

Backstage Pass

Minnesota State Theatre & Dance

February 2009

What's All That *Noises Off*?

When a group of American actors heads to Britain to perform a sex farce, a disaster ensues! Michael Frayn's magnificent play manages to contain all the great favorites of farce: mistaken identity, dropped trousers, slamming doors and the laughably sincere agony of the characters.

I have read that the secret to farce is suffering and I am inclined to

believe it. The characters of farce are larger than life and the suffering induced by their crazy situations must be equally exaggerated. Acting *Noises Off* is a remarkable feat.

As choreographed as a dance and incredibly complicated, the script allows no room for error. The play is like a Rhoads sculpture in that if even one element is out of place, the entire work falls apart. The actors

must work together symbiotically, timing every line perfectly, placing every prop with precision and executing every action with meticulous accuracy.

It has been our great delight to work on this wonderful play and we all hope that you enjoy it as much as we have.

—Heather Elise Hamilton



When sex, sardines and silliness collide, you must have *Noises Off*. Here, the characters find out what happens when they interact without a script ... or with one, for that matter (left to right): Poppy (Tierney Bagan), Selsdon on balcony (Christopher McCarthy), Booke (JoNae Villeneuve), Belinda (Liz Dowd), Freddy (Jeff E. Smith), Lloyd, the director (Mathias Becker), Garry (Cody Gerrells), Dotty (Deanne McDonald) and Tim (Joel Partyka).

Children's theatre tour comes home for a show



The annual children's theatre touring production comes home for one performance at 1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28, in the Andreas Theatre. All tickets are \$5 and available by calling the Theatre & Dance Box Office at 507-389-6661 between 4 and 6 p.m., Monday-Friday. The seven-person cast has been on the road since mid-January and will be so until March 5. They visit at least four schools every week and will be seen by more than 8,000 elementary school-aged kids during their eight weeks on the road. The cast is (left to right): Kayla Bartlett (on floor), Emma Ottoson, Adam Moen, Kim Steffen, Duncan Scully, Taylor Johnson and Stephen Crisp. Director is Nikki Swoboda, with original music by Eric Mayson.

“Abiyoyo” comes in off the road for one show only

A ukulele-playing boy and his magician father are always getting into mischief, so they are banished to the edge of their town. There they have an opportunity to redeem themselves

when Abiyoyo, a horrible, people-eating giant approaches the village. In an ironic ending, they use the very things that irritated their neighbors—the boy's clanking ukulele and his father's magic

wand—to save the village. Based on a South African lullaby and folksong, the original script and lyrics were created, in part, by the cast during rehearsals. It is too fun to sleep through!

Coming soon ... *Tobacco Road*

Studio show one of the longest-running shows

Tobacco Road, set in a fictionalized version of author Erskine Caldwell's home town, lays bare the story of the Lesters, the poorest, whitest, trashiest, horniest family in rural Georgia. Jeeter, the Lester family patriarch in *Tobacco Road*, is a beaten-down sharecropper who can no longer get credit to buy the supplies he needs to farm. His family survives, in their crumbling shack, on fat-back rinds and corn meal. Ada, his wife, is wasting away from pellagra; Dude, their 16-year-old son, is a half-wit; Ellie May, their voluptuous 18-year-old daughter, has a gruesome hairlip that makes her "look as if her mouth were bleeding profusely." Jeeter and Ada's other surviving children got out as quickly as they could.

Base instincts are the only kind the Lesters seem to have. The book opens with a visit from Lov, Jeeter's son-in-law, who's distraught that his 13-year-old wife, Pearl (Jeeter's daughter), won't sleep with him. (Jeeter had sold the girl to him for \$7, some cylinder oil and a few quilts.) He wants help tying Pearl to the bed. The starving Lesters, though, are more interested in getting their hands on the sack of turnips Lov is carrying, and ultimately they do—but not until Ellie May has distracted Lov

by sliding her naked bottom toward him across the dirt yard in what will become one of the most tragically nasty rape-seduction scenes ever put to paper.

"Ellie May's acting like your old hound used to do when he got the itch," Dude says to Lester. "Look at her scrape her bottom on the sand. That old hound used to make the same kind of sound Ellie May's making, too. It sounds just like a little pig squealing, don't it?"

From here, the grotesqueries pile up and up. Dude marries a widowed, lecherous and much older female preacher—her nose is deformed and looking into her nostrils is like "looking down the end of a double-barrel shotgun"—only because he wants to honk the horn on her new car. There are scenes involving rats and corpses; elsewhere, the female preacher is passed around like a sex doll among the men at a fleabag hotel, while Dude and Jeeter sleep in a nearby room; finally, Jeeter, in a futile attempt to clear his land for farming, accidentally kills himself and his wife when a fire he's set burns down their shack.

So, why did *Tobacco Road* find a place on the Modern Library's list of the Best 100 Novels in the English Lan-

guage—at No. 91, between *Midnight's Children* and *Ironweed*? The reasons have nothing to do with the blinkered cultural stereotypes Caldwell locked into cement and everything to do with the fact that few novels have as much stripped-down force and inspire as much terror and pity. The force comes from that fact that Caldwell's id—his naked obsessions with sex, class and violence—cuts the surface of every page like a dorsal fin. You can't stop turning the pages, because you want to see how much further your jaw can drop. The terror and pity arise from the fact that, as ham-fisted and exploitative as his attempts could be, Caldwell really did want to bring Americans some news: news about how the worst-off of the rural poor really lived.

Source: <http://www.slate.com>