



**The American Survival Guide to *Noises Off***

Compiled by Austin Rae Doty

with acknowledgements to **Old Vic New Voices Education** and **A Noise Within**

Table Of Contents

2-4. Glossary

5-6. About the Playwright

7. The Love Triangle

8. Map of the *Nothing On* tour

9-11. Michael Frayn's Character Biographies

12-16. Interviews With the Cast

18. What is Dramaturgy?

Glossary:

British and theatre terms in no particular order

- **Love, sweetheart, honey, etc:** A common term used among friends and acquaintances. It is considered polite, and very British, to use this terminology with a range of people. However, the terms of endearment can be used more romantically with the right tone, or condescendingly with the wrong tone
- **Posset mill:** Hot beverage of boiled milk, wine or ale (which curdles the milk), and sometimes spices such as nutmeg or cinnamon. The drink was often used as a cold remedy or a sleep aide.
- **Fortnight:** Two weeks.
- **Service Quarters:** A room (or rooms) in old houses or mansions where the servants or housekeepers live.
- **Airing Cupboard:** A closet of sorts where the boiler or water heater is kept. Because it is generally a warm room, sheets and linens will often be hung in there to dry.
- **Valium:** A sedative used to treat anxiety, muscle spasms, and seizures.
- **Calls:** The stage manager will be able to communicate to both the actors in the dressing rooms, as well as the audience via a tannoy.

- **Tannoy:** A microphone-loudspeaker system. Often used in theaters and grade schools to make announcements.
- **Lavatories:** Restrooms. Toilets and sinks only.
- **The Stalls:** Orchestra seating, often has its own bar, separate from the lobby.
- **Postprandial:** The period after dinner or lunch.
- **“The Gear”:** British slang equivalent of calling someone great.
- **VAT:** Value Added Tax
- **Aired bed:** To strip the mattress down and leave it exposed to the air, possibly leaving it out in the sun on a balcony.
- **Hot water bottle:** A container often made of a rubbery material, filled with hot water, often to warm up a bed or to apply to a specific part of the body to soothe muscles.
- **Pigeonhouse:** Mrs. Clackett means pigeonhole, the name of the compartments in a writing desk.
- **Buffoon:** A person who tries to be funny, but only ends up looking foolish.
- **Mullion:** Vertical bar between panes of glass on a window.
- **Bric-a-Brac:** Misc. objects of little value.
- **Loo:** Toilet.
- **Myra Hess (Dame):** Famous British pianist. Died in 1965. During WWII, when concert halls had to be blocked out at night for protection from German bombers, she organized over 2,000 lunchtime performances. She commenced this practice during the London Blitz.
- **“Prosecuted for incitement:”** Offense under the common law of

England and Wales; pressuring someone to commit a crime.

- **Bullion vaults:** Unallocated gold and silver kept in a vault.
- **Marbella:** City in Spain on the coast.
- **999:** UK equivalent of 911
- **Taps:** Sink hot and cold dials. The UK typically has one faucet head for warm water and another for cold water in a single sink.
- **Tea service:** A complete tea set.
- **WC/ WC Suite:** Water Closet, bathroom. May be a room with just a toilet and sink, or may include a toilet, sink, and bath.
- **Ballcocks:** a floating ball mechanism used in filling water tanks.
- **Bust-up:** A separation of lovers.
- **Beginners:** The actors who will appear first on stage.

- **Madeira:** Four islands off the northwest coast of Africa, though technically belonging to Portugal.
- **Richard III:** Had severe scoliosis, which is why the back problem joke is funny.
- **Digs:** Place, crib, living quarters.
- **Oxfam:** Oxford Committee for Famine Relief.
- **OAP's:** Old Age Pensioner; living off of retirement pension.
- **Ministrations:** The provision of assistance or care.
- **Burnous:** A garment of North African and Middle Eastern origin. It is a cloak with a hood typically made out of wool.
- **Pulling chain gesture:** It is how some toilets are flushed. The water tank can be suspended above the toilet, pulling the chain allowed it to flush.

### About The Playwright

Michael Frayn was born on September 8, 1933 in Mill Hill, London to a working-class family. His father was a deaf asbestos salesman, and his mother was a shop assistant. Frayn attended Sutton High for Boys until, unfortunately, his mother passed away when he was twelve. After her passing, Frayn's father couldn't afford the tuition and Frayn was placed in the selective, yet public, Kingston Grammar School. Once he graduated, he completed two years of compulsory National Service (military). During this period, he studied Russian and worked as an interpreter (he would later on be known as "Britain's finest translator" of Anton Chekhov, a famous Russian playwright).

After his service was completed, Frayn went on to study Moral Sciences (philosophy) at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. During his time there, he joined the Cambridge Footlights, a student theatre and comedy club. He began writing material for the group but hit a bump in the road when a play he wrote the majority of, *Zounds*, was not asked to be performed in London (when their group had asked in previous years). The experience discouraged him and he moved away from theatre and focused on journalism.

Throughout Frayn's journalist career, he wrote for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and several columns and travel features for a myriad of other publications. From 1960 to 1990, Frayn was married, and divorced to Gillian Palmer and had three daughters together. He also wrote several well-received novels before he found himself back in the theatre. His first show, *The Two of Us* premiered in 1970, and sparked his inspiration for *Noises Off*. While watching from

backstage one night, he thought it was much funnier to observe from the back of the set than the front. The epiphany struck him to write a play that shows both sides of the theatre world.

The show first began as *Exits*, a one-act he wrote for a charity event in 1977, but he worked on it until it eventually blossomed into *Noises Off*. It premiered in 1982, and had a successful five-year run. He is even credited as reviving the American farce! His life since *Noises Off* consisted of many successful works, including more farces, dramas, and translations. He married Claire Tomalin in 1993, has lost against her in Whitbread Book of the Year. His work continues to be produced across the UK and United States and his translations continue to be read. Frayn is currently 83 years old and has yet to decide if he has retired.

“I haven’t come to the theatre to hear about other people’s problems. I’ve come to be taken out of myself, and, preferably, not put back again.” –Michael Frayn

# Love "Trangle"





Map of Nothing On Tour



Michael Frayn's character Biographies

Nothing On: Behind the Dressing Room Doors

**Dotty Otley**

(Mrs Clackett) makes a welcome return to the stage to create the role of Mrs. Clackett after playing Mrs. Hackett, Britain's most famous lollipop lady ("Ooh! I can't 'ardly 'old me lolly up!") in over 320 episodes of TV's ON THE ZEBRAS. Her many stage appearances include her critically acclaimed portrayal of Fru Sackett, the comic char in in Strindberg's SCENES FROM THE CHARNELHOUSE. Her first appearance ever? In a school production of HENRY IV PART I as the old bag-lady, Mrs. Duckett.

**Belinda Blair**

(Flavia Brent) has been on the stage since the age of four, when she made her debut in SINBAD THE SAILOR at the Croydon Hippodrome as one of Miss Toni Tanner's Ten Tapping Tots. She subsequently danced

her way around this country, Southern Africa, and the Far East in shows like ZIPPEY-DOODA! And HERE COMES LES GIRLS! More recently she has been seen in such comedy hits as DON'T MR DUDDLE!, WHO'S BEEN SLEEPING IN MY BED?, and TWICE TWO IS SEX. She is married to scriptwriter Terry Wough, who has contributes lead-in material to most of TV's char shoes. They have two sons and three retrievers.

**Garry Lejeune**

(Roger Tramplemain) while still at drama school won the coveted Laetitia Daintyman Medal for Violence. His television works include POLICE!, CRIME SQUAD, SWAT, FORENSIC, and THE NICK, but he is probably best known as 'Cornetto', the ice-

cream salesman who stirs the hearts of all

### **Selsdon Mowbray**

(Burglar) first 'trod the boards' at the age of 12- playing Lucius in a touring production of JULIUS CAESAR, with his father, the great Chelmsford Mowbray, in the lead.

Since then he has served in various local reps, and claims to have appeared with every company to have toured Shakespeare in the past half-century, working his way up through the Mustardseeds and the various Boys and Sons of, to the Balthazars, Benvolios, and Le Beaus; then the Selenders Lennoxws, Tinculos, Snouts, and Froths; and graduating to the Scroops, Poloniuses and Aguecheeks. His most recent film appearance was as Outraged ensioner in GREEN WILLIES.

### **Brooke Ashton**

(Vicki) is probably best known as the girl wearing nothing but 'good, honest, natural froth' in the Hauptbahnohotbrau lager commercial. Her television appearances

the lollipop ladies in ON THE ZEBRAS.

range from Girl at Infants' School in ON THE ZEBRAS to Girl in Massage Parlor in ON PROBATION. Cinemagoers saw her in THE GIRL IN ROOM 14, where she played the girl in room 312.

### **Frederick Fellowes**

(Phillip Brent) has appeared in many popular television series, including CALLING CASUALTY, CARDIAC ARREST!, OUT-PATIENTS, and IN-PATIENTS. On stage he was most recently seen in the controversial all-male version of the TROJAN WOMAN. He is happily married, and lives near Crawley, where his wife breeds pedigree dog. 'If she ever leaves me,' he says, 'it will be for an Irish wolfhound!'

### **Robin Housemonger**

(Author) was born in Worcester Park, Surrey, into a family 'unremarkable in every way except for an aunt with red hair who used to sing all the high twiddly bits from

THE MERRY WIDOW over the tea-table.’ He claims to have been the world’s most unsuccessful gents hosiery wholesaler, and began writing ‘to fill the long hours between one hosiery order and the next.’ He turned this experience into his very first play, SOCKS BEFORE MARRIAGE, which ran in the West End for nine years. Two of his subsequent plays, BRIEFS ENCOUNTER and HANKY PANKY, broke the box office records in Perth, Western Australia.

NOTHING ON is his seventeenth play.

### **Lloyd Dallas**

(Director) ‘read English at Cambridge, and stage craft at the local benefits office.’ He has directed plays in most parts of Britain, winning the South of Scotland Critics’ Circle Special Award in 1969. In 1972, he

directed a highly successful season for the National Theatre of Sri Lanka. In recent years he has probably become best known for his brilliant series of Shakespeare in Summer’ productions in the parks of the inner London boroughs.

## Interview with the cast

### **Annabel Wall**

*What challenges have you faced while getting to know your character?*

- A challenge I faced playing Dotty/Clackett was all her relationships with the other characters. Dotty kisses Freddy and Lloyd, and finds herself in sexually precarious situations frequently throughout the show. Finding a motivation behind such a physical action has been an interesting process.

*Describe your personal challenge with playing a character who is playing a character.*

- A personal challenge I have with my character is playing age. There is a distinct difference between Dotty's elderliness and Clackett's. I was able to secure Dotty's earlier in the process, but Clackett's almost senile bumbling elderliness was harder to capture understandably.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- My biggest challenge with the blocking was the props. The goal is to make the various sardines gimmicks seem forgetful and funny, but really it takes so much thought to remember when I need to leave a plate on stage, versus when I need to have a plate given to me, versus when I need to be looking for sardines but have the newspaper etcetera.

### **Bruce Gammonley**

*What challenges have you faced while getting to know your character?*

- Pretending to be five decades older than I actually am is a bit difficult. It definitely makes moving around the set a lot slower. In addition, it is hard to know when Selsdon is actually drunk, or just incompetent.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- With a show like this, it's extremely hard to keep track of all the props onstage. I was lucky in that Selsdon has only one motivation, and that is the whisky bottle. All of his moves are in order to get him closer to the whisky while not letting the others know what he is doing.

*Share a backstage secret.*

- Method acting is used a lot these days, but it is not always the best route to take. Someone like Selsdon is not a role to method act.

## **Michelle Schrader**

*What do you enjoy most about the process of a show?*

- My favorite thing about the process of a show is the sense of unity between the cast and crew. It is an incredible feeling to be a part of a group of people working so hard to create the best possible production.

*What is different about this show in comparison to ones you have worked on in the past?*

- This show relies heavily on physical gags and humor. In the past I have never worked on a show that had to be so intricately timed out and planned. This show definitely has a ton of moving parts that have to line up just right, so that the desired effect can land with the audience.

*What challenges have you faced while getting to know your character?*

- It has been a challenge to find the delicate balances of Brooke in trying to give her depth and not make her a stereotype. It is easy to place the broad stereotype of “blonde bimbo” on her, but I wanted to create more depth in her character. I decided to justify her distracted nature with things like an interest in meditation and palm reading. I also wanted to find depth in her emotionally with regards to what she actually cares about in the theater world as well as romantically with Loyd.

## **Brandon Fisher**

*How has your character developed throughout the rehearsal process and what have you arrived at?*

- When I first imagined Tim, I immediately jumped to the conclusion that he was this loveable, sappy guy who was pushed around by everyone and kept making mistakes. As we moved through rehearsals however I started to realize that Tim actually takes his job quite seriously. Also, I realized that Tim only really lets Lloyd (the shows director) push him around. Having come to these conclusions, I realized that Tim is actually very passionate about the show and wants to do whatever he needs to make sure that it all goes well. Let’s see if it does!

*What is different about this show in comparison to ones you have worked on in the past?*

- The majority of my past productions were done in high school so I was very used to one style of doing things. In high school it seemed as though we had many more weeks of preparation time, and we did not get to work on our actual set usually until a week or two before a performance. It has been really nice to have the opportunity to not only work on a set early on, but also to work with props, and costume pieces since the very beginning. I enjoy watching how quickly and professionally the faculty works together to prepare everything which the actors need in the show, and in rehearsals.

*Describe your experience working in a different era.*

- It was actually kind of weird getting acquainted with a design crew who took time period so seriously. In past productions, the only pieces of design which seemed even the least bit era oriented were the costumes. It feels like the crew was taking things very realistically here, so adjusting my acting methods and verbal expressions to meet the needs of the 1970's in Britain was an interesting and somewhat difficult challenge. Oh, and don't even get me started on learning to pronounce all of these British words!

### **Zack Rickert**

*What do you enjoy most about the process of a show?*

- I always enjoy just creating a character throughout the whole process. It is very interesting to start from scratch and figure out all the clues left in the play that tell me who the person I'm playing is. And it is really rewarding to be able to see that fully fleshed out character by the end of the process.

*How has your relationship with the accent and dialect evolved?*

- The accent has definitely become more natural and easy to do. Particularly with the lines it is this way because of the repetition, but I often find myself accidentally slipping into an English accent in my everyday life. It confuses a lot of people including myself.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- It took quite a while and a lot of patience to block act 2 — in which there is very little dialogue apart from *Nothing On*. I have never had to work so hard just to figure remember what I am doing and how to say things without words. It was tricky, but I definitely think I am a better performer for having done it.

## **Nicole Conklin**

*What do you enjoy most about the process of a show?*

- I love bringing a script to life with a talented cast. I was thrilled to be working with this group of actors! Our cast feels like a family. We spend so much time together creating this show. The bond that we develop is crucial because it gives us a foundation to build upon when we dive into the character development. It gives us chemistry with each other and helps us interact. We have to trust each other and teach each other and as exhausting as it is, it is a remarkable experience.

*Describe your personal challenge with playing a character who is playing a character.*

- For me, it was to develop two personalities; as Belinda and as Flavia. You have to have the separation; otherwise you are only playing one character and the show is less believable. Flavia is more like a stereotypical housewife that lives in a nice house and has nice things and tends to take care of her husband. Belinda is much more genuine and caring and loves her crew and wants to make sure everyone is happy and that everything is running smoothly. She tries very hard to be everyone's best friend. What makes comedy so funny is when the actors believe in their characters reality. When you believe in your lines, the jokes aren't funny because it isn't funny to the character. The biggest reward is the when the audience responds and laughs.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- Oh man, where to begin! For starters, you have to be in relatively good shape for Act 2. There is a time where I have to run up and down the stairs several times and by the time I go on stage I am completely winded – but I have to deliver my lines as if I wasn't! My fellow actors also have to run around. At one point I leap on Garry while he has an axe. The timing in this show is SO important. Everything is so carefully placed and timed so we all have to work together to make sure we all have our correct cues down so that every action has a purpose and every action makes sense.

## **Bradley Calahan**

*How has your relationship with the accent and dialect evolved?*

- Well, I've worked once before on a show that required a British accent in *The Canterville Ghost*. We were taught a lot about the technicalities of it and how to pronounce certain words, and I think that experience really helped with this production. I have noticed that, with how much time we spend in rehearsals, I often end up talking in a British accent in day-to-day life without even noticing, like I'm just picking it up. I've actually had to make a conscious effort to stop.



*What is different about this show in comparison to ones you have worked on in the past?*

- I've never worked on a more complex and complicated show before. There's just always so much going on at once and you constantly have to be thinking about what comes next. The rehearsal process was also very different than anything I've ever done before. Usually we work through the entire show and block it and memorize it all at once, but due to this show's complicated nature, we had to break it up into sections, so that we didn't actually finish blocking and memorizing till close to the end of the rehearsal process. That made me really nervous at first and took me out of my comfort zone, but it all came together in the end.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- When we first began rehearsing the show I was at a loss as to how we were going to manage it. It, honestly, didn't seem like it was going to be possible, especially in the short amount of time that we had to put it together. The complex blocking—especially in Act 2—was a real challenge at first, trying to figure out where you are and when. But working with a great cast and crew, it all came together much more easily than I was expecting, and the process moved a lot faster than I have ever seen it move in previous productions I've been involved with.

## **Claire Oliver**

*What challenges have you faced while getting to know your character?*

- The challenge with Poppy is her internal struggle and being able to really understand why she is in love with this aggressive director. She tries to act professional when around the crew and cast, which is why her affair with Lloyd comes as such a shock to the cast members at the end of Act 1. I had a difficult time being able to add subtle glances or movements when she is interacting with Lloyd in order to hint that something is going on, but not so much as to seem really obvious about it. And I really like that she gets her moment in Act 2 to really show how she feels about Brooke and about Lloyd and her problematic situation.

*How has your relationship with the accent and dialect evolved?*

- I have always really enjoyed performing with specifically a British accent. It is really fun to change it up and over exaggerate the sounds of each word. Unlike some of my cast members I only had to have on dialect, so I got to really dig into a traditional London accent which was really fun! I liked being able to speak as if I had grown up in London my whole life. Some of my lines at first were kind of a mix of British and American dialect, but as the rehearsal process went on it became a lot easier to speak with just a British dialect. It has been a really exciting process!

*What do you enjoy most about the process of a show?*

- I really enjoy working with the cast. They have been the best part of this production. Everyone is so dedicated to the performance and to their characters and I really appreciate seeing so much passion for theatre among my peers. It is clear that we are all ready to put on an amazing show and to have a good time doing it!

### **Stephen Mackey**

*What do you enjoy most about the process of a show?*

- I really enjoy the development of the characters and figuring out how to play them and how to make the character as impactful as possible.

*What are some significant cultural differences that you've noticed between the British and the American?*

- There are a whole bunch of words that are used in Britain that we don't use in America, such as Stalls. Which apparently means the house seats.

*Describe your challenges and successes with the complex blocking.*

- I love the physicality of the blocking and the speed and timing. That is the most difficult part of this show is figuring out the timing of everything and your speed getting to certain places.

### What is Dramaturgy?

Dramaturgy, in short, is the study and application of theatre literature, history, research, and continuity. The dramaturg often provides packets, not unlike this one, to the director and the actors. Providing insight to the plays origins, history, playwright, and vocabulary, allows those involved to glean a better understanding of the production as a whole. With shows like *Noises Off*, it is especially important that the actors understand the cultural differences in the regional vocabulary, and the dialect thereof. Additionally, the distinct tastes of British humor as well as Michael Frayn's contribution to the revival of the farce. Overall, it is the job of the dramaturg is to make sure everyone has complete understanding of what is going on in the text.