

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

That Noise You Hear Is Laughter "Noises Off" at Holmdel

Philip Dorian – Two River Times, New Jersey, July 20, 2008

One of the worst plays ever written is at Holmdel Summer Theater. It's ineptly directed and performed by a cast of bungling actors, and I could not recommend it more highly. Nothing On is the play-within Michael Frayn's Noises Off, which is the most sublime farce ever written. Also, the director, Gary Shaffer, is the very opposite of inept (ept?) and the cast, rather than bungling, is a perfectly calibrated, well-oiled farce machine. Holmdel's Noises Off is outstanding.

Noises Off is about a second-rate acting troupe rehearsing and touring the drippy Nothing On. Frayn's first act is funny, the second is funnier and the third, funniest. At Holmdel, make that hilarious, hilariously and hilariest.

During rehearsal and performance of the play-within-the-play, everything that could go wrong does go wrong. Missed cues and misplaced props gum up the works, and backstage affairs and bruised egos contribute to the turmoil. Director Shaffer and his cast of nine locals, including two pros (Actors Equity members), are chaos-management experts; every goofy line and intentional misstep is executed with pinpoint timing.

The settings are the final rehearsal of the mock play, a performance viewed from backstage (here, literally), and a later performance of Nothing On, after personal off-stage matters have invaded the performance. The cumulative effect is side-splitting.

In the 'inside' play, Barbara Bonilla plays housekeeper Dotty, whose dealing with a plate of sardines (that's right, sardines) is a matchless running gag. Finally, all semblance of professionalism deserts Dotty, and Ms. Bonilla plays it beautifully. Michael Chartier, whose resonant speaking voice has never better fit a role, acts the harried director's frustration to a tee. His exasperation is priceless. Glenn Jones's character speaks without really saying anything and takes pratfalls that would send a lesser actor to the ER. Jones, whose comic range is limitless, manages to top himself every time out; once again, he's marvelous. Marvelous-looking Rebecca Harris is on-target as the ditsy ingenue who spends most of the play in her undies and remains faithful to the script in the face of prevailing pandemonium.

Eric Yves Garcia and Lea Gossett are both excellent as the leading man who suffers nosebleeds at the drop of a cue and the leading lady who tries - and fails - to bring some order to the proceedings.

Debbie Barr and Adam Hayek are the stage manager and stagehand who hold Nothing On together - barely. And Geoff Shields turns in a beaut as the alcoholic, over-the-hill, spacey actor whose random entrances and exits contribute to the havoc.

Noises Off is technically challenging, but Holmdel doesn't back down. The set, with seven doors that work (or don't) precisely on cue, is the flawless creation of Paul and Lori Renick. Rob Ulrich and Courtney Keating's lighting contributes handsomely, and major props are due props mistress Rachel Hayek and costumer Mary Harris.

Director Shaffer describes himself as a farce aficionado. This production will make anyone a Shaffer aficionado.

If you've not seen Noises Off before, catch it here. Repeaters won't be disappointed either. Besides its overall quality, there's an innovation that enhances the audience-to-play relationship: Instead of rotating the set for act two and back for act three, Holmdel rotates the audience. Trust me; it works. And why not?

Everything about this show works just fine.

"Noises Off" plays through Aug. 2 at the Duncan Smith Theater on the grounds of Holmdel High School, Crawfords Corner Road, Holmdel. Performances are Fri. and Sat. at 8 p.m. and Sun. at 2. For tickets (732) 946-0427 or at www.holmdeltheatre.com

