NOISES OFF
BY MICHAEL FRAYN

MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY
— EDUCATION PACK PART A —

FROM 8 JULY - 12 AUGUST 2017
ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE, THE PLAYHOUSE

QUEENSLAND THEATRE

MTC MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

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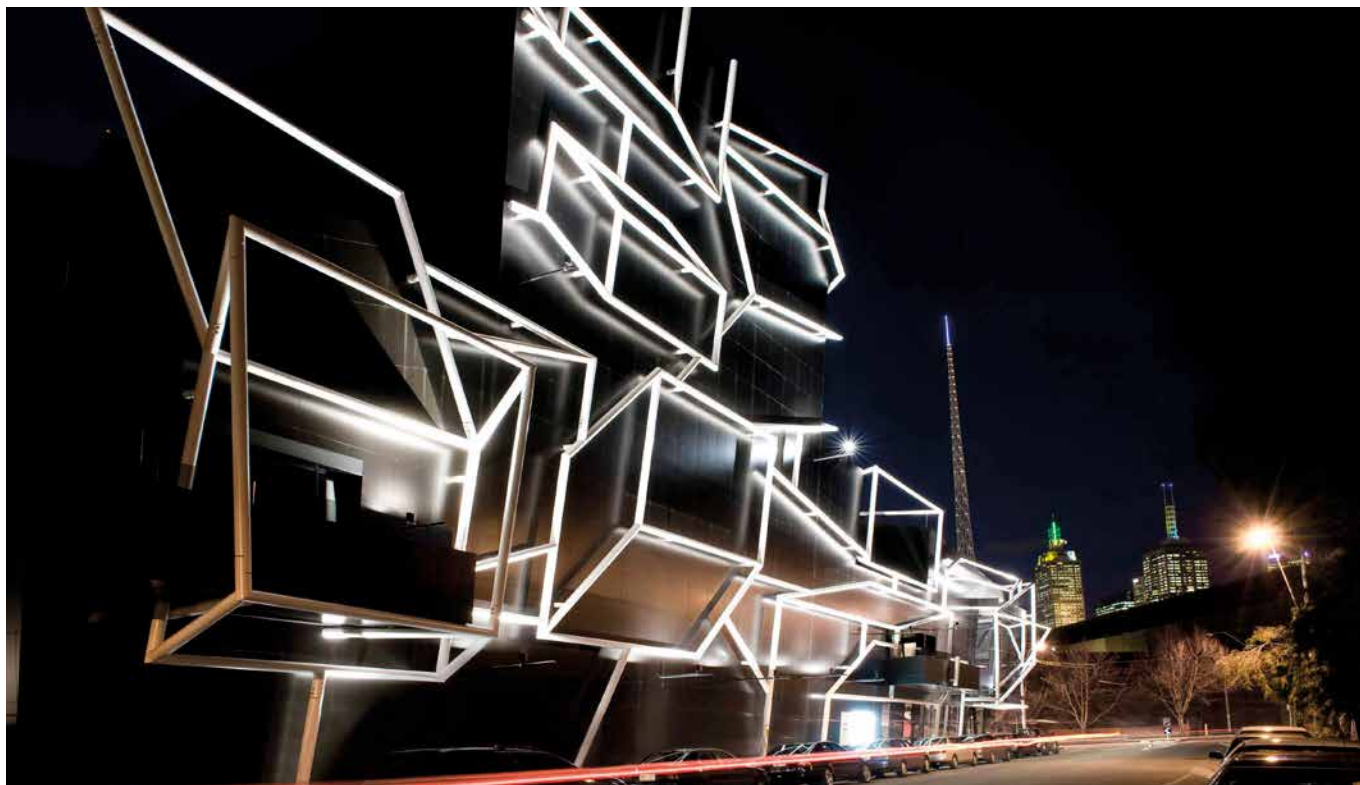**Activity**   **Discuss**   **Interview**   **Look for**   **Connect**

Melbourne Theatre Company

MTC is Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual mainstage season of up to 12 plays, an annual Education production and diverse learning program, play readings, and more. MTC is one of the major performing arts companies in Australia, and one of the largest theatre companies in the English-speaking world. Founded in 1953, MTC is also the oldest professional theatre company in Australia, and currently exists as a semi-autonomous department of the University of Melbourne.

As Australia changed, MTC has changed with it. We like to think that we have frequently been at the forefront of Australian culture, introducing new ideas and new ways of looking at our lives, our society and the world; helping to explain a swiftly evolving landscape as we moved through it. Today, with Southbank Theatre as our performance home and our headquarters in Sturt Street, Southbank, MTC strives to present Melbourne audiences with the best drama from Australia and overseas to the highest standards.

Our Vision: To enrich lives with understanding and empathy through the storytelling power of the finest theatre imaginable.

Our Artistic Purpose: To produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences.

MTC acknowledges the Yalukit Willam Peoples of the Boon Wurrung, the Traditional Owners of the land on which Southbank Theatre and MTC HQ stand, and we pay our respects to Melbourne's First Peoples, to their ancestors past and present, and to our shared future.

Introduction

Noises Off by Michael Frayn has been called 'the funniest play ever written', an accolade which points to carefully constructed theatre. Frayn's script is brimming with comic potential that requires meticulous direction and precision timing, which this production has in spades. For this production, MTC has joined forced with Queensland Theatre to create a touring play within a play within a play on tour. These pre-show notes are designed to help you better understand the play's structure, characters, and performance styles, so that you're primed to take in every detail at the theatre. After your excursion, download Part B of the Education Pack for production photos, interviews, curriculum links and activities to help you analyse and evaluate *Noises Off*.

Theatre Studies Unit 4 – Area of Study 3 – Outcome 3

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse and evaluate acting in a production. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on key knowledge and key skills outlined in Area of Study 3.

Key knowledge

- the character/s in the production including status, motivation and characteristics
- interpretation by actor/s of a playscript in performance
- expressive skills including facial expression, voice, gesture, movement, stillness and silence used by the actor/s to realise character/s
- the use of focus and the acting space
- the use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play
- the interrelationships between acting, direction and design
- the establishment and maintenance of the actor–audience relationship
- the interrelationships between acting and theatrical style/s utilised in the production
- understanding of theatrical terminology and expressions to analyse and evaluate a theatrical production.

Key skills

- analyse the character/s in the production including status, motivation and characteristics
- analyse and evaluate interpretation by actor/s of a playscript in performance, including the acting skills used by actor/s to realise character/s, the use of focus and the acting space and the
- interrelationships between acting, direction and design
- analyse the use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play
- analyse and evaluate the establishment and maintenance of the actor–audience relationship
- analyse the ways that actor/s work within the theatrical style/s utilised in the production
- use theatre terminology and expression appropriately.

Cast and Creatives

Simon Burke
Lloyd Dallas

Emily Goddard
Poppy Norton-Taylor

Libby Munro
Brooke Ashton

Ray Chong Nee
Garry Lejeune
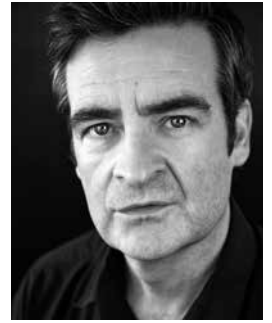
Hugh Parker
Frederick Fellowes

James Saunders
Timothy Allgood

Louise Siversen
Dotty Otley

Steven Tandy
Selsdon Mowbray

Nicki Wendt
Belinda Blair

Sam Strong
Director

Richard Roberts
Set & Costume Designer

Ben Hughes
Lighting Designer

Russell Goldsmith
Composer &
Sound Designer

Nigel Poulton
Movement Director

Leith McPherson
Associate Director &
Voice Coach

Caroline Dunphy
Assistant Director

Synopsis

Noises Off is presented in three acts, and follows the hijinks surrounding the play within the play, *Nothing On* (another invention of the playwright). Act 1 takes place during the ill-fated dress rehearsal on the night before *Nothing On's* Opening Night. We see that the cast are hopelessly unready, baffled by entrances and exits, missed cues, missed lines, and bothersome props. The director's patience is wearing thin, as are the stage managers' nerves. Rehearsals are repeatedly stopped in order to clarify blocking, search for lost contact lenses, or quell anxiety among the team.

Act 2 takes place one month later, during a Wednesday matinee performance of *Nothing On* along its tour of English towns. In this act, the play is seen from backstage, and we witness the deteriorating relationships between the cast that lead to backstage shenanigans and onstage bedlam. The play falls into disorder before the curtain falls.

In Act 3, we see a performance near the end of the ten-week run, when personal friction has continued to increase. The actors remain determined at all costs to cover up the mounting series of mishaps, but it is not long before the plot has to be abandoned entirely and the more coherent characters are obliged to take a lead in ad-libbing somehow towards some sort of end.

The script dictates that an interval takes place between Act 1 and 2.

Plays about theatre

Compare and contrast *Noises Off* with other scripts that contain meta-theatrical elements: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare; *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov; and/or *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello.

Ray Chong Nee and Louise Siversen

Structure

🎤 Sam Strong (Director)

'This play is a Swiss watch of comic construction. All of the component parts of its three acts work precisely together to create an ideal whole.'

Presented in three acts, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* cleverly creates a comic crescendo by using repetition. In Act 1, we're led through the actions of the play within the play, *Nothing On*, with meticulous detail. The director shouts reminders about key props (trays of sardines, overnight bags, newspapers), and specific entrances and exits (the set includes eight doors across two levels, plus windows to climb through). As the audience, we see *Nothing On* in rehearsal as the fictional audience will see it on stage. It is with this prior knowledge that we enter Act 2, this time backstage.

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🎤 Sam Strong (Director)

'In the hurricane of action, nothing is accidental. To cite but the most recent example: today in rehearsal we were pondering why a particular stage direction suggested an actor go back through a doorway to collect a bag. Of course, this was a set up for the second act where he catches a glimpse of something he shouldn't back stage as a result of the movement.'

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🔍 Look for set ups

Read through the script and look for moments like the one Sam mentions above, which set up action for the later acts.

Director Sam Strong in rehearsal

Libby Munro and Ray Chong Nee

Many of the gags in Act 2 rely on us knowing what's happening (or supposed to be happening) on the other side of the set. When a prop isn't in the right place backstage, we can anticipate how this will affect the 'onstage' action. In Act 2 we also learn more about the 'actors' – love triangles, fragile egos, and idiosyncrasies. This forms a new layer of information with which we enter Act 3. Seeing *Nothing On* once again as the 'audience', the comedy continues to spring from us knowing what *should* be happening.

Look for 'backstage'

In Act 2, when we see behind-the-scenes of *Nothing On*, look for stagecraft elements that evoke the backstage world. How might backstage be mimicked on stage?

Setting

The entire action in *Noises Off* takes place either onstage or backstage during rehearsals or performances of the play within the play, *Nothing On*. Each act is set in a fictional theatre in a real English town. In Act 1, we see the dress rehearsal at the Grand Theatre in Weston-Super-Mare, and the auditorium of the theatre is used as an extension of the set, with the director coming and going through the audience. Act 2 shows a Wednesday matinee performance one month later at the Theatre Royal in Ashton-under-Lyne, however this time we see the set from 'backstage'. In Act 3, we see a performance near the end of the ten-week run, at the Municipal Theatre in Stockton-On-Tees. In Act 3, we see a combination of onstage and backstage.

Discuss actor-audience relationship

Discuss how the actors will relate to the audience differently in each of the three acts, as their 'actor' characters and as their 'character' characters. How might their acting style change when they're playing the characters in *Nothing On*?

The Title of the Play

Noises Off takes its title from theatrical stage directions indicating sounds coming from offstage. The title hints at the dual onstage/backstage world presented in the play, and highlights the façade of theatre.

> **LLOYD:** 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 theatre. That's life.

In his review of the recent Broadway revival by Roundabout Theater Company, New York Times reviewer Charles Isherwood described *Noises Off* as 'both a classic farce and a fiendishly ingenious homage to the form'. In addition to the play commenting on farce itself, theatre critic for The Guardian Michael Billington says 'the play becomes a metaphor for the larger lunacies of life, and the thin dividing-line between order and chaos'.

Sources: Michael Billington (2002) for the British Council on **literature.britishcouncil.org**; Charles Isherwood (2016) reviews *Noises Off* on **nytimes.com**

Discuss the meaning of *Nothing On*

Considering the meaning behind the title of Michael Frayn's play, what might the meaning of *Nothing On* be?

Emily Goddard

Characters

Noises Off Characters

Dotty Otley — A late-middle-aged actor. Forgetful. Dating Garry, though she attempts to make him jealous by meeting with Freddy. Dotty plays Mrs Clackett in *Nothing On*.

Garry Lejeune — An actor who never finishes a sentence. Dating Dotty. Easily fired up, repeatedly tries to attack Freddy after believing that Dotty was having an affair with him. Speech affectations disappear onstage but are ever-present offstage. Garry plays Roger in in *Nothing On*.

Brooke Ashton — A young inexperienced actor. Pays no attention to other performers, either in performance or backstage. She seems as though she is not present – like she is somewhere else inside her head. Is always losing her contact lenses. One-third of a Lloyd-Poppy-Brooke love triangle. Brooke plays Vicki in *Nothing On*.

Frederick "Freddy" Fellowes — An actor with a serious fear of violence and blood. Gets nosebleeds easily. Often questions the meaning of his lines and moves. Blames himself often for things going wrong. Freddy plays Philip and the Sheikh in *Nothing On*.

Belinda Blair — Cheerful, sensible, and reliable actor. She may have feelings for Freddy. Belinda plays Flavia in *Nothing On*.

Selsdon Mowbray — An elderly alcoholic Englishman who hides his bottles onstage. If he is not in sight while rehearsing, the stage crew must find him before he passes out. Is hard of hearing when he wants to be. Selsdon plays the Burglar in *Nothing On*.

Lloyd Dallas — The director of the play, *Nothing On*. Temperamental. One third of a Lloyd-Poppy-Brooke love triangle.

Tim Allgood — An over-worked Company Manager (in charge of taking care of the actors), and Stage Manager. Understudies Selsdon and Freddy.

Poppy Norton-Taylor — Assistant Stage Manager. Emotional and over-sensitive, and envious of Brooke, whom she understudies. Pregnant with Lloyd's child. One-third of a Lloyd-Poppy-Brooke love triangle.

Nothing On Characters

Mrs Clackett — A Cockney Housekeeper for the Brent's home in England. Hospitable, though slow.

Roger Tramplemain — A real estate agent who is attempting to rent Flavia's and Phillip's home, but uses it for his own personal benefit.

Vicki — A woman who works for Inland Revenue and is trying to woo Roger.

Philip Brent — An Englishman who lives out of the country with his wife Flavia to avoid paying taxes. He enters the country knowing that if Inland Revenue catches him, he will lose most of the year's income.

Sheikh — A Middle-Eastern sheikh, interested in renting Flavia's and Phillip's home.

Flavia Brent — Phillip Brent's wife. She is dependable, though not one for household duties.

Burglar — Old Cockney man in his seventies, breaking into the Brent's home.

Contextual Information

The inspiration for the play

In his thirties, Michael Frayn was working as a reporter and columnist, and began writing plays. It was during this transition to writing for the stage that the inspiration for *Noises Off* hit:

Michael Frayn (Playwright)

'The idea came to me in 1970. I'd written a series of short plays and one night I was watching from the wings, seeing the actors dashing between the different doors backstage. It occurred to me that it was all far funnier from behind than it was in front.'

From the outset, *Noises Off* was about life imitating art. The onstage nonsense of farce was matched by the backstage shenanigans. The rehearsal process for the first incarnation of *Noises Off* saw the personalities of the characters of the play within the play manifesting themselves in the real-life actors:

Michael Frayn (Playwright)

'When I made changes, I had to do them in triplicate because every time you changed one act, you had to change the other two. It was like building something out of jelly. Eventually Nicky Henson – who was playing Garry, the spokesman for his fellow actors in the play – stood up on behalf of the rest of the cast and said that they weren't prepared to cope with any more alterations. It was rather delightful, because that's exactly what his character would have said. It reminds me of an old theatre story about an actor who's terribly ill. A friend visits and the actor says: "It's hard, dying – but it's not as hard as farce."'

Source: How we made *Noises Off* interviews by Andrew Dickson (2016) on **theguardian.com**

Nicki Wendt, Simon Burke, Steven Tandy and Louise Siversen

A history of touring theatre in England

> 'Noises Off is a quintessential British play set in the post-war era where weekly repertory theatre, often using poorly written plays that were superficially rehearsed with second-rate actors, was commonplace.'
> – Suzannah Conway (2017)

In 1964, the British Minister for the Arts Jennie Lee persuaded the government to invest money in regional theatre, rather than theatre in London. As a result, a huge number of theatres were built or converted throughout regional England. Until recently, many regional theatres had a reputation for poor quality productions and facilities. Producers and playwrights complain that it can be difficult to attract talented actors to such regional productions. These types of regional theatres are likely the venues where *Nothing On* tours.

In Australia, quite different, the world of *Noises Off* is more like amateur and community theatre. Coincidentally, *Noises Off* is a favourite play for Australian community theatre groups.

Sources: Suzannah Conway reviews *Noises Off* by Queensland Theatre/MTC (2017) on **limelightmagazine.com.au**; Arifa Akbar, Now the whole of Britain's a stage (2011) on **independent.co.uk**; Jen Harvie, Staging the UK (2005) Manchester University Press; Jason Jacobs, Leah Reddy, Olivia O'Connor & Sarah Kutnowsky, *Noises Off* Upstage Guide (2016) by Education at Roundabout on **roundabouttheater.org**

Discuss the lasting appeal of *Noises Off*

Why do you think *Noises Off* continues to be so popular decades after it was originally written?

British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s

'The 1960s changed British theatre forever,' says Michael Billington, theatre critic for *The Guardian*. Significant increases in Arts Council funding encouraged playwrights to take risks. Social tensions in Britain encouraged the creation of plays that examined social issues such as police corruption and the experience of the educationally deprived.

Billington suggests that much of the best writing of the 1970s 'was powered by a belief that theatre had a directly political function'. However, playwrights drifted toward writing for television toward the end of the decade.

The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 had a radical impact on theatre, as it did on other aspects of British life. This decade saw the rise of the musical, a theatrical form Billington describes as one that 'appeals to our desire for escape and that actively celebrates capitalism'.

Source: Michael Billington, The players (2002) on **theguardian.com**

Discuss *Noises Off* resists

How might *Noises Off* have been a reaction against the social and political context of its time?

The Playwright

Playwright, novelist and translator Michael Frayn was born in London in 1933. After two years National Service, during which he learned Russian, he read Philosophy at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Michael then worked as a reporter and columnist for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers. His other plays include *Alphabetical Order* (1975), *Clouds* (1976), *Donkeys' Years* (1977), *Make or Break* (1980), *Benefactors* (1984), *Copenhagen* (1998), *Democracy* (2003), and *Afterlife* (2008). He has also published several novels, most recently *Skios* (2012), a comic novel about mistaken identity, as well as translating a number of works from Russian, including plays by Chekhov and Tolstoy.

Theatre critic for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington, says there is a 'thematic consistency that underpins' most of Michael Frayn's work. Frayn himself once wrote that his plays are about 'the way in which we impose our ideas upon the world around us'. Billington suggests that this 'conflict between the objective universe and our often helpless attempts to give it personal structure and order', underpins almost everything Michael Frayn has written. Billington also says Frayn's 'achievement was to use comedy and farce as vehicles for exploring philosophical ideas'. *Noises Off* was an instant commercial success and has maintained international fame for more than three decades.

Source: adapted from the British Council on **literature.britishcouncil.org**

Noises Off – a brief history

Michael Frayn (Playwright) reflects on his play's forty-year evolution.

'The 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 which 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 production in Washington 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. … In 2000, re-reading the English text that had been in use for the previous fifteen 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.'

Source: Michael Frayn (November 2011) introduction to the Methuen revised edition.

Theatrical Styles

Farce

Farce is a theatrical genre from first seen in France in the late 15th/early 16th century. Farce as non-literary form can be traced back to Aristophanes' comedies in classical Greece. To farce something is to stuff it: Latin *farcire*.

Historically, the term meant a literary or artistic production of little merit. Therefore, farce was often categorised a low comedy. French farce has its roots in Molière and *commedia dell'arte*; but the first generally accepted English version is little more than a hundred years old: a comedy titled *The Private Secretary* in the 1880s starring famous actor Herbert Beerbohm Tree.

Farce was first used to describe the elements of clowning, acrobatics, caricature and indecency found together within a single form of entertainment. Actors would insert silly little bits of buffoonery into the texts of religious plays – hence the use of the 'farce' meaning 'stuffing'. The style usually achieves its affects from physical or bodily humour, turning crude or absurd, as opposed to verbal wit or the nuances of social behaviour. Farce's main purpose is to stimulate laughter through exaggeration or extravagance instead of realistic imitation of life.

Farce is a specific style of comedy in that the laughs come from character and situation. The action of farce is propelled by panic, with the characters lying to save face, which compounds their troubles: they now have to deal not only with the original problem, but also the lie. Hence, their behaviour becomes increasingly more bizarre. Other conventions that this performance style uses include:

- A very physical form of comedy using exaggerated gestures
- Stock physical characteristics
- Sparkling fluency of the verbal exchanges
- Characters are often dissatisfied or frustrated with something, who stage elaborate theatrical scenes in order to teach a (usually violent or humiliating) lesson
- Traditional farce still aims for the happy ending and endorses the status quo
- In a state of tension, the 'crises' are always about to happen
- Actions takes us to the furthest extremes of human behaviour.

Molière (1622–1673) was one of France's greatest comic dramatist. Many of his comedies addressed serious themes and paved the way for modern drama and experimental theatre. Molière frequently satirised the difference between people's perceptions of themselves and other people's perceptions of them. *Les Presciuses Ridicules (The Conceited Ladies)* is a 1659 farce about the pretentious manners, style, and language of two country women who wish to distinguish themselves. Extremely popular in Paris after its opening, the play established Molière as a master of the farce genre.

Farce spread quickly throughout Europe in 16th and 17th centuries, notably with Shakespeare and Molière using elements of farce in their comedies. In the early 18th century, Farce was derided as nonsensically trivial, overly embodied, and overly commercial and had become an integral and popular feature of the stage. Farce also surfaced in music hall vaudeville and boulevard entertainments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before later appearing in film comedies starring Charlie Chaplin, the Keystone Kops, and the Marx Brothers.

Some other notable plays from history with all the venerable ingredients of French farce include: *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière; *The Barber of Seville* by Beaumarchais; *Professor Taranne* by Arthur Adamov; *Don't Dress for Dinner* by Marc Camoletti; as well as the television comedy *Fawlty Towers* created by John Cleese.

Source: Adapted from Heidi Irvine, *Noises Off* Education Resource (2017) on **queenslandtheatre.com.au**

Commedia dell'arte

Commedia dell'arte began in 15th Century Italy and was a comedy style of travelling players. Conventions of this performance style include:

- Use of slapstick and physical comedy
- Use of mask to denote particular characters
- Use of *lazzi* (stock comedic routines or 'gags', eg. trying to catch a fly)
- Stock characters – often one dimensional and easily recognisable
- Linear narrative with many asides and interruptions
- Direct address to the audience..

In *Noises Off* and the play within the play, *Nothing On*, many of the characters emulate some of the stock characters from *commedia dell'arte*. For example, it could be suggested that Lloyd possesses elements of Il Capitano, and that Poppy is in some ways like Pierrot.

Sam Strong (Director)

'*Noises Off* has also proved enduringly popular because it is a work of deceptive substance. At the same time as it makes us laugh at ourselves, *Noises Off* confronts us with truths we recognise. While they might be playing stock types in *Nothing On* (the bombshell, the burglar etc.) Frayn's characters are anything but, and the work succeeds because they are complex, flawed human beings.'

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The stock characters in the characters

Research the stock characters of Commedia dell'arte and draw parallels between the characters in *Noises Off*, *Nothing On* and those of this performance style.

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Look for *lazzi*

During the performance, look for examples of slapstick physical comedy.
Do some characters have signature lazzis?

Sitcom

While sitcom as a performance style is not necessarily demonstrated in this production of *Noises Off,* it's interesting to note how contemporary screen comedy has been influenced by farce. The classic sitcom room design conforms to the stage farce set design, with upstage doors, downstage furniture, and a presentational style conveniently leaving one wall absent for the cameras/audience. The term 'sitcom' is a portmanteau of 'situation comedy', meaning the comedy is derived from the situations characters find themselves in. Does that sound familiar? In fact, each episode of Friends is named after a key situation that the characters have to navigate (e.g. *The One with the Blackout; The One Where Nana Dies Twice; The One with the Birth).* Like farce, sitcom characters are loosely based on stock archetypes (jock, clown, hero, nerd, everyman etc.). Many sitcoms use these conventions, and some plot devices have been so overused that they have become tropes or clichés.

TV can be homework too

Research the stock characters of Commedia dell'arte and draw parallels between the characters in *Noises Off*, *Nothing On* and those of this performance style.

Watch some sitcoms like *Friends, The Big Bang Theory*, *Seinfeld* or *The Nanny* and identify conventions of farce. How is the comedy constructed in these shows? What stock characters or archetypes are at the root of these characters? How does the set resemble a theatrical set design?

Nicki Wendt, Hugh Parker, Louise Siversen, Simon Burke and Emily Goddard

The Performance Space

You will see this production of *Noises Off* in the Playhouse at Arts Centre Melbourne. This venue seats up to 884 people across two levels: the stalls and the circle. The proscenium arch stage has a fly tower above for flying scenic elements. In this production, the set is built on a revolving stage so that it can turn. As the script includes a play within a play, the design includes a theatre within a theatre. Think about how the design might be integrated into the space.

Discuss the theatre within the theatre

How might the physical building be integrated into the design? Where will the set end and the Playhouse begin? Will actors enter the auditorium and mingle with the audience? Will the fourth wall be broken?

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Fake theatre

Look for fake walls, lighting bars or curtains that are made to mimic elements of a theatre but are actually designed stagecraft elements in reality.

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Set sneak peek

Visit the Queensland Theatre YouTube channel to see the set being used in rehearsal: An interview with *Noises Off* Director Sam Strong on **youtube.com/qldtheatreco**

The Script

Formatting

Noises Off is a visually different script to most, in that it is laid out on the page in a unique way. In Act 2 in particular, when a performance of *Nothing On* is taking place upstage concurrently with silent 'backstage' mischief, there are many detailed stage directions down two sides of the page denoting each performance space. Yvonne Antrobus originated the role of Poppy in the first production of *Noises Off* in 1982. She recently reflected on the rehearsal:

> 'Looking at [my script] after all these years, I see that I made very few notes. Michael Blakemore, the director, did not "direct" us (except for the drilled precision necessary for physical farce) as some do. … The name of my character is underlined in biro throughout the script, as is usual. What is unusual is that certain parts of the script are divided down the centre of the page so that two conversations appear to be going on at the same time.'

Source: Yvonne Antrobus (2011), *Noises Off*: the play so funny it made people ill on **theguardian.com**

Scripting two plays at once

Look at the script for *Noises Off* and examine how the playwright has carefully constructed the dual onstage/backstage worlds so that they tessellate exactly.

Stage directions

Noises Off contains more stage directions than you may have seen in other scripts. In particular, Act 2 includes highly detailed stage directions about the 'backstage' business that is performed downstage.

Sam Strong (Director)

'Rehearsing *Noises Off* is similar to standing in front of something awe-inspiring. It is easy to underestimate Frayn's play because it is comedic in effect and based around the performance of a farce. But *Noises Off* has become a classic, not just because it is very funny, but also because it is a work of structural perfection.'

Analyse the stage directions

Choose an excerpt from Act 2 where the page is divided in two parts. Analyse how the playwright has made clear when actions are in sync or line up to deliver a comic moment. How might Sam Strong have chosen to rehearse these scenes?

Meta-theatre

This entire play takes place inside a theatre, either onstage or backstage, and sometimes both at once. Does this mean that only people who already have a solid understanding of the conventions and history of theatre will understand the script?

Sam Strong (Director)

'What has made the play a classic is that it is not an in-joke - the humour is not reliant on an intimate (or indeed any) knowledge of theatre making. It merely uses that specific context to show us human behaviour we recognise from any work place: the heady commencement and inevitable sour turn of a secret romance; petty and gross acts of sabotage; the moment at which patience and politeness give way to blunt criticism; and the attempt to present a façade of calm through the chaos.'

Discuss the humour

Do you agree that the humour in *Noises Off* is not an in-joke? Sam suggests that audiences don't need to have a pre-existing knowledge of theatre making to appreciate the humour. If this is so, why might the playwright have chosen a theatre as this specific context?

Follow the instructions: Design the set

Carefully read Michael Frayn's stage directions at the start of the play, which describe the set design (the number of doors he dictates is essential to the action). Follow these instructions and draw a ground plan (bird's eye view) of a set design.

Annotate the script

Read the script excerpt below and annotate through the lens of one or more of the following stagecraft areas: Direction; Acting; Lighting design; Set design; Properties; Costume and make-up; and/or Sound.

The start of Act 2

From: *As the curtain rises the telephone is ringing.*

To: *Belinda makes things worse by trying to move Dotty's head to a less suggestive position.*

Perform the script

Read the script excerpt above and perform it with your class. Assign characters, and creative roles such as director and stage manager. Rotate roles and see how different directors tackle this scene.

Marketing & Publicity

Melbourne Theatre Company has a large Marketing and Communications department with roles including graphic designer, publicist, marketing campaign manager, and digital manager. For the MTC season of *Noises Off,* the team created various poster designs for different stages of the marketing campaign. For each of these versions, many different concepts were considered before the final design was produced.

Subscription Campaign

The initial image for the 2017 subscription brochure (**1**) featured key cast members in costume behind-the-scenes. This image was actually shot backstage, behind the set of MTC's production of *Skylight* by David Hare, which was midway through its 2016 season at Southbank Theatre at the time.
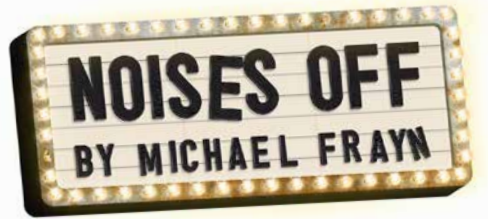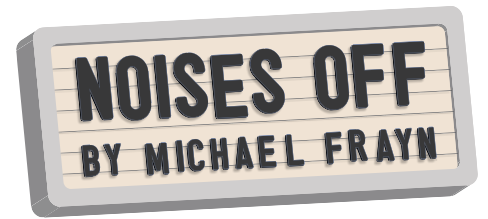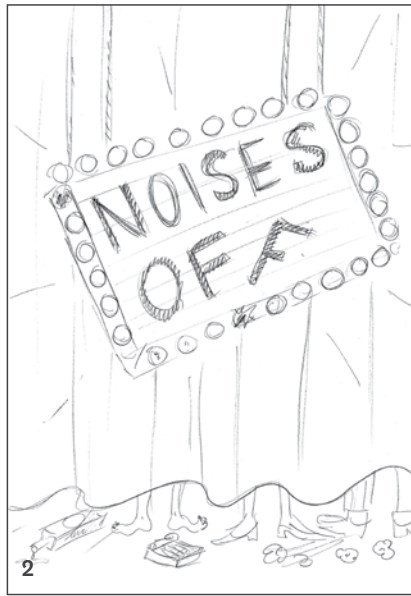

Single Tickets Campaign

Creating a theatrical title device

The original image included a font that was consistent across all Season 2017 images, so the next step in this campaign's evolution was to make the show stand out on its own. The graphic designer created an askew, faded-glory marquee that hinted at the bedlam of the play within the play. It started out as a sketch (**2**) that was reproduced graphically in Adobe Illustrator (**3**), which was in turn taken into Adobe Photoshop (**4**) to have lights and texture added to make it look more realistic.

The photoshoot

This image was shot on location and then finalised by a professional image retoucher who made the sign blend in with the photograph, with all the light and shadow effects (**5**). You might recognise key props from the script littering the floor. You might also identify which characters belong to which pairs of legs from their costume items.
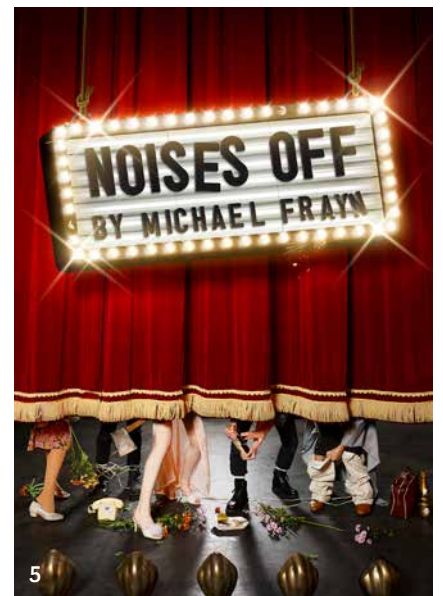
Design your own poster

Look at the MTC marketing material above, and search online for other examples of how this production is being promoted. Design your own poster and annotate your image to explain your choices.

Reviews

'Being set in a larger-than- life theatrical world of make-believe, the medium of farce has both a resonance and a truth. Witty, sharply observed and brilliantly written, this delightful play-within-a-play imagines *Nothing On*, a truly bad piece of theatre in three stages of its life.'

Source: Suzannah Conway reviews *Noises Off* by Queensland Theatre and MTC (2017) on **limelightmagazine.com.au**

'The three acts (performed with one intermission) all depict a company of second-tier actors performing the first act of a creaky British sex farce set in a country house, here rendered in mock-Tudor style, but updated with garish accouterments establishing the period to be the taste-free 1970s.'

Source: Charles Isherwood reviews *Noises Off* presented by Roundabout Theater Company (2016) on **nytimes.com**

'Notoriously, the play has a slow start, as the audience adjusts to what is a play-within-a-play, and not a very good one. … It's theatrical genius centred on a second act played out almost entirely in dumb-show, then climaxing in some of the funniest moments in modern theatre where, let's just say, the offstage chaos results in onstage roles being shared around. Melbourne will get the best of it because by then it should be played-in.'

Source: Martin Buzacott reviews *Noises Off* presented by Queensland Theatre and MTC (2017) on **theaustralian.com.au**

Discuss the reviews

From reading the reviews above, what do you expect to see on stage in this production of *Noises Off*? Make a list of predictions about the set, acting styles, what you'll find funny, and how stagecraft elements like sound, lighting and costume might be used.

Nicki Wendt, Hugh Parker, and Louise Siversen

Connect

When you visit the Theatre, share your experience on Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag
#mtcNoisesOff and tag **@melbtheatreco**

Like MTC Education on Facebook for behind-the-scenes information about our Education Program
and discover ways for you to get involved with MTC. **facebook.com/MTCEdu**

Attendance Information

This production contains adult themes, coarse language and theatrical smoke. For further information, please call the
MTC Education team on (03) 8688 0974.

Duration
Approximately 2.5 hours including a 20 minute interval.

School groups & students
Go online to read more about visiting with school groups and opportunities for students. **mtc.com.au/education**

Enquiries

General MTC Education enquiries
Email **education@mtc.com.au** or contact our Education Coordinator 03 8688 0974.

School bookings
Email **schools@mtc.com.au** or phone 03 8688 0963.