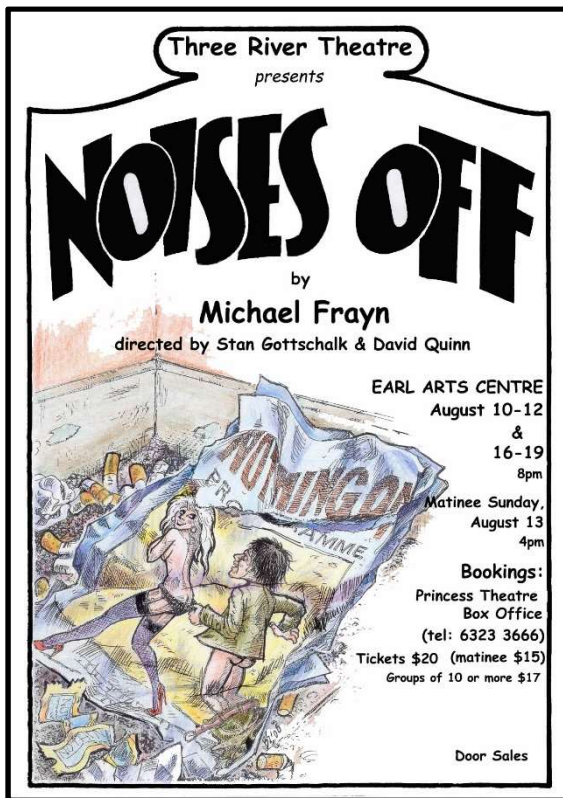


Noises Off 2006



“Hold your next line until just after the laughter peaks and begins to subside, then deliver it.”, is the standard advice for playing through audience laughter in comedies. And good advice it is; except that it simply didn’t work for *Three River Theatre*’s 2006 production of Michael Frayn’s comedic masterpiece *Noises Off*. The reason was that often the laughter never peaked, but remained as a solid wall of sound - sometimes for minutes at a time. It was a good problem to have.

But let me go back to the beginning.

In early 2006 the 3RT Committee decided that it needed a comedy to serve as a counterweight to the darkness of our 2005 production of Louis Nowra’s *The Golden Age*. Patsy Mace had long been a champion of us taking on the challenge of Frayn’s madcap *Noises Off*. After reading her copy of the script, I too, was sold, and got on board to direct what has been billed, with justification, as “the funniest farce ever written”. (In fact, it’s a farce on steroids, complete with not the traditional three doors, but no fewer than eight!)

Here’s the idea...and I’ll let reviewer Michael Edgar describe it:

...We watch a fourth-rate English theatrical company first rehearsing and then performing a tatty play, Nothing On. The troupe is a collection of recognizable theatrical types, united in ineptitude...Frayn brilliantly shows us how offstage passions, tensions and jealousies gradually ruin the onstage performance...

Frayn does that by showing us, in Act I, a segment of a disastrous rehearsal the night before opening. Act II shows that same segment later in the show’s run, but this time we only HEAR the onstage action, with the set revolved to show us the intrigues simultaneously going on silently and intensely backstage (where you have to be QUIET). Finally, in Act III, we see that same segment, again from the audience perspective, still later in the run. By now those backstage tensions have hilariously flared into active onstage sabotage.

Funny? Absolutely. But there was a major production worry – the set required that all those doors be distributed around a two-story country-house which had to be able to revolve a full 180 degrees to show the audience the play from backstage!



The Bearing

I was not at all sure that we could build this – and there was only one person to whom I could turn - *der gizmomeister* Flocky Bock. (It’s a long story, but our friendship goes way back to early 1970s Melbourne. He’s the complete engineer who happens to have an artistic heart; whenever I found myself in need of the “impossible” on stage, he was the person to figure out how to make it happen.) So, I asked his expert engineer’s opinion. The response was an instantaneous “Sure we can”. It so happened that he had on his front veranda the main bearing from a West Coast ore crusher, which he bought at a sale for next to nothing, figuring it would come in handy

one day (as you do). That bearing would become the rotational centre of a platform that we'd build, on top of which we'd construct our 8-door house.

After carefully measuring The Earl, I found that we could JUST fit a set in there, and came up with a model that was basically a pastiche of lots of designs I saw on the internet, tempered with the reality of our space and resources. That meant that both the two extreme entrances on the ground floor and the onstage and backstage stairs were all free-standing - not rotating with the main house platform. The stairs were built on wheels, and the two entrances were shifted using a special wide trolley that Flocky built for them.



Set Design Model



The "Backstage" Side

size, and its concrete-and-tin construction, meant that it was cold enough to accommodate refugee penguins from Antarctica.

With Flocky taking the lead, he, Ian Dix and I started the daunting build, working more-or-less six days a week (with weekend help from a lot of workers, and punctuated by Flocky's stream of obscure bilingual German-English puns). First we made a revolving platform fixed to the bearing. On top of that, we put up a scaffolding frame and filled that frame in with MDF walls, a window, stairs, and those eight entrances/exits. It was a monumental task, and we must have generated a truckload of MDF dust, but by Day 1 of rehearsals, we had enough of it built so the actors could use both floors and all entrances.

Aaah, but where to build it? I just KNEW that the eight-door farce required a precision of timing that meant we'd have to have the set built from Day 1 of rehearsals. So, we needed a venue to serve for both building and rehearsals - and we'd probably need it for 4 months or so to get everything done. It was a big ask, and as time passed with no solution, it was looking like a bridge too far. We were running out of time when Kerry Finch came to the fore, and secured for us a commercial space on Invermay Road, (donated by a local businessperson) that filled all our needs. The only drawback was that its



The "Audience" Side

We had borrowed a couple of those gas heaters that you see sometimes in outdoor cafes, but after the first gas bottle we gave up; they simply had no effect whatever on the cold.

David Quinn had come on board as Associate Director, and he did a great job. He had everyone's character and vocal inflections down pat, so during the inevitable absences from rehearsal he could seamlessly fill the gap. In fact, he was so good at it that I started giving him notes. But those absences pointed to a looming truth – comedy is actually a LOT harder to play than straight drama or even tragedy. The frenetic physical action of a farce



The Set Reversed for Act II



The Set for Acts I and III

requires pinpoint ensemble timing both in the lines and in the accompanying slamming of doors etc. To make things even more complex, the “silent movie”-style backstage action of Act II had to be timed to the lines of the interior play being performed onstage.

The cast found this challenging – so challenging, in fact, that in the last week of rehearsal they expressed their collective insecurity by suggesting that perhaps they would be unable to perform the show. Thankfully, a half-dozen intensive lines runs fixed their concerns, and things returned to the normal levels of performance anxiety.

It was a bump-in we'll never forget. The massive set (by this time fully built and painted) had to have all pieces numbered, and be deconstructed, transported and rebuilt in The Earl in a day - with Flocky working down to the wire sawing out unnecessary bits of MDF to reduce the massive weight of the structure. Somehow he, Ian Dix (and plenty of others) managed the task, and when all was said and done, one person could (if need be) rotate the entire set on his/her own.

Finally, we opened, and it was payoff time. I had NEVER experienced the phenomenon of continuous and solid laughter like that in my life. It simply did not stop. The cast rose to the occasion and put in a flawless and absolutely professional season that had packed houses rolling in the aisles.



Bump-In: Flocky Ponders the Task

Two weeks later, we put to bed one of the most successful shows 3RT ever produced – and got ready to go back to a restful tragedy with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. But that's another story.



The Finale – L. to R. Chris Rattray, Jeff Hockley, Marcus Bower, Nicole Jobson