

'Noises Off' Is Spot On

City Lights plays with a play within a play in Michael Frayn's famous farce

By Matthew Craggs

ANYONE who has ever worked in a theater could easily pull out a handful of crazy stories of mishaps, affairs or accidents and the emotional and physical scars they took away from the debacle. It's no surprise that *Noises Off*, the play within a play where everything that can go wrong does, is such a favorite for audiences and thespians alike. As *Noises Off* begins at the City Lights Theater Company, the audience quickly learn that they're watching actors rehearse the fictitious play *Nothing On* for an increasingly distraught director, Lloyd Dallas (Steve Lambert), who drips acidic wit when dealing with inept actors and missed cues. What makes Michael Frayn's script so enjoyable is that *Nothing On* chugs along on slapstick comedy and dropped trousers but *Noises Off* is a farce for the backstage drama including fistfights and love triangles.



Over three acts the offstage antics cross over to the onstage production of *Nothing On* in ways that comically disrupt or hilariously coincide with the performance. The entire cast does a wonderful job maintaining the comic timing that is essential to both plays. Outstanding are Robyn Winslow as Brooke Ashton and Tom Gough as Garry Lejeune, who work very well together with Winslow playing the clueless but externally calm, comic foil to Gough's highly animated distress.

By nature, *Noises Off* can be taxing on the crew and audience members. With two intermissions, the show runs just over three hours. This wouldn't necessarily be a problem, but director Marcia Frederick starts the energy levels high and keeps them there. Some characters such as Tim Allgood (Daniel Mitchell) and Selsdon Mowbray (Ken Boswell) lose their appeal because by the time they gain prominence onstage, the audience is too tired from the high energy of the rest of the cast. A strict interpretation of Frayn's script also requires an extremely complex two-story set with eight functional doors, one window and the ability to pivot 180 degrees twice during the show. Designed by Ron Gasparinetti, the set looks amazing but suffers from the space limitations of the City Lights Theater. Actors stand an inch or less below the second floor, and the compressed length of the set makes the edges improperly lit or hidden to audience members sitting on the sides of the thrust theater. An explanation that the set is representative of the play within a play would suffice if the space limitations of the theater didn't create what struck me as a threat to safety. Choosing not to vacate the theater during intermission for set changes, the stagehands received much laughter from the audience as they struggled to keep the two-story set from falling off the stage. When a crash resulting in broken glass and a battered set occurred, suddenly, people weren't as amused.

Taking on *Noises Off* is a risky endeavor for any theater, but City Lights does a grand job with this farcical look at its craft. The actors nail the comic timing and easily fill the theater with continuous laughter that'll overflow into intermission, which you can feel free to enjoy at the concessions stand or outside in the beautiful, fall air.

NOISES OFF plays Wednesday–Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2 and 7pm through Oct. 19 at City Lights Theater Company, 529 S. Second St., San Jose. Tickets are \$25–\$40. (408.295.4200)