

ENTERTAINMENT

Michael Frayn's sex farce comes to the Citadel

Noises Off: Often frustrating, often hilarious

Noises Off
Citadel Theatre
Shoctor Theatre • March 30-May 5

review by James MacDonald

I do not particularly like the "play within a play" format. Perhaps it is the often contrived offstage situations. Perhaps it is the usually stereotyped actors. Or maybe it is simply the fact that the play within the play is better than the play itself.

Noises Off, which opened at the Citadel's Shoctor Theatre Saturday night, suffers in part under all these problems. The result is an often confusing, often frustrating, often heavy going but usually hilarious production. Michael Frayn's new comedy about the onstage and backstage problems of a British touring company full of bit actors under a delusion of greatness is very entertaining, despite the inevitable problems with the format.

The first act of the play is generally devoted to showing us how the play should be done. The play is a sex farce called *Nothing On* and is quite amusing in itself. Unfortunately, it is a bit too good, and it sets us up for a letdown. The second act, devoted to the scene backstage after a month on the road, gives hysterical impressions of the frenzy of the scene behind the scenes in a production wrought with technical errors, and with errant actors who do their best to kill one another at every possible moment (this will certainly be appreciated by anyone who has ever been involved in the performing arts).

The major fault of the play lies in the third act. After two consistently funny acts and two intermissions, we expect a rousing finale to leave us rolling in the aisles, the icing on the cake as it were. What we get is momentary flashes of amusement, almost buried beneath immeasurable overacting and an exhausted script. The actors almost cannot be blamed for going overboard; they are obviously as frustrated as we are for laughs. The whole scene eventually degenerates into something resembling an exercise in improvisation found in the Fine Arts building at any given time. Needless to say, it's an incredible



Noises Off (from left to right Anthony Bekenn, Maida Rogerson, Ian White, Sharry Flett): The play within the play is better than the play itself.

disappointment.

Disregarding the third act, the acting is quite good. Anthony Bekenn is excellent as the young but never-to-be-great actor Garry Lejeune (programme notes are given for the play within the play. His bio mentions him as two-time winner of the Rose Bruford Medal for Effort. Notice also the play on words in all the actors' names). Sherry Flett as the slightly neurotic Brooke Ashton and Eric House as the alcoholic Selsdon Mowbray are almost as good, though House at times resembles a drunken Captain Highliner.

Eve Crawford as the slightly promiscuous

Belinda Blair, Ian White as the victimized Frederick Fellowes, and Miles Potter as increasingly agitated director Lloyd Dallas are all enjoyable, but each is too stereotyped for lasting humour, and each falls victim to overacting in Act III. U of A Bachelor of Fine Arts grad Alyson Bachinsky puts in a fine performance in a smaller role as Assistant Stage Manager Poppy Norton-Taylor, the brightest of the troupe. Only veteran All-Bran pusher Maida Rogerson and Ron Wolosyn are consistently disappointing as washed up actress Dotty Otley and stunned stage manager Tim Allgood respectively. Wolosyn seems to change character every Act, and Rogerson is too one-dimensional in a potentially funny role (Wolosyn also struggles under an inconsistent British accent).

The blame for the ineptitude of the third act must be laid equally on the script and the directing. It is difficult to blame the writing, however, because of its many bright spots and its fine treatment of this difficult format. The humour is, on the whole, intelligent and fresh, excepting the problems of Act III. There is nothing offensive in the script, and though it is often suggestive, it is never insulting or excessively crude. This makes it all the more disappointing when, near the end of the production, the story starts to rely on that most obvious form of comedy, slapstick, as its main source of chuckles. Though the slap-

stick works well in Act II, it becomes repetitive and uninspired by the third.

The fault lies on the shoulders of director Bernard Hopkins. Hopkins gives us a few moments of priceless hilarity, but his direction turns laborious and desperate. The actors often look out of place and often the potential humour of a situation isn't exploited fully. The brightest spot from a directing point of view is the excellent choreography of the frantic Act II. Hopkins' biggest problem seems to be his failure to utilize his rather large cast (most of whom are on stage most of the time) to its best advantage.

Hopkins is a veteran, however, and hopefully the kinks can be smoothed over as the run progresses, allowing the full comedic value of the play to come through.

With all its faults, however, *Noises Off* is a very funny play. There are certain precious moments that will leave you in stitches, and despite the third act it leaves you with a good feeling inside. It is certainly the best play I have seen at the Citadel in a few years (not saying much). It suggests a glimmer of hope for good comedy next season, something the Citadel has lacked for a while. *Noises Off* is worth seeing, if only for Bekenn's performance and the many, though fleeting, flashes of comic brilliance which should leave you doubled over with laughter.



Eric House venting fury on a confused Ian White: Fleeting flashes of comic brilliance should leave you in stitches.

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