

## Joyful Noises

"[...] one of the most sustained slapstick ballets I have ever seen ... ingeniously synchronized... a forceful argument of farce's value as human comedy."

—Frank Rich, *The New York Times*

"*Noises Off* may not be perfect [...] but its goals are simple and simply achieved: it wants to make us laugh, and it does. [...] the most fun I've had, in the theatre and out, since the second week of September."

—Adam Feldman, Broadway.com

"Breathlessness, vertigo and that scary-sweet exhilaration of being out of control: there are few highs to equal the experience of floating in the upper altitudes of comedy. In the spectacularly funny new revival of *Noises Off*, Michael Frayn's peerless backstage farce, there are moments when everyone — onstage and in the audience — seems to be riding the same runaway roller coaster"

—Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

"Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* is the funniest farce ever written. If it isn't, tell me what is. Never before has 'side-splitting' taken on a meaning dangerously close to the non-metaphorically medical. [...] This is a great night out for a belly laugh — as long as that belly is surrounded by sound ribs."

—Clive Barnes, *The New York Post*

"This show could be hazardous to your health. Too much laughter is debilitating."

—Weldon Jones, San Diego theatre critic

"*Noises Off* is a glorious opportunity to watch seven slamming doors, one breaking window, 10 trips up and down stairs and 17 false entrances, while listening to 73 flubbed lines, 46 miscues, one dramatic highlight, 22 double entendres, six regular entendres and a million laughs, all while trying to find a missing plate of sardines. Or so says the producer and, of course, I believe him. Having just seen this nutty play for the fourth time, I'd believe any outrageous claim about this hilarious farce. [...] Even though I know the whole story, even though I know the end, even though I can recite half the lines, it doesn't seem to matter, it just gets funnier and funnier. [It's] by far the craziest comedy ever to hit the stage — a farce by which all others must now be measured."

—Barbara K. Mehlman, *Curtain Up*

# Frayn's Madcap Take on Total Theatrical Meltdown

*Onstage Catastrophes + Backstage Hijinks = Sublimely Ridiculous Noises Off*

BY LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY

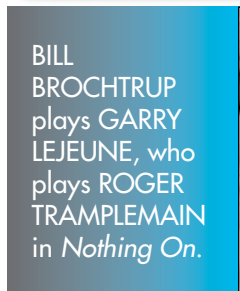
"That's what it's all about. Doors and sardines. Getting on — getting off. Getting the sardines on — getting the sardines off. That's farce. That's the theatre. That's life."

Lloyd Dallas, *Noises Off*

**D**uring a performance of his disastrous first play, *The Two of Us* (1970), author Michael Frayn was watching the on-stage carnage from



NANCY BELL plays BELINDA BLAIR, who plays FLAVIA BRENT in *Nothing On*.



BILL BROCHTRUP plays GARRY LEJEUNE, who plays ROGER TRAMPLEMAIN in *Nothing On*.



JENNIFER LYON plays BROOKE ASHTON, who plays VICKI in *Nothing On*



BRIAN HOSTENSKE plays TIM ALLGOOD, the Stage Manager of *Nothing On*.



KALEO GRIFFITH plays LLOYD DALLAS, the Director of *Nothing On*.



TIMOTHY LANDFIELD plays FREDERICK FELLOWES who plays PHILIP BRENT in *Nothing On*.



WINSLOW CORBETT plays POPPY NORTON-TAYLOR, Assistant Stage Manager of *Nothing On*.



NICK ULLETT plays SELSDON MOWBRAY, who plays the BURGLAR in *Nothing On*.



the wings. "It was a farce with two actors playing five characters," he remembers, "so there was a lot of fast changing and running from one door to another backstage and putting on a different coat and so forth. Suddenly I realized, 'this is much funnier from behind than what's going on out front. One day I must write a farce seen from behind.'"

"One day" was a very long time in coming — a full ten years passed, in fact, before the first rehearsal of *Noises Off*. *Noises Off* began as a one-acter entitled *Exits*, which Frayn worked on for a decade until he had a full three-act script. "I can't remember how many endings there were, because I re-wrote every day," he recalls. At one point, the original cast simply refused to learn any more!!

The hardest part for Frayn was trying to remember where all nine actors (and fifteen characters) were and what they were doing at every moment. "I

often felt that I had come to the end of the bytes in my brain, that I had exceeded the capacity of my memory store." And on top of that, he wasn't sure whether or not the darn thing was even performable. "No one ever knows until you actually try it out what an audience understands, what actually plays and what you don't need to say."

Here's the basic set-up: in the waning hours before the opening of Robin Housemonger's perfectly dreadful British sex romp *Nothing On*, six inept but largely lovable actors from a third-rate (fourth? fifth?) provincial touring company are trying their best to get through the final dress rehearsal. Director Lloyd Dallas, Tim, the exhausted Stage Manager, and Tim's assistant, Poppy, find themselves staring into the yawning maw of imminent disaster — bumbling housekeeper Mrs. Clackett can't seem to remember where she put the sardines; hot-to-trot real estate agent Roger can't seem to remember his lines; his paramour Vicki can't seem to remember what play she's in; and the tipling septuagenarian Burglar can't seem to remember anything to save his soul (except where his bottles are hidden). Add to this the unexpected return of Philip and

Flavia Brent, in whose country home the action of the play-within-a-play unfolds, and Frayn's farcical masterpiece is off and running.

The challenges of directing a play with more stage directions than dialogue are formidable, and Art Manke is certainly up to the task. His choreographic come-

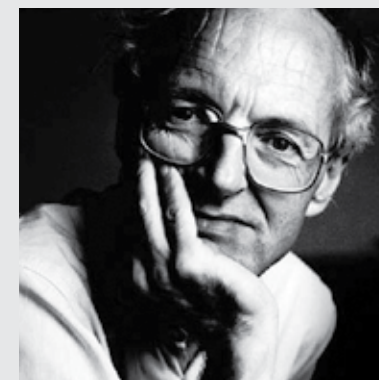
dic talents were most recently seen at SCR in last season's riotous *Taking Steps*, and he also directed *Bach at Leipzig* (2006-07) and the Theatre for Young Audiences world premiere of *The Wind in the Willows* (2003-04). Manke's creative ensemble includes John Iacovelli (Set Designer), York Kennedy (Lighting Designer), Angela Balogh Calin (Costume Designer) and Vincent Olivieri (Sound Designer).

The artistic pieces are in place — now all we need is you! As Michael Frayn reminds us, "To find two, or five, or ten good actors to perform a play is difficult; to find 500 good people to watch it, night after night, is a miracle."

## A Writing Life

**E**nglish dramatist, columnist, reporter and translator Michael Frayn was born on September 8, 1933, in the suburbs of London. As a young boy, he displayed a talent for music and poetry and by the time he was a teenager, he knew that he wanted to be a writer. After a brief stint in the army, Frayn attended the University of Cambridge. Graduating in 1957 with a degree in "moral sciences," he soon began his writing career as a

reporter and also wrote several novels including *The Tin Men* (1965), *The Russian Interpreter* (1966), *Benefactors* (1984), produced at SCR in 1987, and *A Very Private Life* (1968). Frayn's first play, *The Two of Us* (1970), was viciously attacked by the critics as well as audience members, who actually spat at him as he left the premiere. His perseverance paid off in 1975 when *Alphabetical Order* won the *Evening Standard* Award for "Best Comedy of the Year," followed by a string of stage successes: *Clouds* (1976), *Donkey's Years* (1977), *Make or Break* (1980), *Noises Off* (1982), *Benefactors*



(1985), *Copenhagen* (1998), *Democracy* (2003) and *Afterlife* (2008). In addition to being a celebrated playwright, Frayn has translated a number of Chekhov plays, written several acclaimed novels and screenplays for two films. His latest book is *Stage Directions: Writing on Theatre 1970-2008*.