

Play within a Play Speaks Volumes

Theatre Review

By MICHAEL EDGAR

Michael Frayn's *NOISES OFF*, by *Three River Theatre* at the Earl Arts Centre

The funniest play ever written? Or just one of the funniest? Critics have argued the point for 20 years. Audiences don't care. Around the world they have flocked to *Noises Off* and then rolled in the aisles.

This is a play about putting on a play, or as Stan Gottschalk writes in his perceptive director's notes, it is a farce encased in a comedy. We watch a fourth rate English theatrical company first rehearsing and then performing a tatty play, *Nothing On*.

The troupe is a collection of recognisable theatrical types, united in ineptitude. (I'm afraid I have memories of acting in companies that were almost as bad.) Playwright Michael Frayn brilliantly shows us how off stage passions, tensions and jealousies gradually ruin the onstage performance. His master stroke in act two is to let us see one performance from behind the scenes. The wordless action becomes more and more hilarious as a fireman's axe, a whisky bottle and a bunch of flowers pass from hand to hand in action that becomes increasingly frenetic.

Of course this meticulously crafted portrayal of theatrical chaos requires absolute precision in the actual playing. For the most part this ensemble cast of some of Launceston's finest achieves this. Just occasionally I felt some of the characterisation in the outer comedy tends to the farcical and the actors are still coping with how to play lines into a wall of continuous laughter. But these are minor quibbles.

The show is splendid already and will only get better. A delighted capacity audience gave the cast a great and deserved ovation at the end. If you have cracked ribs, avoid *Noises Off*. Otherwise don't miss it. It plays the rest of this week and Wednesday till Saturday next week.