Ken Ludwig focuses on the world of opera. Continuing in this vein, *The Play That Goes Wrong*, a 2012 farce by Henry Lewis, Jonathan Sayer, and Henry Shields of London's Mischief Theatre company, has been going wrong on Broadway for more than a year now. For more than two millennia, farce has kept us laughing by showing us just how ridiculous the human species can be.

# THE BRITS HAVE A WORD FOR IT

Noises Off features a number of British expressions that might be unfamiliar to some Americans.

**airing cupboard** • Cupboard is the British term for closet. An airing cupboard is a built-in closet with a heater of some kind and shelves to hold clothing and/or towels for drying.

**bloke** • man; equivalent to the American terms *guy* or *fellow*

**boiled sweets** • hard candy

**bust-up** • a quarrel or a disturbance

**dial 999** • the British equivalent to 911

**fruit machine** • slang for a slot machine

**house-agents** • real estate agents

**loo** • slang term for bathroom

**OAP** • Old Age Pensioner

**plaster on his head** • a bandage

**row** • an argument or fight

**smalls** • slang for underwear

**taps** • any plumbing valve, particularly the fittings that control water supply to bathtubs and sinks

**WC** • water closet; a toilet

## OTHER WORDS MADE IN BRITAIN

Set in Great Britain, Noises Off features a number of other terms that originated there.

### fortnight

Two weeks. The term is derived from 14 nights.

### Great Scott!

A minced oath for “Great God!” Sometimes identified with novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). Popular throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the expression has fallen out of fashion.

*Myra Hess performing  
at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square  
during the London Blitz.  
(see citation on opposite page)*



**Inland Revenue**

From 1849 to 2005, Inland Revenue was the British equivalent of the IRS. In 2005, it became Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, but it is still frequently referred to as Inland Revenue.

**Irish linen**

Irish linen is very luxurious and expensive.

**Myra Hess playing on through the air raids**

Dame Myra Hess (1890-1965) was a noted British concert pianist. During the London Blitz (1940-41), when all concert halls were blacked out at night to avoid being targets for German bombs, she organized a series of lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. The concerts continued Monday through Friday without fail for six years, nearly 2,000 in total, with Hess herself playing in 150 of them. In 1941, Hess was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her services maintaining public morale in London through her concerts.

*(see photograph on opposite page)*

**Oxfam**

Oxfam is a global confederation of more than twenty non-profit organizations that work together to end poverty around the world, founded at Oxford University. Like Goodwill or the Salvation Army, Oxfam encourages individuals to donate clothing, toys, and other goods for resale in its shops.

**posset mill**

A posset is a hot British drink made of milk curdled with wine or ale and often spiced—something like eggnog. It is highly unlikely that posset would be produced in a mill.

**50 quid**

Quid is British slang for the pound sterling in British currency. Today, 50 pounds is worth about 70 U.S. dollars.

**tannoy**

Tannoy Ltd is a British manufacturer of loudspeakers and public-address (PA) systems. The term “tannoy” is sometimes used generically in colloquial English to mean any public-address system.

**tax exile**

A tax exile is a person who leaves a country to avoid the payment of income tax or other taxes. British income tax rates for its wealthiest citizens peaked at 99.25% during World War II. In the 1950s, Noël Coward was among the first celebrities who were known to have left Britain to avoid paying what they considered to be onerous taxes. In the 1970s, when the top rate was 83%, many British music and movie stars did likewise. After dipping to a low of 23% in 1997, today's highest British tax rate is 45%.

**VAT**

In the United Kingdom, the value-added tax (VAT) is levied on most goods and services provided by registered businesses. It is a sort of sales tax that is paid by the seller rather than the purchaser (with the expense indirectly passed on to the purchaser as part of the price paid). The standard rate is 20%, with certain exemptions, such as food.

# THEATRE TERMS

Noises Off *invites the audience to see the rehearsal process and backstage, areas that are usually unseen by most people. There are a number of terms used in the play that may be unfamiliar.*

## PEOPLE

The **PRODUCER** oversees the whole of the production process while supporting the creative. They are in charge of the production budget and finance.

The **PLAYWRIGHT** writes the play. (The term playwright is derived from the same idea as the term wheelwright, using wright to mean one who crafts or makes something.)

The **DIRECTOR** is responsible for the overall vision of the production. He or she collaborates with the cast and creative team, through design and staging, to bring that vision to life.

The **DESIGNERS** are responsible for the way a production looks. Designers include scenic, costumes, lighting, sound, and sometimes projections.

The **STAGE MANAGER** is responsible during the rehearsal process for scheduling rehearsal time, developing a prompt script with all blocking moves and technical cues, and maintaining communication between all the various departments involved in the production. Once the show is in performance, he or she is responsible for the smooth running of the show, including calling sound, lighting, and projection cues, and ensuring that the actors maintain the staging as established during rehearsals.

The **ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER** supports the stage manager throughout the rehearsal and performance period. He or she is often responsible for being “on book” (following the script and giving line prompts when the actors ask for them), as well as keeping track of props and costume pieces used in the show.

*Actress Mehry Eslaminia plays Poppy,  
the assistant stage manager of  
Nothing On, the play within Noises Off.  
Photo by Zach Rosing.*

The **COMPANY MANAGER** in a touring production such as *Nothing On* is in charge of housing, transportation, payroll, and other non-stage related needs of the full company, including actors, crew, and creative team. (In *Nothing On*, Tim Allgood serves as both Stage Manager and Company Manager.)



## THE STAGE

The **AUDITORIUM** is the space which contains both the stage and audience seating.

**DOWNSTAGE (DS)** is the area on stage closest to the audience.

**UPSTAGE (US)** is the area on stage furthest away from the audience.

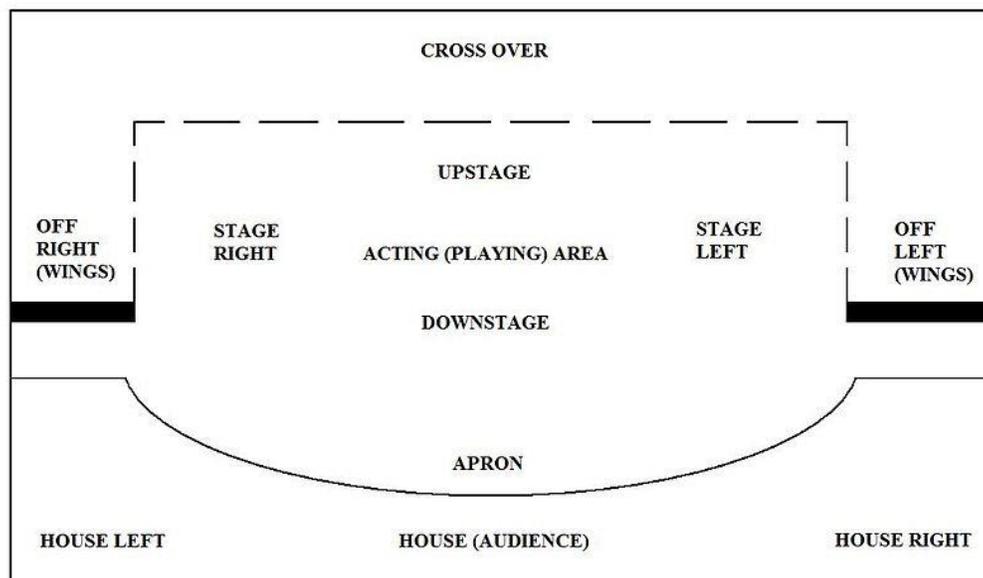
**STAGE LEFT (SL)** is the area on stage to the actors' left (to the audience's right).

**STAGE RIGHT (SR)** is the area on stage to the actors' right (to the audience's left).

**CENTER (CS)** is the area on stage in the center.

The **WINGS** are the areas to either side of the stage, from whence the actors make their entrances and exits.

The **PROMPT CORNER** is an off-stage area from which the assistant stage manager can feed lines if needed



**DRESSING ROOMS** are where the actors prepare to go onstage, where they get dressed in their costumes and apply makeup.

The **GREEN ROOM** is a waiting room or lounge where the cast can relax offstage before and during performances. The origin of this historic term is uncertain, but there are numerous theories: that the color was considered relaxing, that it was restful for actors eyes when out of bright stage lights, that it was a place for early unstable makeup products to “cure” and lose their green tinge, that it was a reference to nervous actors' faces, and many more. Today they are rarely painted green.

## OTHER THEATRE LINGO

**BEGINNERS** is the British equivalent of the American term places, meaning that actors should be in place to go on stage for the first scene of a play.

**BLOCKING** refers to all of the moves that an actor makes onstage, including entrances, exits, moving about on stage, sitting down, and standing up.

**CALLS** are announcements made by the stage manager or assistant stage manager, over the PA system to the actors or audience, informing them when the performance is about to begin.

The term **CURTAIN** is used as a cue in the theatre to refer to the raising or lowering during performance of the drape that divides the audience from the stage.

The **DRESS REHEARSAL** or “dress” is the final run-through of a production before it is first performed for the public. Usually it is run without stopping, under performance conditions, with full costume, make-up, and lighting.

The term **ELECTRICS** is often used by the production team to refer to lighting instruments, rigging, cues, or almost anything to do with the lighting of a show.

**HOUSE** and **HOUSE FRONT** refer to the audience area of the theatre.

A **MATINEE** is a performance that takes place during the day rather than in the evening

**NOISES OFF** is a British term for offstage sound effects; it can also be used for unwanted noises heard from backstage during a performance.

**PROPS** or properties are items used by actors during a performance, such as telephones, newspapers, boxes, bags, letters, envelopes, flowers, and plates of sardines.

The **RIGGING** in a theatre is the system of pipes that hang over the stage to hold scenery and lighting equipment, as well as the ropes or cables and pulleys that raise and lower the pipe.

**STAGE DIRECTIONS** are the notes in the script that indicate unspoken action or effects, as opposed to spoken dialogue.

**STALLS** is the British term for seats on the floor level, what Americans call orchestra seats.

The Term **TABS** is used by the British to indicate most masking drapes, as well as the grand drape.

The **TECHNICAL REHEARSAL** or “tech” is the rehearsal in which the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, sound, and sometimes projections are added into the rehearsal process before public performances begin. Typically they are long rehearsals with frequent stopping and starting.

# ALIGNMENT GUIDE

Seeing a performance at Indiana Repertory Theatre is a great way to help make connections for students and facilitate their understanding of a text. Some key literature standards to consider on your trip would be:

## READING - LITERATURE

- RL.1 – Read and comprehend a variety of literature independently and proficiently
- RL.2 – Build comprehension and appreciation of literature by analyzing, inferring, and drawing conclusions about literary elements, themes, and central ideas
  - Sample: 9-10.RL.2.2: *Analyze in detail the development of two or more themes or central ideas over the course of a work of literature, including how they emerge and are shaped and refined by specific details.*
- RL.3 – Build comprehension and appreciation of literature, using knowledge of literary structure and point of view
  - Sample: 11-12.RL.3.2: *Analyze a work of literature in which the reader must distinguish between what is directly stated and what is intended (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement) in order to understand the point of view.*
- RL.4 – Build comprehension and appreciation of literature by connecting various literary works and analyzing how medium and interpretation impact meaning

## READING - NONFICTION

- RN.2 – Extract and construct meaning from nonfiction texts using a range of comprehension skills
  - Sample: 8.RN.2.3: *Analyze how a text makes connections and distinctions among individuals, events, and ideas.*

## READING - VOCABULARY

- RV.3 – Build comprehension and appreciation of literature and nonfiction texts by determining or clarifying figurative, connotative, and technical meanings
  - Sample: 9-10.RV.3.3: *Interpret figures of speech (e.g., euphemism, oxymoron) in context and analyze their role in the text.*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Playwright Michael Frayn was inspired to write *Noises Off* after seeing one of his own plays from backstage and deciding that the play was “funnier from behind than in front!” During *Noises Off*, we see the company perform the first act of the play-within-the-play, *Nothing On*, three times: once in rehearsal, once from backstage, and once from the front. How are the three acts different? How are they the same? Which act do you find funniest? Why? How does the structure of the play work to set up material in Act I that pays off later in Acts II and III?

Most of the characters in *Noises Off* are actors, but a few (Lloyd, Tim, and Poppy) are involved with the play in an off-stage capacity. Consider these three characters and their work on the production. What kinds of responsibilities do they have? How does their work contribute to the production? How do their characters function differently than do the characters who are actors?

Much of the humor in *Noises Off* comes from the dysfunctional relationships between the characters. What other stories—plays, movies, or TV series, as well as novels and stories—feature funny dysfunctional relationships? Why do you think dysfunctional relationships are such a common device for creating humor? Do you find this device funny? Why or why not?

In recent years, the theatre world has often found itself challenged by the depiction of women in classic plays. The #MeToo movement has placed a particular focus on how women are depicted in the arts. Current Broadway productions of *My Fair Lady* (written in 1956) and *Carousel* (1945), for example, are attempting to deal with these issues in different ways. Looking at *Noises Off*, written in the early 1980s, how does it hold up in 2018? How do we respond differently to a character like Brooke than we might have in the past? Without attempting to sanitize or ignore the past, how do we deal with such questions when seeing old plays and movies or reading old books?

Misunderstandings play an important part of the comedy both of on and offstage in both *Noises Off* and *Nothing On*. For example, Philip mistakes Roger for a tax inspector, while miscommunications backstage cause both Tim and Lloyd to enter as burglar understudies. Can you think of other examples of comedic misunderstandings or mistaken identities in the play, or in other plays, books, movies, or television? What makes these misunderstandings funny? What funny misunderstandings have happened in your own life?

During Act I, the characters are in the midst of a rehearsal for their production of *Nothing On*. What is the purpose of rehearsal? Why are rehearsals important? What are some comparable processes in work, sport, or life? How are they the same? How are they different?

The characters in *Noises Off* are a traveling theatre company who put on performances of *Nothing On* in a different town every week. Today, many people do a lot of traveling for their jobs. What might be the advantages of a job that requires a lot of travel? What might be the disadvantages? How is travel for work different from travel for leisure? How do you think you would succeed in a job that requires a lot of travel?

## WRITING PROMPTS

In Act III of *Noises Off*, everything goes wrong for the theatre company, with hilarious results. Write a short narrative about a time when you were involved in a project or event where everything went wrong. What happened? How did the project or event turn out? Did the things that went wrong seem funny at the time? Were you able to laugh about it later? Why or why not?

While we see Act I of *Nothing On* three times, we never see the rest of the play. Write a synopsis that finishes *Nothing On*. What do you think happens? Does it have two acts, or three? What happens to each of the seven characters (don't forget the Sheikh)? What further plot twists might occur? For extra credit, write a scene of dialogue between two of the characters.

Read the article about farce on pages 8 and 9. Both *Noises Off* and its play-within-a-play, *Nothing On*, are examples of farce. What other plays or movies have you seen that are farces? What elements do these stories have in common? What elements create opportunities for humor? Write a short farcical scene of your own. Try to include as many as you can of the elements of farce that you have noted.

Write a review of the play. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of the theatrical aspects – scenery, lights, costumes, sound, direction, acting – as well as your impressions of the script and the impact of the story and/or themes and the overall production. What moments made an impression? How do the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound work with the actors' performance of the text to tell the story? What ideas or themes did the play make you think about? How did it make you feel? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not? To share your reviews with others, send to: [education.irt@gmail.com](mailto:education.irt@gmail.com)

*Hollis Resnik, Jerry Richardson, & Robert Neal in Noises Off at the IRT. Photo by Zach Rosing.*



# ACTIVITIES: IMPROV and THEATRE GAMES

*When things go wrong during Nothing On, the actors find themselves having to improvise. However, improvisation (or “improv”) isn’t only for emergencies—it can be fun too! Here are a few improv and theatre games to flex your creative muscles and make your classmates (and yourself) laugh.*

## PROPS

For this game, you’ll need to assemble a collection of random objects. These might include a wooden spoon, a ruler, a scarf; or better yet, use objects whose actual purpose you don’t know. Divide into teams of two, each team claiming one object. Then have the teams take turns coming up with alternative uses for their object. For instance, the wooden spoon may become a microphone, an oar, a conductor’s baton, a light saber ... the possibilities are endless. Teams should switch from one to another as quickly as possible without hesitating; if a team hesitates or can’t come up with a new idea on their turn, the members of that team are out.

## ONE WORD STUDY

Sit in a circle and create a story together. The first person says the first word, the second person adds a second word, and so on. The only rule: don’t hesitate—say the first thing that comes into your head.

## QUESTIONS ONLY

For this game, you’ll divide into two teams. Then, pick a simple setting for your scene (examples: shopping at the mall, visiting the zoo, going to a birthday party). Two people from the same team should begin their scene. You can make the scene go however you want it to, with only one rule: you can only speak in questions. If someone makes a mistake by saying something that isn’t a question, that person is out, and someone else from their team must take their place and continue the scene.

## DO IT THIS WAY

For this game, one person volunteers to be the guesser. Have the guesser leave the room. When he or she is gone, the rest of the group must come up with an adverb that might describe an action (slowly, grumpily, sleepily, etc.) Once you’ve picked your adverb, call the guesser back into the room. The guesser can then ask anyone in the room to perform an action in the style of the adverb she must guess (example: “eat this way” – the actor must pretend to eat slowly or grumpily, or sleepily). The guesser gets three chances to make other players act – then time is up and he or she she must guess the adverb.

## WHO IS THE LEADER?

For this game, everyone stands in a circle. One person volunteers to be the guesser. The guesser then leaves the room. When he or she is gone, choose one person in the circle to be the leader. The leader initiates a movement such as swaying from side to side or snapping fingers, which everyone else copies. The leader should change the movement frequently, and everyone else must be alert and follow along. Once the leader has been chosen and the first movement has been started, call the guesser back into the room. The guesser will stand in the middle of the circle and try to figure out who is the leader.

## ZIP, ZAP, ZOP

For this game, everyone stands in a circle. One person starts the game by pointing to someone else in the circle and saying, “Zip!” The person who is pointed to must then point to someone else while saying, “Zap!” The person that the second person points to must point to another person while saying, “Zop!” You should point to people at random (don’t just go around the circle), but the words must always go in the same order: zip, zap, zop. The words should also be spoken in rhythm – no hesitations or pauses. If a player hesitates or says the wrong word, he or she is out.

*Challenge version:* Add a movement for each word (for example, jumping in place when you say “zip” or putting your hand on your head when you say “zap”). When pointed to, players must then give both the correct word and the correct motion (while staying in rhythm!) in order to stay in the game.

*Rob Riley, Hollis Resnik, & Robert Neal in Noises Off at the IRT. Photo by Zach Rosing.*



# RESOURCES:

## BOOKS

### FICTION

*The Marvels* by Brian Selznick

– young adult novel chronicling over a century in the life of a London theatrical family

*A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend* by Emily Horner

– young adult novel about a group of teens putting on a play in honor of a classmate who has died

*Will Grayson, Will Grayson* by John Green and David Levithan

– young adult novel with a major plotline involving a high school theatre production

*Better Nate Than Ever* by Tim Federle – young adult novel about a boy pursuing his theatrical dreams

*Richard III* by William Shakespeare – classic history play mentioned in *Noises Off*

*The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey

– a detective stuck in a hospital bed investigates the real Richard III

*Tempest-Tost* from the Salteron Trilogy by Robertson Davies

### NONFICTION

*History of the Theatre*

by Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy

*Farce: The Comprehensive and Definitive Account*

*of One of the World's Funniest Art Forms*

by Albert Bermel

*Stop the Show! A History of Insane Incidents*

*and Absurd Accidents in the Theater*

by Brad Schreiber

*Act One* by Moss Hart

*The Empty Space* by Peter Brook

*An Actor Prepares* by Konstantin Stanislavski

*Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public,*

*and the Greatest Theater Story Ever Told*

by Kenneth Turan and Joe Papp

*Drama: An Actor's Education* by John Lithgow

*Ghost Light* by Frank Rich

*Sondheim and Company* by Craig Zadan

*Prince of Players* by Eleanor Ruggles

*Design for Living: Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne*

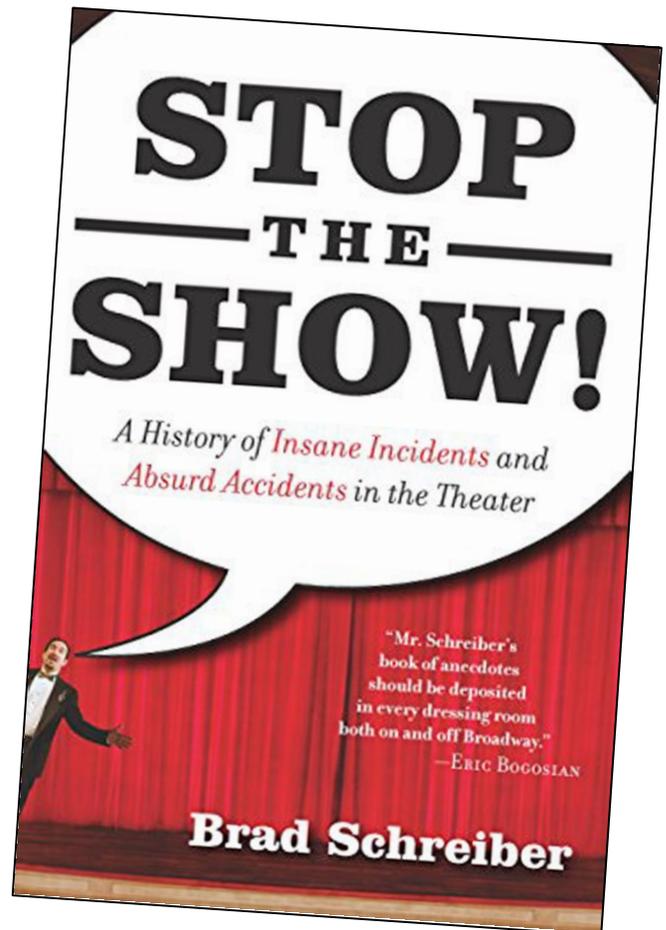
by Margot Peters

*Run Through* by John Houseman

*The Secret Life of the American Musical: How Broadway Shows Are Made*

by Jack Viertel

*Not Since Carrie: Forty Years of Broadway Musical Flops* by Ken Mendelbaum



## MOVIES

### FILMS ABOUT THE THEATRE

*42nd Street* (1933) musical starring Warner Baxter & Ruby Keeler  
*Stage Door* (1937) comedy-drama starring Katharine Hepburn & Ginger Rogers  
*All About Eve* (1950) comedy-drama starring Bette Davis & Anne Baxter  
*The Band Wagon* (1953) musical starring Fred Astaire & Cyd Charisse  
*Kiss Me Kate* (1953) Cole Porter musical starring Kathryn Grayson & Howard Keel  
*The Producers* (1967) Mel Brooks comedy starring Gene Wilder & Zero Mostel  
*All That Jazz* (1979) autobiographical Bob Fosse musical comedy-drama starring Roy Scheider  
*Victor/Victoria* (1982) musical starring Julie Andrews, Robert Preston, & James Garner  
*The Dresser* (1983) drama starring Albert Finney & Tom Courtenay  
*Noises Off* (1992) comedy starring Michael Cain & Carol Burnett  
*Bullets over Broadway* (1994) Woody Allen comedy starring John Cusack & Dianne Wiest  
*Waiting for Guffman* (1996) Christopher Guest comedy with Fred Willard & Catherine O'Hara  
*Shakespeare in Love* (1998) comedy-drama starring Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow, & Judi Dench  
*Topsy Turvy* (1999) comedy-drama about Gilbert & Sullivan writing *The Mikado*  
*Chicago* (2002) musical starring Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, & Richard Gere

### FARCES

*A Night at the Opera* (1936) starring the Marx Brothers  
*Bringing Up Baby* (1938) starring Cary Grant & Katharine Hepburn  
*Arsenic & Old Lace* (1944) starring Cary Grant & Priscilla Lane  
*Some Like It Hot* (1959) starring Marilyn Monroe, Jack Lemmon, & Tony Curtis  
*Clue* (1985) starring Tim Curry, Madeleine Kahn, & Christopher Lloyd  
*A Fish Called Wanda* (1988) starring John Cleese, Jamie Lee Curtis, & Kevin Kline  
*The Birdcage* (1996) starring Robin Williams & Nathan Lane

## WEBSITES

The history of farce

<https://loversandliarsmedley.wordpress.com/about/a-dramaturgs-perspective/the-origins-of-farce/>  
<http://www.appstate.edu/~martybjw/dramaturgypages/moonoverbuffalo/historyfarce.htm>  
<http://www.michaelarditti.com/non-fiction/an-anatomy-of-farce/>

Some thoughts on the nature and value of farce

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jun/10/farce-is-everywhere-why>

Six rules of farce from British playwright Ray Cooney

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/10688416/Ray-Cooneys-six-rules-of-farce.html>

A brief history of British theatres

<http://www.theatrust.org.uk/discover-theatres/theatre-faqs/172-how-has-the-design-of-theatre-buildings-changed-over-time>

# GLOSSARY

**ballcock**

the mechanism in a toilet tank that fills it and keeps it from overflowing; a valve is connected to a hollow, sealed float with a lever mounted near the top of the tank

**Battle of Waterloo**

In the Battle of Waterloo (1815), French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and his army were defeated by British and Prussian forces, resulting in the end of Napoleon's reign.

**bric-a-brac**

Odds and ends, miscellaneous objects of little to no value; decorative home accessories.

**bullion**

Gold, silver, or other precious metals in the form of coins or bars.

**burnous**

A long, loose, hooded garment, like a cloak or a cape, traditionally worn by Arabs.

**colloquy**

A formal, intellectual conversation between two people.

**distrain**

The seizure of property in order to obtain payment of money that is owed.

**Duke of Buckingham ... Duke of Gloucester ... Duke of Clarence**

Characters in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

**hiatus**

A pause or a gap in a series of events.

**incitement**

Encouraging or bringing about passion to do something; instigating a reaction. In criminal law, incitement is the encouragement of another person to commit a crime.

**Madeira**

A variety of fortified wines made in the Portuguese Madeira Islands, off the coast of Africa.

**ministration**

A task one is working on.

**mullion window**

A window divided into many small decorative panes, separated by wood or metal.

**postprandial snooze**

An after-dinner nap.

**potentate**

A person with great power; a dictator. Today the term is also used to describe powerful businessmen.

**Sardinia**

An autonomous region of Italy, and the second-largest island in the Mediterranean Sea.

**service flat**

Service quarters, a separate apartment within the house for use by the housekeeper.

**sheikh**

An honorific Arabic title given at birth that often denotes the hereditary ruler of a tribe.

**surgical corset**

Similar to the corsets historically worn for fashion purposes, surgical corsets are often fitted on individuals with spinal problems or internal injuries in order to immobilize and protect the torso.

**turbot**

A large, flat, circular species of fish, nothing like a sardine.

**Valium**

A prescription medication that typically produces a calming effect.

*The company of Noises Off at the IRT. Photo by Zach Rosing.*



# THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

*You, the audience are one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make each theatre experience enjoyable for everyone:*

Leave mp3 players, cameras, mobile phones, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home.

You may think texting is private, but the light and the motion are very annoying to those around you and on stage. Do not text during the performance.

Food and drink must stay in the lobby.

The house lights dimming and going out signal the audience to get quiet and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.

Don't talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage. Even if you think they can't hear you, they can.

Never throw anything onto the stage. People could be injured.

Remain in your seat during the play. Use the restroom before or after the show.

Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue and sound effects, and look at the scenery, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.

Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp—whatever the story draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.

Remain at your seat and applaud during the curtain call because this is part of the performance too. It gives you a chance to recognize a job well done and the actors a moment to thank you for your attention.

