

## CITY OF SAN JOSE'S Arts Express Program Presents:

### City Lights Theater Company

#### *Noises Off*

#### Teacher Guide

Grades 6-12

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### About the Arts Organization

City Lights Theater Company (a non-profit organization) produces a season of 6 plays per year in the Company's intimate 108-seat venue, and is committed to presenting exhilarating, thought-provoking plays that speak strongly to our audiences. The Company actively develops and produces new plays through our New Play Readers Series, some of which become a part of a regular season. City Lights also encourages the growth of smaller "nomad" theatre companies through their Spotlight Series, in which a diverse group of performing artists are hosted in our theatre and provided with publicity and box office services for their productions. The Company also offers a Youth and Education Program which offers ticket discount, free Study Guides and other opportunities. In addition, City Lights is widely regarded as a nurturing space in which many up-and-coming actors, directors, designers and technicians are given an opportunity to develop their theatre skills alongside seasoned professionals.

### About the Program

*Noises Off*, written by Michael Frayn, first premiered in London, England in 1982. The three act comedy uses the idea of a play within a play. Act one takes place at the dress rehearsal of "Nothing On" where the actors are struggling with lines and props (particularly sardines) and is seen from the front of the set. Act two is a month later and is seen from backstage where actors continue struggling and attacking each other. The third act, seen from the front, is almost two months later and the actors are under pressure to hide their mishaps as well as their personal friction caused by love triangles and lost contact lenses.

Playwright Michael Frayn got the idea for the play in 1970, when he was standing in the wings watching a performance of *Chinamen*, a farce that he had written for Lynn Redgrave. According to the playwright, "It was funnier from behind than in front and I thought that one day I must write a farce from behind."<sup>1</sup>

A play within a play is a literary device where one story is told during the action of another story. It can be used in novels, short stories, plays, television, films, poems, music, and even philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> B. K. Mehlman review, <http://www.curtainup.com/noisesoff.html>

## Learning Objectives

Students will--

- Learn vocabulary that is unique to a play
- Learn the history of the play
- Understand the concept of “a play within a play”

## Historical and Cultural Context (adapted from Wikipedia.org)

The earliest recorded theatrical event dates back to 2000 BC with the passion plays of Ancient Egypt. This story of the god Osiris was performed annually at festivals throughout the civilization, marking the known beginning of a long relationship between theatre and religion.

The Ancient Greeks were the first to begin to formalize theatre as an art, developing strict definitions of tragedy and comedy as well as other forms, including satyr plays. Like the passion plays of Ancient Egypt, Greek plays made use of mythological characters. The Greeks were also the first to develop the concepts of dramatic criticism, acting as a career, and theatre architecture.

Western theater continued to develop under the Roman Empire, in medieval England, and continued to thrive, taking on many forms in Spain, Italy, France, and Russia in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. A uniquely American theatre developed along with the colonization of North America.

The history of Eastern theater is traced back to 1000 BC with the Sanskrit drama of India. Japanese forms of Kabuki, Noh, and Kyogen date back to the 17th centuries. Other Eastern forms were developed throughout China, Korea, and Southeast Asia.

Comic theater, which has Western origins, was found in Ancient Greece. Comedy comes from the Greek word *komos* which means celebration, revel, or merrymaking, and often focuses on a problem that leads to some form of catastrophe which in the end has a happy outcome. Designed to make the audience laugh, comedy often includes archetypal characters and precisely timed banter.

The history of a play within a play was first used by Thomas Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* around 1587, where it forms the resolution of the story. Kyd is also assumed to have used it in his lost *Hamlet* (the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo is so convinced of the far-reaching consequences of his "revelation" that he predicts it will bring about the "fall of Babylon". William Shakespeare used this device notably in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labours Lost*, and *Hamlet*.

When characters in a play perform on stage the action of another play, often with other characters forming an "audience", the audience in the theatre sometimes loses its privileged, omniscient position because it is suddenly not clear who is in the play and who is in the play within. The device, then, can also be an ironic comment on drama itself, with inversions and reversals of its basic elements: actors become authors.

## **Vocabulary—**

*Actors: A person, male or female, who performs a role in a play or other entertainment*

*Actor's Position: The orientation of the actor to the audience (e.g., full back, full front, right profile, left profile)*

*Blocking: The planning and working out of the movements of actors on stage*

*Comedy: A play that is humorous in its treatment of theme, and generally, has a happy ending*

*Design: The creative process of developing and executing aesthetic or functional elements in a production, such as costumes, lighting, sets, and makeup*

*Directing: The art and technique of bringing the elements of theater, film, television, and video together and the process by which an individual or individuals take responsibility for the creative look, style, and action of a play, film, video, or media piece*

*Director: The person who oversees the entire process of staging theatrical or media production*

*Dress Rehearsal: a practice of an artistic work just prior to its first public performance*

*Noises Off: sounds that are meant to be heard from offstage*

*Props (properties): Items carried on the stage by an actor or the small items on the set used by the actors*

*Wings: Off stage areas out of view on stage left and stage right that may be used for exits, entrances, and set changes*

## **Preparation for the Program and Reflecting on the Program**

1. Review the history of the play, a play within a play, and related vocabulary.
2. Students can write their own plays, using the play within a play concept. This can be done before or after viewing the play
3. Talk about what to look for as you watch the play, and write about after viewing the play:
  - Where are people standing and what effect does this have?
  - How are the props being used?
  - Is there any symbolism or metaphor in the play and if so, where?
  - Which character do you most identify with?
  - How are the characters relationships changing over the course of the play?
  - Develop criteria before viewing play and then write a formal review.

## **Curriculum Connections--CA Visual and Performing Arts Standards**

Note: The California Visual and Performing Arts Standards were created based on the premise that each student is receiving comprehensive and sequential arts instruction in all four major arts disciplines. Since this is rarely the case, the following standards may not correspond to the grade levels served by the Arts Express program.

Theater Standards:

*Artistic Perception:* 1.1 (throughout) Use the vocabulary of theater to describe experience; 1.3 (high school) Identify the use of metaphor, subtext and symbolic elements

*Aesthetic valuing:* 4.1 (grade 8) Develop criteria and write a formal review

## Resources

- About the play: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noises\\_Off](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noises_Off) and, to purchase the play <http://www.amazon.com/Noises-Off-Michael-Frayn/dp/1400031605>
- Play within a play: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080502094615AA62UYy>
- Theater [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_basic\\_theatre\\_topics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_basic_theatre_topics)