



# **NOISES OFF**

**MICHAEL FRAYN**

**TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK**  
**RESEARCHED & WRITTEN BY**  
**SIMON POLLARD**

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# NOISES OFF

MICHAEL FRAYN



Jonathan Coy  
FREDERICK FELLOWES



Janie Dee  
BELINDA BLAIR



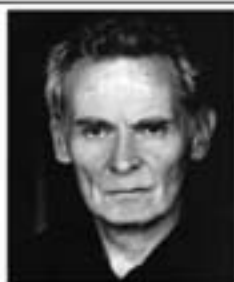
Robert Glenister  
LLOYD DALLAS



Jamie Glover  
GARRY LEJEUNE



Celia Imrie  
DOTTY OTLEY



Karl Johnson  
SELSDON MOWBRAY



Aisling Loftus  
POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR



Amy Nuttall  
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Paul Ready  
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## UNDERSTUDIES



David Hedges  
LLOYD DALLAS  
& FREDERICK FELLOWES  
& SELSDON MOWBRAY



Lucy Hough  
BROOKE ASHTON &  
POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR



Mark Jackson  
TIM ALLGOOD  
& GARRY LEJEUNE



Caroline Wildi  
BELINDA BLAIR  
& DOTTY OTLEY

## MICHAEL FRAYN HIS STORY

*"Theatre is what we all do all the time in life - we're both performing and being the audience."*

Michael Frayn

Michael Frayn was born in Mill Hill, London on 8 September 1933. His father, Tom Frayn, was a travelling salesman and his mother Violet was a shop assistant and amateur violinist who died of a heart attack when Frayn was 12 years old. For a short time, they lived above an off-licence in Mill Hill before moving to Ewell in Surrey, where Frayn and his younger sister Jill spent the majority of their childhood. He attended the private school Sutton High for Boys, before transferring to Kingston Grammar School after his mother's death.

After leaving school, he completed two years of compulsory National Service, during which time he studied Russian and worked as a Russian interpreter. It was during this period that he met and befriended the young Alan Bennett and they began writing revues together. He then went on to study at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, initially taking French and Russian but later transferring to Moral Sciences, a subject now more commonly referred to as Philosophy. "I liked the name moral sciences," Frayn says, "No-one knew what it meant but it sounded very impressive." Whilst at university, he joined the Cambridge Footlights, the celebrated student comedy and theatre collective. He wrote many sketches for the group, although unfortunately his final year show *Zounds*, for which he wrote the majority of material, was the first in the group's recent history not to transfer to London. The experience turned Frayn away from the theatre and he focused on other forms of writing.

Upon graduating, Frayn embarked on a career as a journalist, writing columns and travel features for publications including *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. He married Gillian Palmer, a psychotherapist, in 1960 and the couple had three daughters together before their divorce in 1990. In 1965 he wrote his first novel *The Tin Men*, a philosophical satire about computers, which won the Somerset Maugham Award the following year. He continued to write a series of well-received novels throughout the late 1960s, before returning to the theatre in 1970 with a set of four one-act plays entitled *The Two of Us*, directed by Michael Codron and starring Richard Briers and Lynn Redgrave.

Although *The Two of Us* did not receive particularly favourable reviews, it ran in the West End for six months and gave Frayn the idea for what was to become his biggest success to date. Whilst watching the show from backstage, he realised that "it was much funnier from the back than the front and I resolved one day to write a play seen from behind." During the 1970s, Frayn continued to write novels and plays, including his first full-length farce *Alphabetical Order* and new translations of works by Chekhov and Tolstoy. In 1977 he wrote the one-act farce *Exits* for a charity event, which in 1982 he developed into the full-length farce-within-a-farce *Noises Off* which ran successfully at the Lyric Hammersmith and then at the Savoy Theatre for five years.

Frayn once said: "You can classify plays in any number of ways – as comedies or tragedies; as verse or prose, as high comedies, low comedies, black comedies, tragic-comedies; as art or entertainment. But however you do it they all fall into two even more fundamental categories – they are all hits or flops." Throughout the 80s and 90s Frayn wrote a string of hits including translations, farces and dramas. His greatest successes were *Benefactors*, about the housing projects of the 1960s and the World War 2 drama *Copenhagen*, which premiered at the National Theatre, before transferring to the West End and Broadway.

Frayn married the biographer and critic Claire Tomalin in 1993 and they have been referred to on more than one occasion as "Britain's premiere literary couple." In 2002, they competed against each other for the Whitbread Book of the Year, with Frayn's novel *Spies* eventually losing out to Tomalin's biography of Samuel Pepys. Frayn continues to write novels, newspaper features and plays. His most recent play *Afterlife* was staged at the National Theatre in 2008 and several of his other plays are in the process of major revivals, including Sheffield Theatres' 2012 trilogy of *Copenhagen*, *Democracy* and *Benefactors* and The Old Vic's current production of *Noises Off*.

*"He smuggles ideas into commercially popular forms. His plays are serious comedies about people's attempts to interpret the world, about the constant battle between the forces of order and disorder, about the search for happiness."*

Michael Billington, *The Guardian*

# CHRONOLOGY

## MICHAEL FRAYN'S CAREER

|             |   |             |   |
|-------------|---|-------------|---|
| <b>1933</b> | – Michael J Frayn is born on 8 September, in Mill Hill, London.   | <b>1990</b> | – Translate's Trifonov's <i>Exchange</i> and writes <i>Look Look</i> (screenplay).  |
| <b>1957</b> | – Frayn graduates from Emmanuel College, Oxford, with a degree in Moral Sciences (Philosophy).  | <b>1991</b> | – <i>A Landing on the Sun</i> (novel), <i>Audience</i> (play).  |
| <b>1965</b> | – Frayn writes his first novel <i>The Tin Men</i> .   | <b>1993</b> | – <i>Now You Know</i> (novel), <i>Here</i> (play).  |
| <b>1966</b> | – <i>The Russian Interpreter</i> (novel).   | <b>1995</b> | – Frayn translates Offenbach's <i>La Belle Hélène</i> , renaming it <i>La Belle Vivette</i> .   |
| <b>1967</b> | – <i>Towards the End of the Morning</i> (novel).  | <b>1998</b> | – Frayn writes <i>Copenhagen</i> , which is staged at the National Theatre, running for over 300 performances and winning the Evening Standard award for Best Play.   |
| <b>1968</b> | – <i>A Very Private Life</i> (novel).   | <b>1999</b> | – <i>Headlong</i> (novel).  |
| <b>1970</b> | – Frayn writes <i>The Two of Us</i> , a set of four one-act plays.  | <b>2000</b> | – <i>Copenhagen</i> opens at the Royale Theatre on Broadway and wins the Tony Award for Best Play. <i>Noises Off</i> is revived by the National Theatre.  |
| <b>1973</b> | – <i>Sweet Dreams</i> (novel).  | <b>2001</b> | – The National Theatre's production of <i>Noises Off</i> transfers to the Piccadilly Theatre, where it runs for two and a half years. A simultaneous production opens at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.                     |
| <b>1977</b> | – Frayn writes his first full-length plays <i>Alphabetical Order</i> , <i>Clouds</i> and his first farce <i>Donkey's Years</i> .  | <b>2002</b> | – <i>Spies</i> (novel).   |
| <b>1978</b> | – Frayn translates Chekhov's <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> and writes the farce <i>Balmoral</i> .   | <b>2003</b> | – <i>Democracy</i> premieres at the National Theatre, winning the Evening Standard and Critic's Circle awards for Best Play.  |
| <b>1979</b> | – Frayn translates Tolstoy's <i>The Fruits of Enlightenment</i> .   | <b>2004</b> | – <i>Democracy</i> transfers to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.  |
| <b>1980</b> | – Frayn revises <i>Balmoral</i> , renaming it <i>Liberty Hall</i> and writes <i>Make and Break</i> (play).  | <b>2008</b> | – A collection of Frayn's introductions to his plays is published as <i>Stage Directions: Writing on Theatre 1970–2008</i> . His most recent play <i>Afterlife</i> is performed on the Lyttleton stage at the National Theatre.       |
| <b>1982</b> | – Frayn writes <i>Noises Off</i> , which premieres at the Lyric Hammersmith, winning the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy. It transfers to the Savoy Theatre where it runs for five years.  | <b>2009</b> | – Frayn publishes <i>Travels with a Typewriter</i> , a collection of travel pieces that he wrote for various newspapers during the 1960s and 70s.   |
| <b>1983</b> | – <i>Noises Off</i> opens at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway. Frayn translates Chekhov's <i>Three Sisters</i> .   | <b>2010</b> | – Frayn publishes a memoir about his father – <i>My Father's Fortune: A Life</i> .  |
| <b>1984</b> | – <i>Benefactors</i> opens at the Vaudeville Theatre, winning the Evening Standard and Olivier awards for Best Play. Frayn also writes <i>Number One</i> , a translation of Jean Anouilh's <i>Le Nombri</i> , and <i>Wild Honey</i> , a translation of a previously unnamed Chekhov play. | <b>2011</b> | – Sheffield Theatres announce <i>The Michael Frayn Season</i> , with plans to stage <i>Copenhagen</i> , <i>Benefactors</i> and <i>Democracy</i> as well as a series of readings in 2012. <i>Noises Off</i> is revived by The Old Vic. |
| <b>1986</b> | – Frayn translates Chekhov's <i>The Seagull</i> and <i>Uncle Vanya</i> and writes the screenplay for the film <i>Clockwise</i> , starring John Cleese. <i>Benefactors</i> opens at the Atkinson Theatre on Broadway.  |             |   |
| <b>1987</b> | – Frayn revises <i>Balmoral</i> again, returning to its original title.   |             |   |
| <b>1989</b> | – <i>The Trick of It</i> (novel), <i>First and Last</i> (play).   |             |   |



## NOISES OFF AT A GLANCE

### ACT I

The play begins during the final dress rehearsal at the Grand Theatre, Weston-Super-Mare for the regional tour of the new British farce *Nothing On*. It is late at night and the play is due to open tomorrow. Tensions are running high, as the director Lloyd Dallas struggles with his cast of tired and frustrated actors. The fact that the play itself is not very good – a formulaic farce involving tax evasion, a Sheikh and various plates of sardines – is the least of his problems. Among his chief concerns are leading actress Dotty Otley who appears to have forgotten all of the blocking, the argumentative Garry Lejeune with whom Dotty is having a relationship, the alcoholic Selsdon Mowbray who keeps going missing, senior actor Frederick Fellowes whose wife left him this morning and the young actress Brooke Ashton who keeps losing her contact lenses. To make matters worse, Lloyd is having an affair with Brooke and also with the inexperienced assistant stage manager Poppy. As the rehearsal continues, more revelations and dilemmas come to light – leading variously to tears, arguments, sickness and nosebleeds – before they finally reach the end of their Act I run-through.

### ACT II

A month later, *Nothing On* is now up-and-running and the cast are about to perform a matinée at the Theatre Royal, Ashton-under-Lyne. This time, the action takes place backstage before and during the performance. The cracks that were beginning to show in Act I have grown bigger and the relationships within the company are rapidly deteriorating. Dotty and Garry have locked themselves in their respective dressing rooms following an argument and the fraught situation is worsened when Lloyd sneaks backstage to see Brooke. When the performance finally starts, the backstage action continues in a dumb-show\*, with the actors struggling to deal with Selsdon's disappearance, Garry's misdirected jealousy at Freddie, and Brooke's threats to walk out. As props are misplaced, entrances are missed and pranks are played, the performance descends into chaos and Act I ends with Poppy loudly revealing to Lloyd that she is pregnant.

\*action without dialogue

### ACT III

*Nothing On* is now heading towards the end of its ten-week tour and is about to be performed at the Municipal Theatre, Stockton-on-Tees. Stage manager Tim announces that the show will be slightly delayed, as we hear Dotty and Belinda screaming at each other backstage. When the show begins, Dotty is limping and distracted, getting lines and blocking completely wrong. Things go from bad to worse as the action continues, with the actors changing the play considerably, making mistakes, trying to cover for them and inevitably making everything worse. However, under Lloyd's guidance, the cast manage to stumble towards a vaguely happy ending.



# NOISES OFF CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

## TIM ALLGOOD

Tim is the stage manager of *Nothing On*. As well as having his own stage management responsibilities, he is also Freddie's body double in one scene and understudy for all of the male roles. He is incredibly tired and overworked, having not been to bed for 48 hours. He is logical and sensible but frequently finds himself overruled and bossed around by Lloyd, particularly in Act II, when he is sent to buy some flowers for Brooke instead of running the show. He is constantly stressed and clearly not comfortable in front of an audience, getting tongue-tied and flustered when he has to apologise for the late start of the show in Act III.

## BROOKE ASHTON

Brooke is a relatively new and inexperienced actress, appearing as Inland Revenue tax collector Vicki in *Nothing On*. Although she has had several minor roles on screen, this is her stage debut. She is having an affair with director Lloyd Dallas, unaware that he is also having a relationship with Poppy. She is highly emotional and practises meditation to calm her nerves. The majority of the time she is oblivious to what is going on around her, rarely listening to the conversations of her fellow actors. She is eager to impress and even when things go wrong during the performance, she carries on regardless, unable to adapt to changes or mistakes. She wears contact lenses which she has a habit of losing and finds it very difficult to see anything without them.

## BELINDA BLAIR

A former dancer, Belinda is a successful actress, having appeared in number of farces and now playing the role of Flavia Brent in *Nothing On*. Of all the cast, she is the most resilient, constantly rallying her fellow actors and supporting them through their various dilemmas. However, her constantly positive attitude seems to grate on other members of the cast and it is suggested that there may be an element of falseness to her sunny disposition. She is the source of all gossip, filling Lloyd in on the various relationships and dramas within the company. She is very protective of Freddie and clashes violently with Dotty when she thinks that there is something going on between them.

## LLOYD DALLAS

Lloyd is the director of *Nothing On*, although his heart does not seem to be in it. In Act I he is tired and desperate to finish the dress rehearsal and his stress levels rise as the rehearsal is constantly brought to a standstill by various members of the cast. Most of the time he prevents his anger from showing by patronising the actors, referring to them as 'love' and 'honey' and making snide remarks at their expense. He is having affairs with Brooke and Poppy, although it is clear that his affections lie more with Brooke. When his temper reaches bursting point, he vents his frustrations at Brooke, cruelly humiliating her in front of the rest of the cast. During his visit to the production on tour, he is unwilling to do anything to help the show, prioritising spending time alone with Brooke. However, at the end of the play, it is his quick thinking that saves the performance.

## FREDERICK FELLOWES

Freddie is a seasoned actor, most well-known for his appearances in various TV hospital dramas, who plays the roles of Philip Brent and the Sheikh in *Nothing On*. He has a very nervous disposition, suffering from nosebleeds whenever he is faced with violence and is overcome with dizziness at the sight of blood. He seems weary and stressed during Act I and we later find out that this is because his wife has left him that morning. Referred to by Garry as 'that poor halfwit,' he is not particularly intelligent and for the most part of Act II is completely unaware of the impact his platonic chat with Dotty has had on her relationship with Garry.

## GARRY LEJEUNE

Garry is a fairly well-known actor who plays the role of estate agent Roger Tramplemain in *Nothing On*. He is having a secret relationship with Dotty Otley, with whom he previously acted in the sitcom *On The Zebras*. He is well-meaning, constantly trying to keep the cast's morale up but also argumentative and defensive, frequently standing up to Lloyd during Act I. However, the majority of the time he comes across as inarticulate when he tries to express himself, frequently leaving sentences unfinished and his listeners confused. He takes himself and his work very seriously and is incredibly possessive of Dotty, turning to violence against Freddie in Act II, when he believes he is being cheated on. However, he tries to remain as professional as possible throughout Act III, despite the various problems thrown at him.

## SELSDON MOWBRAY

Selsdon is an elderly Shakespearean actor, who has only ever played supporting roles throughout his career. He plays the small role of the Burglar in *Nothing On*. He is apparently hard-of-hearing and frequently misses his cue to enter, although Lloyd suggests that actually 'he can hear better than I can.' However, when he is onstage, he is an enthusiastic actor, delivering each of his lines as if it is a Shakespearean monologue. Unfortunately he frequently forgets his lines, freezing mid-sentence and waiting for a prompt. He is also an alcoholic and because of this he is falsely accused of hiding multiple bottles of whisky around the set.

## POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR

Poppy is the inexperienced but well-intentioned assistant stage manager of *Nothing On*. As well as being responsible for cuing the show, Poppy is understudy for all of the female characters. She has recently been having a secret relationship with Lloyd and at the end of Act II we find out that she is pregnant with his child. Despite the fact that she frequently gets the blame when things go wrong, she is still in love with him. She is very highly-strung, constantly on the verge of tears and becomes very jealous of Brooke when she finds out that she has also been involved with Lloyd.

## DOTTY OTLEY

Dotty is the leading actress of the *Nothing On* company, playing Mrs. Clackett the cockney housekeeper. Famous for her role as Mrs. Hackett the lollipop lady in the TV sitcom *On The Zebras*, as well as her many stage roles playing similar characters, she is not only starring in, but also financing this production of *Nothing On*, using her life savings in the hope that she can 'put a little something by'. She is forgetful, getting her lines and moves wrong throughout Act I. Nevertheless, she is an exuberant actress, playing the role with energy and good comic timing. She enjoys being the centre of attention and is flirtatious, causing Garry – a younger actor with whom she is having a relationship – to think she is cheating on him with Freddie. She is also shown to be something of a drama queen in Act II, when she initially refuses to perform and has a vicious streak which sees her tying Garry's shoelaces together. By the end of the play she is behaving very unprofessionally. However, with Lloyd's help, it is she who ultimately saves the play with her quick thinking, as it draws towards the final curtain.





# **FARCE AROUND FARCE**

## **AN INTRODUCTION FROM**

### **MICHAEL FRAYN**

**Michael Frayn charts the progress of *Noises Off* from its inception in 1977.**

This play has gone through many different forms and versions. It began life as a short one-acter entitled *Exits*, commissioned for a midnight matinee of the Combined Theatrical Charities at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on 10 September 1977, where it was directed by Eric Thompson and played by Denis Quilley, Patricia Routledge, Edward Fox, Dinsdale Landen and Polly Adams. Michael Codron thereupon commissioned a full-length version, and waited for it with intermittent patience. Michael Blakemore, who was to direct it, persuaded me to rethink and restructure the resulting text, and suggested a great many ideas that I incorporated. After the play had opened at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1982, I did a great deal more rewriting, and went on rewriting until Nicky Henson, who was playing Garry, announced on behalf of the cast (rather as Garry himself might have done) that they would learn no further versions.

The play transferred to the Savoy Theatre and ran until 1987 with five successive casts. For two of the cast-changes I did more rewrites. I also rewrote for the Washington production in 1983, and I rewrote again when this moved to Broadway. When the play was revived at the National Theatre in 2000 I rewrote yet again. Some of the changes were ones that I'd been longing to make myself – there's nothing like having to sit through a play over and over again to make your finger itch for the delete key – while many more changes were suggested by my new director, Jeremy Sams.

What vicissitudes it has been through in other languages I can mostly only guess. In France it has been played under two different titles (sometimes simultaneously in different parts of the country), and in Germany under four. I imagine that it's often been freely adapted to local circumstances, in spite of the prohibitions in the contract. In France, certainly, my British actors and the characters they are playing turned into Frenchmen, in Italy into Italians (who introduced a 'Sardine Song' between the acts). In Barcelona they were Catalan-speaking actors playing Spanish-speaking characters; in Tampere, in Finland, they were robust northerners speaking the Tampere dialect and playing effete southerners with Helsinki accents. On the Japanese poster they all appear to be Japanese; on the Chinese poster Chinese. In Prague they performed the play for some ten years without Act Three, and no one noticed until I arrived.

Farce seems to gather farce around it. One Christmas in Sicily two different touring productions, one lawfully contracted, one not, like husband and lover in a farce, turned up in Catania at the same time to their mutual surprise; lawsuits followed. In 2000, re-reading the English text that had been in use for the previous 15 years, I discovered a number of bizarre misprints, and I suspect that directors around the world had been driven to some quite outlandish devices to make sense of them. Now the present director, Lindsay Posner, with even more scrupulous scholarship, has discovered a few more, and I don't like to think how many Roger Tramplemains in the past 11 years have been exiting into the bedroom cupboard and emerging dutifully but inexplicably two lines later from the linen cupboard.

**This author's note is adapted from the Methuen text of the play.**

# NOTHING ON SYNOPSIS

## ACT I

The play begins on a Wednesday afternoon in a converted 16th century posset mill, 25 miles outside of London, with lots of doors. A phone rings and Mrs Clackett the housekeeper enters to answer it. We learn that the owner of the house, Philip Brent – a playwright – and his wife Flavia, are now living in Spain and the house is up for rent. We also learn that today is Mrs Clackett's afternoon off but that she is going to stay for a while longer to eat a plate of sardines and watch television. As Mrs Clackett exits, Roger Tramplemain – an estate agent – enters, pretending to his companion Vicki – a tax clerk – that this is his house. It is clear that Roger and Vicki are both desperate to sleep with each other. However, they are interrupted by Mrs Clackett who has misplaced her sardines.

Mrs Clackett returns to her servant quarters and Roger and Vicki disappear into the master bedroom, at which point the front door opens and Philip and Flavia arrive home, believing the house to be empty as it is Mrs Clackett's afternoon off. They have come home to celebrate their wedding anniversary but need to make sure that the Inland Revenue don't know they're in their country, so that they don't lose their claim to be resident abroad. When they are interrupted by Mrs Clackett, they tell her to pretend that she hasn't seen them.

As Roger and Vicki grow increasingly concerned that there is "something creepy going on" due to the noises they can hear and objects that keep being moved around the house and Philip manages to glue himself to a tax demand that he realises he shouldn't have opened, an elderly burglar breaks in through a downstairs window and begins to work his way around the house.

The various characters' stress levels rise and they continue to move around the house at great speed unaware of each other's presence. Chaos ensues: Vicki is locked in the linen cupboard wearing only her underwear, Philip's trousers fall down, Philip mistakes Roger for a tax inspector, Roger mistakes Philip for a "sex maniac" and calls the police, Flavia falsely accuses Philip of having an affair with Vicki and Vicki is revealed to be the burglar's daughter. As if things couldn't get any worse, a sheikh arrives, interested in renting the house. As the sheikh – who is the spitting image of Philip – is promptly attacked by Flavia, Vicki and Roger, the burglar reflects that "when all around is strife and uncertainty, there's nothing like a good old-fashioned plate of sardines!"

### Curtain

We never find out what happens in Acts 2 and 3 of *Nothing On*.



# NOTHING ON CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

## MRS CLACKETT

Mrs Clackett is the Brents' friendly housekeeper, whose sole intention throughout the play is to put her feet up and watch the television, whilst enjoying a plate of sardines. She is well-meaning but ditzy, not always understanding what others say to her and constantly misplacing her sardines.

## ROGER TRAMPLEMAIN

Roger is a junior estate agent in his early thirties, who convinces Vicki that the Brents' 16th Century converted posset mill is his own house, in the hope that she will sleep with him. He is easily stressed and becomes increasingly exasperated by the situation he has found himself in.

## VICKI

Vicki is an attractive but slow-witted woman in her early twenties, who works for the Inland Revenue. She takes her work very seriously, but is desperate to get Roger into bed and gullibly believes that he owns the house. At the end of Act I we discover that she ran away from home when she was young and that the burglar is her estranged father.

## PHILIP BRENT

Philip is a playwright, currently living in Marbella to avoid paying tax. He has returned to his UK home to celebrate his wedding anniversary with his wife Flavia. He is accident-prone, easily flustered and allows himself to be dominated by his wife.

## FLAVIA BRENT

Flavia is Philip's wife and it is clear that she wears the trousers in their relationship. She is glamorous and pampered and enjoys living the life of luxury that she and her husband have afforded themselves. She is devastated and furious when she mistakenly thinks that Philip has been having an affair.

## BURGLAR

The burglar is an elderly criminal, who bemoans the fact that his job is now so easy, nostalgic for the days when break-ins were more difficult. He is quick witted and manages to get himself out of sticky situations. At the end of Act I, he is revealed to be Vicki's father.

## SHEIKH

The sheikh is a visitor from overseas who is interested in renting the Brent's house. For inexplicable reasons, he looks exactly the same as Philip.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF FARCE

*"That's what it's all about. Doors and sardines. Getting on – getting off. Getting the sardines on – getting the sardines off. That's farce. That's the theatre. That's life."*

Lloyd Dallas, *Noises Off*

The word 'farce' is derived from the Latin word 'farcire' meaning 'to stuff', a reference to the first farces which were written as short comic 'fillers' for an evening's entertainment, 'stuffed' between two longer, more serious plays. According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, farce is 'a kind of comedy that inspires hilarity mixed with panic and cruelty in its audience through an increasingly rapid and improbable series of ludicrous confusions, physical disasters and sexual innuendos.'

Key themes that have come to be seen as the staple ingredients of farce are:

- Themes of mistaken identity, marital infidelity and class division
- Stock characters including the crafty servant, the lecherous old man and the bimbo
- Men in their underwear
- Women in their underwear
- Fast entrances and exits
- Slapstick comedy, such as people falling over or being accidentally hit

In his exploration of physical comedy *Why is That So Funny?* John Wright describes the reaction that audiences have to farce as the 'visceral laugh', an uncontrollable automatic response 'when the events around us appear to be moving faster than what's going on in our heads.' An audience of any age or class can appreciate the visceral humour of farce and for this reason, farce as a genre has a history of being held in low esteem by critics and 'highbrow' theatregoers. In *Noises Off*, Frayn uses this to his advantage, mocking the triviality of farce, whilst simultaneously creating a sophisticated and perfectly-crafted example of the genre.

Elements of farce, as with all genres of comedy, can be traced back to Aristophanes' comedies of Ancient Greece and Plautus' of Ancient Rome, which frequently featured lewd humour, physical comedy and grotesque characters. There are also similarities within the short Kyogen plays that originated in Japan in the 14th Century. However, it wasn't until the mid-16th Century and the advent of the Commedia dell'arte in Italy that farce as we know it really began to take shape. With its slapstick comedy, stock characters and frequent themes of mistaken identity and adultery, it is easy to see the influence that commedia dell'arte has had on farce.



## 20 KEY MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF FARCE

- 1594** – Heavily influenced by Plautus’ *The Menaechmi* and the stock characters of commedia dell’arte, William Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* explores the themes of mistaken identity and accidental adultery, relying heavily on physical comedy and visual gags.
- 1743** – Carlo Goldoni’s *A Servant of Two Masters* was an attempt to craft the characters and plots of the improvised commedia dell’arte into a written text.
- 1851** – Eugène Labiche is usually seen as the godfather of the European farce and *The Italian Straw Hat* is the most famous of his works.
- 1892** – *Charley’s Aunt* by Brandon Thomas tells the story of two friends who persuade a Lord to disguise himself as one of their aunts. It is widely regarded as the first modern British Farce.
- 1885** – Arthur Wing Pinero wrote a series of Court Farces, which satirised the British Judicial System and those that worked within it. The most successful of these plays was *The Magistrate*.
- 1895** – Oscar Wilde was famous for his take on the ‘comedy of manners’ genre. Although *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not a farce, its style and construction contained elements that heavily influence the farces that came after it.
- 1907** – Georges Feydeau’s farces, including *A Flea In Her Ear*, provided the prototype for what was to become the ‘bedroom farce’ with its 116 exits and entrances through multiple doors and characters in their underwear.
- 1925** – Although not strictly a farce, Noel Coward’s comedy *Hay Fever* contains many of the key ingredients, including a country house setting, surprise visitors and recognisable stock characters.
- 1926** – *Rookery Nook* by Ben Travers is one of many ‘Aldwych Farces’ which he wrote for the Aldwych Theatre from 1925 – 1933. It is remarkably similar in its plot and construction to *Nothing On* in *Noises Off*.
- 1945** – Philip King’s *See How They Run*, paved the way for sixteen years of ‘Whitehall Farces’ at the Whitehall Theatre (now the Trafalgar Studios) under the direction of Lord Brian Rix.
- 1962** – Marco Camoletti’s *Boeing-Boeing*, about an architect and his three flight attendant fiancées, was translated by Beverly Cross and ran for seven years in the West End. In 1991 it entered the Guinness Book of Records as the most frequently performed French play worldwide.
- 1969** – Joe Orton subverted the genre as a vehicle for making social commentary, writing several farces including *What The Butler Saw*, which was set in a psychiatric hospital.
- 1971** – Anthony Marriott’s bedroom farce *No Sex Please, We’re British*, involving a couple who mistakenly order a large amount of Scandinavian pornography, received dreadful reviews but was embraced by the British public, running in the West End for nearly a decade.
- 1975** – Alan Ayckbourn wrote a series of sophisticated farces. Despite its name, *Bedroom Farce* does not follow many conventions of the traditional ‘bedroom farce’.
- 1975** – Although many of Brian Rix’s Whitehall Farces had been televised, it is *Fawlty Towers* by John Cleese and Connie Booth that is credited with popularising farce with television audiences, with its absurd situations, slapstick humour and stock characters.
- 1982** – Building on the success of *Fawlty Towers*, *‘Allo ‘Allo* was another popular farce-based sitcom, set in France during World War 2.
- 1982** – Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off* elevated the genre, by creating a self-referential farce-within-a-farce.
- 1983** – Having appeared in many of Brian Rix’s Whitehall farces, Ray Cooney went on to write many of his own, including *Run For Your Wife*, which became the West End’s longest running farce. Due to his mastery of the form, Cooney is referred to in France as ‘the English Feydeau.’
- 2009** – Miranda Hart took the key ingredients of farce including ludicrous situations and broad physical comedy, to create the award-winning sitcom *Miranda*.
- 2011** – Taking Goldoni’s *A Servant of Two Masters* and resetting it in 1960s Brighton, Richard Bean’s *One Man Two Guvnors* created a hugely popular contemporary farce, based on farce’s original Commedia dell’arte origins.

## A PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY

*Noises Off* is one of the most famous examples of the ‘play-within-a-play’ tradition, which is itself one example of metatheatre, defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as ‘any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence.’

In her exploration of the genre, Pilar Zozaya writes that for a writer, a play-within-a-play “becomes a very valid means to make his audience think about the fictionality of real life and the reality of fiction; and, if its form is that of the mock-rehearsal the playwright is furnished with the formula that will enable him to point out the flaws and enhance the virtues of the theatre and to comment largely on the state of the theatre of his time.” However, Mark Fisher, writing for the *Guardian*, suggests that plays that contain plays within them are “shows that require something of insider knowledge to get a full understanding of what the writers are trying to do.”

Other famous examples include:

### ***Hamlet* by William Shakespeare**

As part of his plan to confront his uncle Claudius over the murder of his father, Hamlet employs a group of actors to adapt and perform a play called *The Murder of Gonzago* in which a king is murdered by his nephew. According to Hamlet himself, the ‘purpose of playing’ is to ‘hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature,’ and thus the action of the play reflects real-life events. Hamlet renames the play *The Mousetrap* saying that ‘the play’s the thing / wherein I’ll catch the conscience of a king.’ As an audience watching *Hamlet*, we are encouraged not only to watch *The Mousetrap* itself but also the members of its audience.

### ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare**

One of the several plots of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* follows a group of ‘mechanicals’ – local craftsmen – as they rehearse a performance for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Their process is fraught with difficulties – not least their lead actor Bottom having his head replaced with a donkey’s. However, in the final scene of the play, they perform *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which echoes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s themes of forbidden love and generational divide.

### ***The Beggar’s Opera* by John Gay**

Telling the story of the notorious highwayman Macheath, the whole of *The Beggar’s Opera* functions as a play-within-a-play, apart from a short framing scene at the beginning in which we are introduced to a narrator – apparently the writer of the play we are about to watch – who then interrupts the action towards the end of the play, saving Macheath from the gallows and offering the audience a happy ending. Recent productions have developed this framing device, most notably Out of Joint’s *The Convict’s Opera*.

### ***Six Characters In Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello**

In Pirandello’s satirical and surreal exploration of theatre-making, a director and his cast of actors are interrupted during a rehearsal by an unnamed group of six people who want their story to be performed. As the play progresses, the lines between reality and fiction become blurred, not only for us the audience but for the characters themselves. The play ends in tragedy with the director unsure as to whether the tragedy is real or not.

### ***The Real Thing* by Tom Stoppard**

The first scene of *The Real Thing* sees a husband falsely accusing his wife of having an affair. It is not until the second scene that we realise that the previous scene was a performance of a play written by one of the characters and performed by his wife and friend. This ‘fake opening’ sets the tone thematically for a play that goes on to explore the notions of fidelity and performativity. Further metatheatrical levels are added as one of the characters begins rehearsing for a production of *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, and when one considers the potentially autobiographical resonances with Stoppard himself.



# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BACKSTAGE LIFE

*"I don't know why the author came into this industry in the first place. I don't know why any of us came into it."*

Lloyd Dallas, *Noises Off*

As a play about a play-within-a-play, *Noises Off* invites the audience to see what is usually unseen, to such an extent that they may never watch a performance at the theatre in the same way again, constantly wondering what action they are missing out on behind-the-scenes. For those still keen to know more about the world of the theatre, here's a beginner's guide to the business we call show...

## JOBS

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Producer</b>          | The producer oversees the whole of the production process whilst supporting the creative team and is primarily in charge of the production budget and finance. Although the producer of <i>Nothing On</i> goes uncredited, we are told that the production company is called Otstar Productions and, as she has financed the tour herself, we are led to believe that Dotty is producing the play herself.   |
| <b>Writer</b>            | The writer is responsible for writing the play. Occasionally they may be involved in the rehearsal process but usually their responsibilities end once the play begins rehearsals. The unseen writer of <i>Nothing On</i> is Robin Housemonger.  |
| <b>Director</b>          | The director is responsible for the overall vision of the production and by collaborating with the cast and creative team, they bring this vision to life. Lloyd Dallas is the director of <i>Nothing On</i> .   |
| <b>Designers</b>         | The designers are responsible for the way a production looks. Often one person will design the set and costumes, although these are sometimes separate roles, as in <i>Nothing On</i> . These designers would also work alongside a Lighting Designer and sometimes a Sound Designer.  |
| <b>Lead Actors</b>       | The lead actors are those playing the most important roles. Usually it is their names which are used to help sell the show and this may be reflected in the billing and salary. In <i>Nothing On</i> , Dotty Otley is considered the leading actress, even though Mrs. Clackett is not necessarily the most crucial role.  |
| <b>Supporting Actors</b> | The supporting actors play the other roles within the production. Despite the fact that Dotty receives top billing, <i>Nothing On</i> – like <i>Noises Off</i> – is an ensemble production which means that the parts are all of similar weight and that the usual division of leading and supporting actors doesn't really apply.   |
| <b>Understudies</b>      | It is the understudy's responsibility to learn the lines and moves of at least one of the actors in a company and to always be present throughout the performance, ready to go onstage in case of an emergency. In some productions, understudies play smaller roles within the company; in others – such as <i>Nothing On</i> – they also work as stage crew. In <i>Noises Off</i> , there are four understudies, each understudying at least two actors. |
| <b>Stage Manager</b>     | The stage manager is responsible for the smooth running of the show once rehearsals have finished. Throughout the rehearsal process they are also usually in charge of acquiring and maintaining the props and set. Tim is the stage manager of <i>Nothing On</i> .  |
| <b>ASM</b>               | The assistant stage manager supports the stage manager throughout the rehearsal and performance period. They are responsible for being 'on the book' cuing lighting and sound effects and prompting the actors when necessary. Poppy is the ASM of <i>Nothing On</i> .   |
| <b>Production Team</b>   | Larger productions may have a whole team of people working on various different areas of production. These include those working in Marketing, Press, Development, Front of House and Education departments.   |

## THEATRE AREAS

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Auditorium</b> | The auditorium is the space which contains both the stage and audience seating.   |
| <b>Stalls</b>     | The stalls are the seats on the ground floor of an auditorium. In most theatres, they will be on a slight rake, ensuring that audience members can see over the heads of those in front of them.  |
| <b>Circle</b>     | This is the area of audience seating on the first floor, above the stalls.  |
| <b>Balcony</b>    | This is the highest level of seating, generally on the 2nd or 3rd floor. It is often referred to as 'the gods' as it is so high. In some theatres this is referred to as the Upper Circle. In The Old Vic, it is known as the Lilian Baylis Circle. Other theatres have an Upper Circle and then a Balcony. |

### **Stage:**

In a proscenium arch stage, such as The Old Vic, the stage is usually raised and on a slight rake which means it slopes downwards towards the audience.

These positions are always given from the actor's perspective.

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Downstage (DS)</b>    | The area on stage closest to the audience                        |
| <b>Upstage (US)</b>      | The area on stage furthest away from the audience                |
| <b>Stage Left (SL)</b>   | The area on stage to an actor's left, or to the audience's right |
| <b>Stage Right (SR)</b>  | The area on stage to an actor's right, or to the audience's left |
| <b>Centre Stage (CS)</b> | The area on stage in the centre                                  |

From these terms, more specific areas can be referred to, such as DSC (downstage centre), USR (upstage right) etc.

### **Backstage:**

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>Dressing Rooms</b> | The dressing rooms are where the actors prepare to go onstage, with facilities for them to get changed, apply make-up and often to wash and shower too. In smaller companies actors may have their own individual dressing rooms but usually they would share with at least one other actor.   |
| <b>Green Room</b>     | The green room is an area for the cast and crew to relax together before and during a performance. It is not always painted green. There is much debate as to the origin of this term. Suggestions include the notion that actors performing outside would have had to wait for their entrances behind a bush, or that they would have created a den using green material. Others have suggested that 'green' refers to the new and inexperienced actors who would have to wait there. One of the most popular explanations is that 'greengage' is Cockney rhyming slang for 'stage' and so shortened, the 'stage room' became the 'green room'. |
| <b>Prompt Corner</b>  | The prompt corner is an area backstage with a desk and light, where the ASM sits during a performance and cues the show.   |
| <b>Wings</b>          | The wings are the areas either side of the stage, from which the audiences make their entrances and exits. They are called wings because traditionally they consisted of large curtains which hung like wings on either side of the stage.   |
| <b>Front-of-House</b> | Front-of-house is the area in which the audience wait before the show and during the interval. It would usually consist of a foyer, bar, toilets and box office.   |
| <b>Box Office</b>     | The box office is the desk from which audiences buy and collect their tickets. It is called the box office, because traditionally the sales clerk would sit or stand in a small boxed room, selling tickets through a small window.  |

### THEATRE LINGO

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Beginners</b>           | The 'beginners' are the actors who appear onstage in the first scene of a play. 'Beginners' is also used to refer to the 'beginners' call when everyone should be in position five minutes before the curtain up.   |
| <b>Blocking</b>            | Blocking refers to all of the moves that an actor makes onstage, including entrances, exits, sitting down, standing up and gestures.  |
| <b>Calls</b>               | The calls are messages given to the actors or audience by the stage manager or ASM over the tannoy system, informing them when the performance is about to begin. The call is given in relation to 'beginners' so the 30 minute call is given 30 minutes before 'beginners' is called, or 35 minutes before the curtain goes up.  |
| <b>Corpsing</b>            | If an actor loses focus and laughs onstage, they are guilty of corpsing. The phrase is generally thought to derive from when an actor had to play a dead body and other actors would try to make them laugh.  |
| <b>Curtain</b>             | 'Curtain' not only refers to the physical curtain which would traditionally be raised at the beginning of a show and lowered at the end, but also to the final moment of the show when the curtain goes down.   |
| <b>Digs</b>                | An actors' digs are their temporary lodgings during a tour.   |
| <b>Dress Rehearsal</b>     | The dress rehearsal or 'dress' is the final run-through of a production before it is performed for the general public. Usually these are run without stopping, under performance conditions, with full costume, lights and make-up, but – as in <i>Noises Off</i> – this is not always the case.                                  |
| <b>Elecs (LX)</b>          | Elecs or LX is short for 'electricals' and is used by the production team to refer to the lighting cues of a show.  |
| <b>Exeunt</b>              | Exeunt is the stage direction given when more than one character has to leave the stage.  |
| <b>Line</b>                | An actor's line is the dialogue that he or she must deliver. If an actor calls 'line' during a performance or rehearsal, they have forgotten their line and are asking the ASM to prompt them.  |
| <b>Matinée</b>             | A matinée is a performance taking place during the day rather than the evening. Although it is derived from the French word 'matin' meaning 'morning', a matinée usually takes place in the afternoon.  |
| <b>Noises Off</b>          | 'Noises Off' refers to sound – specifically talking – heard offstage or backstage during a performance.   |
| <b>Props</b>               | Props or properties are items used by actors during a performance. Key props in <i>Nothing On</i> include boxes, bags and plates of sardines.   |
| <b>Technical Rehearsal</b> | The technical rehearsal or 'tech' is the rehearsal in which the elements of lighting, sound and set are fine-tuned in the lead up to the dress rehearsal. Traditionally they are long and arduous with frequent stopping and starting, which is why Act I of <i>Noises Off</i> feels more like a tech than a dress to the actors. |

## THEATRE SUPERSTITIONS

People who work in theatre are traditionally notoriously superstitious and many beliefs – most of which are strange and difficult to explain – are still adhered to in order to prevent bad luck, financial ruin and death.

### **Bad Dress Rehearsal**

It is a widely-held superstition that if a show has a bad dress rehearsal, it will have a good opening night. The origins of this superstition are unclear but it may simply have grown from a director trying to encourage and reassure a company in the run-up to opening night. There may also be an element of truth in it – having a bad dress rehearsal may give actors nervous energy, encouraging them to be as alert and focused as possible during the first performance.

### **Break a Leg!**

It is considered bad luck to wish an actor 'good luck' before a performance, as it may be considered to fill them with false confidence. As a result, the phrase 'break a leg' is used instead. Some say that 'breaking a leg' is archaic slang for bowing or curtsying, which an actor will have to do after a successful performance. Others say it comes from a performance of Richard III in which the actor David Garrick was so engrossed in his role that he didn't notice that he had fractured his leg. However, the most likely explanation is that wishing someone to break their leg is a bad thing and therefore the opposite of wishing them good luck.

### **Ghost Light**

Most theatres have at least one night a week when they have no performance on and are therefore 'dark'. Superstitious theatre managers would leave a lit candle on the stage on these evenings allegedly in order to appease the ghosts of the theatre, who can then use the light to see and thus stage their own performance that night.

### **Macbeth**

Refusing to say 'Macbeth' in a theatre is one of the most widely held superstitions in British theatre. It is believed that saying the name of the play will bring bad luck to the theatre company and so instead it is frequently referred to as 'The Scottish Play.' The reasons for this are unclear, but many actors will have heard anecdotes about productions of the play – which is all about witchcraft and murder – that have been fraught with misadventure, suggesting that it is perhaps the play itself that is unlucky. If you do say Macbeth in a theatre, don't panic! One way to be cleansed and forgiven is to leave the room, turn around three times, spit over your left shoulder and swearing, before waiting to be invited back in.

### **Whistling**

Whistling in the theatre is thought to bring bad luck on the whistler. This can be traced back to the days when sailors on leave would work as stage crew and communicate the dropping of ropes and scenery to each other by whistling. Thus, if an actor whistled, it might result in a piece of scenery being dropped on them.

## PETER MCKINTOSH DESIGNER

### What attracted you to designing *Noises Off*?

I did the play about 22 years ago when I was a student at Bristol Old Vic and it's just one of the funniest plays ever written. I love it and I've always loved it and because I'd done it before, I knew the pitfalls. I know that principally, you've got to get the doors in the right place and then everything else comes after that. In the end, I think it's most important to serve the play.

### What challenges did it present?

Once you've worked out where everything needs to go, you then need to make sure that it looks nice. When the curtain goes up, the audience needs to think the set looks lovely, then gradually notice little details like horrible paintings on the walls and then discover there are two doors over a window, which there couldn't be architecturally, but that's a perfect 'farce' set design, because it couldn't be more wrong! The first time I designed it, I couldn't bear the idea of making no architectural sense of a set but this time I thought that that's precisely the point. I think The Old Vic is the perfect stage for this play. It's not too big, which means you can move across the stage without having to wait to get a laugh. But you do have to be able to see everything. Everybody in the auditorium has to be able to see every door, so everything has to be designed within the stage's sightlines.

### How does the double sided set work logistically?

It's all one big truck, which can just be turned round but it's very heavy and requires a certain amount of people to move it. Plus it's on a raked stage which doesn't help. It's fine at the interval because they have 20 minutes but it's the two minutes that they have to turn it back round in the second half which is hard!

### Did you make a conscious decision about the period in which you were setting this production?

The choice that we made was that we would not do either – it could be now, or it could be the Eighties. The props aren't too sophisticated, so nobody's drawing attention to what isn't there, such as mobile phones but equally nothing screams Eighties. I feel that it's much better to keep it open. It's not an exercise in period recreation because it's not a play about living in the Eighties, it just happens to have been written then. There's a charm about it that there possibly wouldn't be now, so what was most important for us was to keep the spirit of that.

### How does the director/designer relationship usually work for you?

It depends on the play. Usually, I would sit down with a director and we would talk together about moods and feels and what sort of production it should be, keeping it very general to start with and then I would go away and do some drawings or make a rough model and the director would come back and respond to that, so it becomes a to-ing and fro-ing of ideas, until you become more and more focused and specific. But with *Noises Off* it was a bit different. It became a logistical exercise. Lindsay and I spent a morning with a very rough model box, trying to decide on the positions of the doors in Act I and then did the same with Act II and decided to move a couple round. As far as the decoration goes, I've worked with Lindsay long enough for him to trust that I will get the feel of the play right, always allowing that he can make adjustments when and where he wants!



### Tell us about the costume designs.

I don't always do costume drawings because usually I'd be looking for something very real, which might be more about shopping and keeping our options open. So with *Noises Off*, I didn't draw the three 'real' people but I decided that I would draw the people in *Nothing On*, because actually it is a play and it is designed and they would be wearing costumes. The characters are very broad, they're all 'types'. I think the Burglar is the most extreme of those but I love the laugh that Belinda always gets when she steps through the door – not because she looks silly, but because she looks like a recognisable type. By drawing them, you get the colour balance right across the board and you can pay attention to tiny details – I love the fact that Roger's tie matches Brooke's underwear for example – and they really look like costumes. But you don't really realise that until you see them standing next to the 'real' people, who all seem much more natural and real.











## CELIA IMRIE 'DOTTY OTLEY'

### **What attracted you to the play and to the role of Dotty in particular?**

Funnily enough I'm old enough to know, and have seen, the original production. I saw Patricia Routledge play Dotty and she was absolutely wonderful – I'm mad about her! I can remember from then how funny it was and so when this came up I knew I had to do it!

### **What are the challenges of playing farce?**

You need a massive amount of energy, but then you do for any play, so in a way you've just got to be on your toes the whole time. It's got to be as real as can be, otherwise it ain't funny! Our director Lindsay Posner is – and I say this with the greatest affection – very finicky but you have to be with farce. The last hour in rehearsals each day was very hard going because we were knackered by then! But hard work has a great reward and certainly playing this now is fabulous – it's a total joy to perform.



### **This is your Old Vic debut – how have you found the experience?**

I have to say, I am completely in love with this theatre. I think it's like a magic place. Without being fanciful, I do feel the ghosts of all the great people here. Apparently there's an 'Olivier spot' somewhere on the stage, where you can practically whisper and be heard throughout the auditorium.

### **With *Noises Off*, it's very important that the ensemble works together. How did you achieve that harmony with this cast?**

We just did! Firstly, it's a brilliant cast, all wonderfully cast in their particular roles. Also, the knowledge that we're all in it together. I think it's a little bit like going in to battle. We all have to go over the top together – I don't mean 'over the top' in performance, I mean literally 'over a hill' together and we do. We do every day and it's lovely.

### **Was the show as fun to rehearse as it is to watch?**

Actually it was pretty serious work. I'm not saying we didn't have a laugh, because we did and Lindsay's got a wonderfully dry sense of humour but we had to get on with it. We have a marvellous stage manager and deputy stage manager and they made sure that tea breaks were literally fifteen minutes. It was interesting how strict all of that was.

### **Does the show stop being funny?**

I think it's such a clever play, but the thing is you have to keep your concentration utterly. I shouldn't really give this secret away, but my script is always in the wings with me constantly, because you always have to be ready and alert and I think that will always be the case with this show.

### **How does performing comedy on stage differ from performing for television?**

The sound of people laughing is like an injection of joy. On television, you don't have that. In *Acorn Antiques* for example, we never did it live, so when you hear the audience laugh it's like an audible 'thumbs up' telling you that they're having a nice time, so that's lovely.

## JAMIE GLOVER 'GARRY LEJEUNE'

### What attracted you to being a part of *Noises Off* at The Old Vic?

It really was a long-term ambition to be in this play. When I was 10 years old, I saw the original production at the Lyric Hammersmith with my mum and dad and we all laughed so hard that we went back the next night! So I've known about the play for a very long time so when I heard The Old Vic were doing it I immediately put my hand up and went "Me, me, me, me, me!" And when I heard that Lindsay Posner was directing it, who is renowned for his forensic attention to detail, I thought it was a really exciting combination, because with this play, you have to be right on the money with every single detail. There are moments in the show where you literally have to have split-second timing, so you need a director who is going to be paying complete attention to that.

### Tell us a bit about the character you play.

I play an actor called Gary Lejeune, who is playing a character called Roger Tramplemain in the play *Nothing On*. He likes to think of himself as being very direct but actually he rarely finishes a sentence to anyone's satisfaction. He's quite, prone to violence if pushed, which comes to a head in Act II. He also does a lot of running around!

### How did you find the rehearsal process?

Usually when you're rehearsing a play, you might go through it two or three times in detail, putting it on its feet, excavating the text more and more each time. With this, we had four weeks' rehearsal, which didn't really feel long enough. Act II, which is only about twenty minutes long, took just shy of two weeks to go through it once and we worked incredibly hard to get through it. It was incredibly frustrating, because a lot of it is a technical exercise. When you're 80% 'there' in a normal play, you feel like you're getting somewhere, but when you're 20% out in this play, you may as well be a million miles away. That being said, when it started to click and you started to feel it happen, it was very exciting. And as soon as you start getting gales of laughter back at you from an audience, that's very intoxicating. The audience response has been amazing and I've certainly never been involved in a play that's had this kind of reaction.

### How accurate a portrayal of theatre life do you think *Noises Off* is?

I think all of the characters in it are archetypes of a certain type. I wouldn't say caricatures because that implies they're not real and I think they're all very real. They're all real people that you might find in any walk of life - I've certainly come across people like all of them in the theatre! It's obviously heightened for comic effect, but there's certainly more than a germ of truth in it and I think I'd be lying if I said there wasn't.

### How did you go about rehearsing the moment when you fall down the stairs?

I worked with a wonderful fight arranger and movement director on a safe way to fall, given my shape and size and the particular demands of the set. The staircase has a dogleg in it. If you actually fell down stairs like that, you wouldn't go round the dogleg, but we've had to manufacture a way to make it believable that you do because it's funnier. I do get bruised doing it every night but I'm confident that I'm doing it safely - well, given the fact that I have to throw myself down the stairs, as safe as can be!

### Have you had any similar experiences to those the actors have in the play?

Nothing like *Nothing On* - that's too horrible to comprehend! Anyone involved in theatre will have had the nightmare where everything goes wrong and that is the essence of what Frayn has written in the last act of the play - a distillation of all the things that could possibly go wrong. One of my first acting jobs was with Julie Walters in Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*. Throughout the play there's the symbol of her husband's ashes in an urn on the mantelpiece, which she had to smash in a very powerful cathartic moment at the end of the play. Except at one performance, she accidentally smashed it half an hour into the play, which was very difficult for us to recover from! So I think we've all had our fair share of things going wrong but hopefully I'll never experience anything that's as much a dedication to mayhem as *Nothing On*.

### Has anything gone wrong onstage so far?

Occasionally things have gone wrong, which the audience find hilarious but what's funny is that if things do go wrong it actually throws out the rhythm, so although it may look like it's meant to happen, it may also look like it hasn't quite worked as a joke. I accidentally slammed Amy's fingers in the door the other day, which the audience laughed at, thinking that it was supposed to happen as she slowly turned white! The essence of *Noises Off* is that everybody tries to plough ahead with *Nothing On* come what may and I think that's a metaphor for life really. I suppose in the theatre, the fact that the show does have to go on means that people want to shore up that mythology as far as possible.





# AMY NUTTALL BROOK ASHTON

## How have you found the experience so far?

It has been the hardest, toughest thing I have ever had to rehearse for. Every day we were longing for the day to finish because we would have to go over and over small sections which probably in reality would have been about 45 seconds if you're watching it from the audience. But to perfect everything, it's all about timing and we just had to keep on going over it. It was hard work and I had to do an awful amount of running up and down stairs – I'm just thankful I only need to do it once a night! But it's hugely rewarding to hear the audience's reactions. I think that from doing it so many times in the rehearsal room, we'd lost sight of the fact that it was even funny, so to know that an audience found it funny was just gorgeous.

## What attracted you to taking this role in this play?

It's such a famous play and although I'd never seen it done, or read it, everyone's heard of it and it's meant to be the funniest farce going. I'd already had a taste of farce in *Boeing-Boeing* in the West End a couple of years ago and I had the biggest amount of fun doing that and I thought how perfect it would be to be doing something fun over Christmas. I hesitated ever so slightly because my role requires me to be on stage in just my underwear but fortunately the designer has worked it so I'm very comfortable and I have tights underneath my stockings and three pairs of knickers, so I'm very much more covered than I look!



## Tell us a little bit about your character in the play.

I play Brooke, who is an actress who plays Vicki in the play *Nothing On*. I had a very strong note from Michael Frayn, who told me not to play it dim. I had to be vacant but not dim as Brooke, but Vicki can be dim because she's the 'bimbo' character in *Nothing On*. I think I'm quite good at vacant – that's a bit of an Amy trait anyway!

## How does acting in a farce differ from the work you've done in your career so far?

The most important thing whether you're doing TV or theatre is to be truthful and as realistic as you can. I've just come from doing *Downton Abbey* for six months and when you're acting for screen you have to be very subtle and almost underplay it. But with this, we've had to heighten it – it's got to be larger than life, but still truthful.

## You've done TV, comedy, drama, musical theatre - where do you feel most at home?

To be honest, I still feel like I'm twelve years old – I'm still learning and trying out new things. I want to keep on doing new things and keep it as varied as possible and as challenging as possible. I can't imagine ever feeling completely comfortable in anything – I like scaring myself a little bit by doing something new and different.

## Are there any roles that you aspire to play?

I always said I was desperate to do a period drama and I got my wish this year doing *Downton*, which I loved. I love history, so anything that's to do with going back in time is great!

## Do you think *Noises Off* is an accurate portrayal of backstage life?

It's absolutely accurate! If the audience could see us backstage during the show, it's sometimes almost as crazy as Act II, with everyone trying to remember which door to come through!

## Has anything gone wrong onstage during a performance?

Things do go wrong – little things probably do go wrong at every single performance but the audience hopefully shouldn't notice! But, although it's a show about lots of things going wrong, unless we get it completely right, it doesn't work. Our timing has to be just right. It's mentally exhausting as well as physically because you're constantly having to listen, making sure that we're all in sync, especially in the dumb show in Act II.

## Are there any theatrical superstitions that you abide by?

Whatever I do backstage at the first performance, regardless of whether it goes well or not, I have to then repeat at every show after that. For example, as we were getting into our positions before our first entrance, I saw Celia and put one of my thumbs up and she said "Double thumbs Amy!" And so now, every night we have to say "Double thumbs!" to each other before the show! It's little things like that that I absolutely have to do. And also, spraying my perfume – sometimes I've had the beginners' call and I've been on my way down to the stage and I've realised I haven't sprayed my perfume so I've run back to the dressing room to put it on – which I know is ridiculous but I don't feel completely right as Brooke unless I have everything just so!



## IN CONVERSATION WITH... THOUGHTS FROM THE CAST

### WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO BE A PART OF THIS PRODUCTION?

**Aisling Loftus (Poppy):** I hadn't heard of the play but when I read it, I read it twice over in one sitting. I thought it was hilarious and the characters were both ridiculous and entirely recognisable.

**Robert Glenister (Lloyd):** I'd never been in a farce before, so I saw it as a challenge.

### TELL US A BIT ABOUT THE CHARACTER YOU PLAY.

**Aisling Loftus (Poppy):** She isn't cut out for this kind of pressure and havoc so is highly strung throughout the play. She would like to be taken more seriously but she is at the very bottom of the 'food chain.'

**Janie Dee (Belinda):** She is thrilled to bits to be in the production *Nothing On*. She's been a showgirl/dancer and now she's an actress and takes it very seriously. She's obsessed with everything and everyone, and she falls for Freddie, and anyone else who's at all nice to her.

**Paul Ready (Tim):** For me, Tim is someone who is just trying to do his very best, but is completely out of his depth.

**Robert Glenister (Lloyd):** He is a failed theatre director, whose ambitions to scale the theatrical heights have not been realised. This sense of failure is reflected in his vicious sarcasm towards the other members of the company.

### WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES YOU HAVE FACED IN REHEARSALS FOR THIS SHOW?

**Aisling Loftus (Poppy):** Pitching the performance right. If it's too over-the-top then no one will care about the characters, and watching a 2D cartoon-like performance would be tedious. But it has to be 'big' enough to carry on The Old Vic stage.

**Robert Glenister (Lloyd):** The Act II 'ballet' which was rehearsed in great detail over two weeks.

### WHAT HAVE YOU ENJOYED MOST ABOUT THE PROCESS?

**Janie Dee (Belinda):** The exhilaration of suddenly getting it right after all the practice. I remember us all whooping once, like we'd scored a goal!

**Paul Ready (Tim):** As much as it was painfully slow and frustrating to get Act II up and running, there was also a strange pleasure in the precision of it and learning to tell a story just with mime and the body.

### IN YOUR CAREER, HAVE YOU HAD ANY ON/OFFSTAGE EXPERIENCES SIMILAR TO THE EVENTS OF NOISES OFF?

**Janie Dee (Belinda):** A good friend of mine now, tried to throw me into the orchestra pit in the middle of a duet we were singing. I think I had made him angry!

### DO YOU HAVE ANY THEATRICAL SUPERSTITIONS?

**Paul Ready (Tim):** I can't say the name of The Scottish Play without having to leave the theatre, spit on the floor and turn round three times. I'm in the theatre as I write this and I can't even write the name!

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