



â??A Machine Built to Break Downâ??: Pioneer Theatre Companyâ??s *Noises Off* Delivers a Carefully Orchestrated Collapse

Description

SALT LAKE CITY, UT â?? Farce is a genre that thrives on collapse, but only if the machinery underneath is airtight. Pioneer Theatre Companyâ??s revival of *Noises Off*â??written by Michael Frayn and directed by Shelley Butlerâ??makes this principle its guiding thesis. Across three iterations of the same act, each one more unhinged than the last, the production leans into precision as the scaffolding for chaos. The result is a lively and impressively executed evening that celebrates the strange labor of theatre-making itself.

This isnâ??t the most staggering or emotionally resonant piece PTC has ever produced, but what the production lacks in sheer astonishment, it makes up for in craft: clean pacing, excellent physical work, and a design team working at the top of their game. It is, in short, a strong, satisfying farceâ??and completely worth your time and money.

Joyful, chaotic, and meticulously engineeredâ??PTCâ??s *Noises Off* is farce at its finest.

Farce in Context: A Lineage of Carefully Orchestrated Disaster

Across 900 years, the throughline remains constant: farce is the art of watching a world unravel faster than its characters can repair it and laughing not just at the collapse, but at the skill with which it is created. *Noises Off* stands at the center of this tradition: not its origin, but its most precise modern articulation.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, playwrights like Molière, Marivaux, and Carlo Goldoni had elevated farce into a linguistic and social art. While commedia dellâ??arte relied on bodies in motion, French farce emphasized verbal agility and satire. In England, strict censorship laws pushed bawdy humor and political critique into subtextâ??making physical comedy an even more vital storytelling tool.

A scene from a theatrical production featuring two characters on stage: one sitting on the ground playing Vincent Randazzo and Avanthika Srinivasan in **The Triumph of Love** by Molière, Marivaux (Photo Credit: Liza Voll.)

During the 19th century, farce crystallized into two dominant styles: the broad physical tradition inherited from commedia and the sharper, verbally driven mode perfected by Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau. Feydeau's intricate bedroom farces—crowded with doors, mistaken identities, and snowballing misunderstandings—established the blueprint for modern farce. Feydeau essentially invented the modern rules: too many doors, too many lies, and comic inevitability.

A final key evolution came in 1920s Britain, where Ben Travers and the Aldwych farces ushered in an era of domestic chaos and rapid-fire timing. Their influence shaped mid-century playwrights like Noël Coward and Alan Ayckbourn, whose precise rhythms and character-driven absurdity form the immediate ancestors of the farce we recognize today. Ayckbourn's clean, architectural timing—his clockwork-like scene structures—directly anticipates Frayn's structural ingenuity, making *Noises Off* feel like both a culmination of and a playful departure from the British farce tradition.

A comedic scene from a play featuring five actors in exaggerated poses, set against a backdrop of w Actors (L&R) Amy Wright, Deborah Rush, Brian Murray (Iying), Dorothy Loudon & Jim Piddock in the Broadway production of **Noises Off**.

Although *Noises Off* is often treated as the definitive farce, the genre's modern machinery predates Frayn. Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (1952), while not a farce itself, provided a durable mystery template ripe for parody. Christopher Durang's *The Actor's Nightmare* (1981) pushed that impulse further, finding comedy in theatrical panic by thrusting an unprepared performer into a play they do not recognize. These works primed audiences to delight in staged disaster

Then came *Noises Off* (1982), the watershed moment. Frayn didn't merely write a farce—he exposed its hidden mechanics. The play crystallized a form built on repetition, collapsing performance, and the porous boundary between backstage chaos and onstage illusion. Nearly every goes wrong—comedy of the last forty years traces its dramaturgical DNA to this exquisitely engineered collapse.

Its influence radiates into Irish and British comedies of the 1990s and 2000s, which—though not traditional farces—share farce's fascination with spiraling breakdowns. Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (1996) and Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) revel in doubling, miscommunication, escalating absurdity, and violence teetering on the grotesque.

Two actors on stage engage in a dramatic and comedic chase; one is dressed as a police officer and Photo Credit: Concord Theatricals. **The 39 Steps**.

The mid-2000s revived meticulously choreographed catastrophe with Patrick Barlow's four-actor stage adaptation of *The 39 Steps* (2005), a quick-change spoof that turned limitation into comic engine. A decade later, Mischief Theatre transformed disaster into a full commercial brand: *The Play That Goes Wrong* (2012), *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* (2013), *A Christmas Carol Goes Wrong* (2017), *The Comedy About a Bank Robbery* (2016), and the BBC's *The Goes Wrong Show* (2019–2021). These works perfected Frayn's insight: **the performance falling apart is the performance**.

Viewed across this lineage, *Noises Off* remains the pivotal hinge. Everything after it—*The 39 Steps*, the Mischief Theatre universe of intentional incompetence—owes a debt to Frayn's revelation that farce endures not because things collapse, but because artists make collapse look effortless. In many ways, the farcical brilliance of *The Play That Goes Wrong* and the modern disaster-comedy lineage it represents traces its blueprint back to Frayn's invention. *Noises Off* is not merely part of farce history—it is the moment modern farce became self-aware.

A group of actors and crew members are engaged in a chaotic theatrical scene, surrounded by a richly detailed set. Cast on stage during *The Play That Goes Wrong*. Photo Credit: Kenny Wax Ltd.

Noises Off is the rare farce that turns its own breakdown into the punchline—and the craft behind it into the real spectacle.

What Is *Noises Off*?

First premiered in London in 1982, Frayn's *Noises Off* is a comedy that turns theatre itself into both subject and punchline. Built around a "play within a play," *Nothing On*, the production repeats its first act three times: first as a disastrous dress rehearsal, then from the backstage vantage point where chaos reigns, and finally as the unraveling end of a bedraggled tour.

Frayn conceived the idea after realizing that one of his own farces was unintentionally funnier from the wings than from the auditorium. *Noises Off* transforms that observation into a masterclass of theatrical engineering. Its rotating doorways, multiplying sardines, escalating violence, running nosebleeds, and increasingly incoherent burglar scenes arise from a meticulous dramaturgical design that exposes how offstage tension inevitably bleeds into onstage performance.

Over the decades, the play has become a staple of professional and community theatres alike, revered for its technical difficulty, its meta-theatrical wit, and its affectionate satire of the beautiful, maddening labor of making theatre.

Scene from the play *Noises Off* featuring three characters: a woman in a red dress, a woman in a black dress, and a man in a white shirt. Olivia Kaufmann, Linda Mugleston, and Rhett Guter | Credit: BW Productions

Bodies as Instruments, Timing as Language

Among a uniformly committed ensemble, **Rhett Guter (Garry LeJeune)** delivers the standout performance of the night. A New York-based actor, director, choreographer, and magician, Guter returns to Pioneer Theatre Company following memorable turns in *White Christmas*, *Elf*, and *Sweet Charity*. He appeared as Rooster Hannigan in the national tour of *Annie* opposite Whoopi Goldberg, and his multidisciplinary background shows: his physical comedy is astonishingly elastic, precise, and delightfully unpredictable without ever tipping into caricature. Even Guter's linguistic spiral, his perpetual "you know?" becomes a running joke that gathers force as the evening unfolds. Guter treats the stage like a kinetic text, each gesture landing with the clarity and timing of punctuation.

Linda Mugleston (Dotty Otley) has appeared in more than a dozen Broadway productions—including *The Music Man*, *My Fair Lady*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Beautiful*, *Cinderella*, *Anything Goes*, *Into the Woods*, *Nine*, and *Kiss Me, Kate*. A frequent and beloved presence at PTC, she brings

her signature blend of precision, warmth, and sly comic intelligence to Dotty. Her choreography with the sardines—dropping them, forgetting them, weaponizing them—becomes a kind of farcical grammar all its own. Mugleston crafts Dotty as a woman determined to hold her own chaos together through sheer force of will.

Terence Archie (Frederick Fellowes)—a Broadway veteran whose credits include *Company*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, *Rocky the Musical*, and *Ragtime*—is one of the production's most satisfying surprises. Archie turns Frederick's habitual nosebleeds, triggered by violence, stress or confusion, into a recurring gag that mirrors the play's unraveling. His impeccable timing transforms a simple physical bit into a character-defining score of escalating absurdity.

Kilty Reidy (Tim Allgood) is endearing as the exhausted stage manager who seems to be aging in real time. A seasoned Broadway and national tour veteran (*Mary Poppins*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Matilda*, *Billy Elliott*), Reidy brings finely honed comic timing to the role of a man fraying at every seam. His earnestness becomes the emotional counterweight to the absurdity unfolding around him, grounding the chaos with a weary sincerity that makes Tim's unraveling as funny as it is relatable.

Sarah Marie Joyce makes an outstanding Pioneer Theatre Company debut as **Belinda Blair**, offering one of the production's most controlled and quietly impressive comedic performances. Blair—the ever-cheerful mediator, explainer, and tension-smoother. With crisp precision and buoyant generosity, her timing is razor-sharp.

Joyce's professional background shows in her clarity and confidence: she recently appeared in *Normalcy* at Playwrights Horizons, *Twelfth Night* at The Old Globe (directed by Kathleen Marshall), and *Murder on the Orient Express* at Syracuse Stage, with television credits including *Blue Bloods*. A graduate of the Stella Adler Studio and The Old Globe/USD MFA program, Joyce brings a blend of training, intelligence, and comedic finesse that makes Belinda's optimism both believable and invaluable. Her performance provides essential glue in a world built to fall apart.

Olivia Kaufmann (Brooke Ashton) leans fully into the delicious absurdity of Brooke's single-mindedness. Kaufmann, who appeared on Broadway as Janis in *Mean Girls*, uses precision stillness, razor-sharp eye focus, and hilariously earnest commitment to create a Brooke who is both oblivious and unstoppable. Her physical bits—particularly the upstairs-downstairs choreography—are executed with fierce technical clarity.

Robert Mammana (Lloyd Dallas) anchors the chaos with a performance that is equal parts exasperation, authority, and barely concealed panic. Returning to PTC after *Prayer for the French Republic* and *Mary Stuart*, Mammana brings Broadway credentials (*Les Misérables*) and national tour experience (*Show Boat*, *Les Misérables*, *The Sound of Music*) to bear on a role that requires command without control. His comedic frustration becomes a dramaturgical engine as he tries—and fails—to corral the world around him.

A group of actors in colorful costumes poses in front of a large backdrop that reads 'Nothing On'.
The Company | Credit: BW Productions

David Manis (Selsdon Mowbray) brings veteran grace to the aging, intermittently sober burglar. Returning for his fourteenth PTC production, Manis deploys decades of stage and screen experience (including his cult-favorite turn as a telekinetic weatherman on *The X-Files*) with understated brilliance.

His entrances grow funnier as the play frays; his commitment to the running gag is a master class in slow-burn comedy.

Avneet Kaur Sandhu (Poppy Norton-Taylor) delivers a grounded, emotionally resonant performance as Poppy, the overworked and under-appreciated stage manager whose breaking point is always just one cue away. Sandhu's reactions—tiny flinches, swallowed frustrations, soft implosions—provide a subtle counter-melody to the larger chaos. Her earnest attempts to keep the show afloat heighten both the stakes and the comedy of the larger ensemble.

Together, this cast operates like a finely tuned machine designed to fall apart. Every door slam, missed cue, misdelivered line, and interpersonal meltdown depends on actors who execute with absolute clarity—proving once again that farce may look chaotic, but its success relies on extraordinary discipline.

Theater stage set designed for a production of 'Noises Off,' featuring a detailed, multi-level backdrop
Linda Mugleston, Avneet Kaur Sandhu, Rhett Guter, and Terence Archie | Credit: BW
Productions

Act Two: The Beautiful Logic of Breakdown

Act Two is the moment that separates amateur *Noises Off* productions from masterful ones. PTC's version leans into the density, allowing the backstage world to devolve into an all-out, wordless war.

Doors slam like weapons. Love triangles detonate in silence. Props become projectiles. Frederick's nosebleeds multiply. And the burglar bits—already absurd—snowball into a full-on comic onslaught as Selsdon's entrances gain chaotic momentum.

There is no way to catch everything happening. Butler does not attempt to tidy the mess; instead, she allows the audience to feel the play's centrifugal force. The pleasure is not in tracking each beat, but in surrendering to the overwhelming abundance of action.

A Scenic Design That Earns Its Applause

The first act rotation of **Paige Hathaway's set** earned an audible reaction from the audience—and deservedly so. The transition from the polished onstage world of the fictional *Nothing On* to the grimy backstage labyrinth is stunning in its clarity and believability.

Hathaway provides the production's most jaw-dropping asset: a fully realized, beautifully functional rotating set that earned an audible gasp from the audience. Every slamming door, staircase, and cramped backstage nook becomes part of the choreography. Hathaway's design doesn't simply house the farce; it performs it.

This isn't merely a set; it's a partner in the farce. Every stairway, slamming door, hidden nook, and too-narrow passage becomes part of the choreography. Farce lives or dies by the reliability of its architecture, and Hathaway's design is a triumph.

Three actors on stage, displaying exaggerated facial expressions and body language, conveying a
Robert Mammana, Linda Mugleston, and Sarah Marie Joyce | Credit: BW Productions

Under Shelley Butler's direction, PTC's ensemble turns theatrical mayhem into a masterclass in timing.

Design & Creative Team Highlights

Pioneer Theatre Company's *Noises Off* works as well as it does because its creative team understands that farce is an architectural art form—every door, cue, and split-second decision must support the spiraling collapse onstage. Under **Director Shelley Butler**, the production embraces that precision as its engine. Butler keeps the pacing tight but never rushed, allowing each beat of chaos to feel both inevitable and freshly surprising. Her approach treats farce not as fluff, but as a technical discipline—and the result shows.

Costume Designer Mariko Ohigashi balances character clarity with backstage practicality. Her choices ground the actors' personas—Dotty's sensible housecoat, Brooke's eye-catching lingerie—while supporting the frantic quick-changes and physicality required for Acts Two and Three.

Lighting Designer Aaron Spivey gives the show its crisp comedic timing. His clean transitions, precise cues, and backstage shadows subtly articulate the world's shifting logic, guiding the audience's eye through moments of intentional overload.

Sound Designer Bryce Robinette adds another layer of carefully controlled chaos. Doors thud, props crash, and backstage mayhem lands with heightened theatricality but never overwhelms the performers. His soundscape sharpens the rhythm of the farce.

Kate Casalino's wig, hair, and makeup design supports both character caricature and backstage realism—sleek where it must be, undone where the story demands it. These elements quietly deepen the visual humor without calling attention to themselves.

Dialect Coach Stacey Jenson ensures linguistic consistency, particularly in Act One's heightened British comedy stylings. Her work keeps the world believable even as everything in it goes off the rails.

A scene from the play *Noises Off* featuring four actors interacting on a couch, showcasing comedy a Sarah Marie Joyce, Olivia Kaufmann, Linda Mugleston, and Terence Archie | Credit: BW Productions

Composer Will Van Dyke contributes a musical palette that feels playful and nimble, framing scene transitions with a wink rather than a punchline.

Fight Director David Christopher DuVal shapes the production's escalating physical violence—trips, falls, entanglements—with astonishing specificity. The comedy lands because the danger feels real while the performers remain safe.

Intimacy Coordinator Alexandra Harbold helps navigate the production's delicate entanglements—romantic, chaotic, and otherwise—with clarity and care, allowing performers to play boldly within secure boundaries.

Finally, **Production Stage Manager James O. Hansen** is the unseen architect of the show's precision. His backstage calling is its own kind of farce choreography, ensuring that timing, transitions, and mechanical cues align with the cast's escalating madness. And **Casting Director Karie Koppel** assembles an ensemble whose physical instincts and comedic rhythms feel beautifully matched—no small feat in a play that demands virtuosity.

Together, this creative team builds the invisible machinery that makes *Noises Off* look effortless—an illusion as demanding as any farcical gag.

Form, Repetition, and the Labor of Performance

One of the pleasures of PTC's *Noises Off* is its refusal to treat farce as lesser theatre. Butler understands that repetition—three iterations of the same act—is the play's dramaturgical argument. Each version reveals what the previous concealed. Each collapse exposes the scaffolding beneath performance: the labor, the ego, the exhaustion, and the attempt to hold it all together.

In this sense, the production feels almost archival. We watch a performance that documents its own breakdown, a record of theatrical labor that can only exist through embodied repetition. It is theatre as palimpsest, each iteration overwriting the last.

Three actors dressed in long coats and hats perform a comedic scene on stage, while a woman with
Kilty Reidy, Linda Mugleston, Robert Mammana, and David Manis | Credit: BW Productions

Audience Response & Final Thoughts

The audience laughed throughout, and the energy remained steady, even if the final ovation wasn't unanimous. That feels appropriate: farce is not universal, nor does it strive to be. What matters is execution—and here, PTC delivers.

Pioneer Theatre Company's *Noises Off* is a spirited, well-crafted revival of one of the most technically demanding comedies ever written. It succeeds on the strength of its ensemble, its jaw-dropping scenic design, and its willingness to embrace the glorious excess at the heart of farce.

It is joyful, chaotic, and deeply theatrical. And yes—the sardines, the nosebleeds, and the burglars absolutely land. It may not be everyone's favorite show, but I thought it was brilliant—and honestly, I'll probably go again.

WHEN

December 5-20, 2025

TIMES

Monday – Thursday, 7:00 PM

Friday and Saturday, 7:30 PM

Saturday, 2:00 PM

WHERE

Noises Off will be performed at Simmons Pioneer Memorial Theatre.

300 South 1400 East, Salt Lake City

PRICES

\$44 - \$57

Students K - 12 or ages 5-18 are half-price Monday - Thursday

- *Curtain Call for All* (name your own price) performances: December 5-20, 2025. *Curtain Call for All* tickets for *Noises Off* will be available starting Monday, December 1 at 10:00 AM.
- ASL-Interpreted performances: Monday, December 8 at 7:00 PM.
- Discounts are also available for University of Utah students, staff, and faculty. Visit PioneerTheatre.org/UniversityofUtah for more details.

MORE INFO

The PTC Box Office is located in Simmons Pioneer Memorial Theatre:

300 S 1400 E.

Box Office: 801-581-6961

Open 10:00 AM - 6:00 PM, Monday - Friday

PTC Show Listing: [Noises Off](#)

CAST

Frederick Fellowes - TERENCE ARCHIE*

Garry LeJeune - RHETT GUTER*

Belinda Blair - SARAH MARIE JOYCE*

Brooke Ashton - OLIVIA KAUFMANN*

Lloyd Dallas - ROBERT MAMMANA*

Selsdon Mowbray - DAVID MANIS*

Dotty Otley - LINDA MUGLESTON*

Tim Allgood - KILTY REIDY*

Poppy Norton-Taylor - AVNEET KAUR SANDHU

CREATIVE TEAM

Director: SHELLEY BUTLER

Scenic Designer: PAIGE HATHAWAY

Costume Designer: MARIKO OHIGASHI

Lighting Designer: AARON SPIVEY

Sound Designer: BRYCE ROBINETTE

Wig, Hair, and Makeup Designer: KATE CASALINO

Dialect Coach: STACEY JENSON

Composer: WILL VAN DYKE

Fight Director: DAVID CHRISTOPHER DUVAL

Intimacy Coordinator: ALEXANDRA HARBOLD

Production Stage Manager: JAMES O. HANSEN*

Casting by KARIE KOPPEL

Category

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