

Noises Off Post-Show Activity: Review		
<i>Length</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>	<i>Content Area</i>
1-2 class periods (45 – 90 minutes each)	Middle School & High School	ELA, Theatre
Objective		Materials Needed
Students will analyze and reflect on the performance of <i>Noises Off</i> by expressing their understanding through a review of the play.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to the <i>Noises Off</i> Alley Re-Sourced guide • Paper and pen or laptops for writing • Whiteboard for group discussion • Story Map outline (included) • Example review (included)
Activity Overview		
<p><i>NOTE: This activity has been aligned with TEKS and Universal Design for Learning. TEKS can be found at the end of this document. Check out the “Notes” section for ideas on how to expand activities or provide additional scaffolding.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction Two Truths and a Lie 2. Example What is a Review? 3. Guided Practice Group Discussion 4. Independent Practice Writing Your Review 5. Reflection Headlines 		
1. Introduction Two Truths and a Lie		5 minutes
<p><i>Activity Steps</i></p> <p>a) Engage students with a quick round of “Two Truths and a Lie” about <i>Noises Off</i> (examples below, but feel free to use your own).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The play features a character repeatedly losing their contact lens and crawling around (true). - There’s a running gag with a plate of sardines (true). - The entire play takes place in a single location – the living room of a country house (lie). 		<p><i>Notes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can enhance the discussion by asking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was your initial reaction to the play? - What would you rate this play (1 out of 10, 5 stars, certified fresh, etc.)?

<p>2. Example What is a Review?</p>	<p>10 minutes</p>
<p><i>Activity Steps</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Present a sample play review of a different production, highlighting its structure and key components. b) Discuss the elements of theater that critics typically analyze (acting, directing, technical aspects). c) Explain the balance between objective analysis and subjective opinion in a review. d) Introduce specific theater terminology relevant to reviewing <i>Noises Off</i>. 	<p><i>Notes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of the Alley’s production of <i>The 39 Steps</i> (another farce) from Houston Press is included in this document. You can see the article online here. • A Story Map is included in this document. Encourage students to utilize this outline to organize their notes during this section and the guided practice. • A common misconception to address: A play review is not just a summary of the plot or a list of likes and dislikes.
<p>3. Guided Practice Group Discussion</p>	<p>25-30+ minutes</p>
<p><i>Activity Steps</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Divide the class into small groups, each focusing on a different aspect of the <i>Noises Off</i> production. b) Groups will brainstorm and discuss their assigned element (e.g., acting, set design, comedic timing). c) Each group will present their observations to the class, encouraging whole-class discussion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guide students in crafting effective thesis statements for their reviews during the group discussion. 	<p><i>Notes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a visible timer while the students are creating and give them verbal warnings during group work. • Structure outlines, sentence stems, and potential questions to answer in a review can be found in this resource from Austin Peay State University.

<p>4. Independent Practice Writing Your Review</p>	<p>15-20+ minutes</p>
<p><i>Activity Steps</i></p> <p>a) Students will begin drafting their 500-word play reviews.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of any provided templates and incorporation of class discussions. - Balance description, analysis, and personal opinion. <p><u>Extension Activity</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students can create a visual companion piece to their review, such as a poster or digital presentation that highlights key points and incorporates relevant imagery from the production. Production photos can be found at www.alleytheatre.org/plays/noises-off. 	<p><i>Notes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circulate to provide individual guidance and answer questions. • Offer multiple options for drafting: traditional writing, voice recording, or digital mind-mapping.
<p>5. Reflection Headlines</p>	<p>5-10 minutes</p>
<p><i>Activity Steps</i></p> <p>a) If your review had a headline, what would it be?</p> <p>b) Share with your neighbor.</p> <p>c) Who heard a headline from someone else that they thought was particularly good at getting to the core of things?</p>	<p><i>Notes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This activity is an Artful Thinking routine. You can learn more about this activity here and explore more thinking routines here.

TEKS			
TEKS – MS ELA	TEKS – HS ELA	TEKS – MS Theatre	TEKS – HS Theatre
<p>Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Drama (TEKS 110.5(b)(8)): Analyze and interpret the elements of drama, including character and plot.</p> <p>Writing/Writing Process (TEKS 110.5(b)(10)): Engage in the writing process to develop essays, storyboards, or scripts that articulate analyses of the play.</p> <p>Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts (TEKS 110.5(b)(11)): Write reflections focusing on themes, character dynamics, and personal responses to the performance.</p> <p>Speaking/Listening (TEKS 110.5(b)(12)): Participate in discussions and presentations, sharing work with peers.</p>	<p>Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Drama (TEKS 110.5(b)(8)): Analyze and interpret complex elements of drama, including character motivations and thematic depth.</p> <p>Writing/Writing Process (TEKS 110.5(b)(10)): Develop sophisticated written reflections through essays, storyboards, or scripts that demonstrate a deep understanding of the play.</p> <p>Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts (TEKS 110.5(b)(11)): Compose clear and coherent reflections that analyze themes, character dynamics, and personal insights regarding the performance.</p> <p>Speaking/Listening (TEKS 110.5(b)(12)): Engage in meaningful discussions and presentations, practicing advanced com. skills while providing peer feedback.</p>	<p>Theatre Arts I (TEKS 117.202(b)(1)): Analyze and interpret various forms of theatre, including the structure and elements of a play.</p> <p>Theatre Arts I (TEKS 117.202(b)(3)): Evaluate the roles of actors, directors, and playwrights, understanding their contributions to the theatrical experience.</p> <p>Theatre Arts I (TEKS 117.202(b)(4)): Demonstrate skills in performance and presentation through group activities and reflections on the play.</p> <p>Theatre Arts I (TEKS 117.202(b)(5)): Engage in collaborative projects, contributing to group discussions and providing feedback to peers.</p>	<p>Theatre Arts II, III, and IV (TEKS 117.202(b)(1)): Analyze and interpret complex forms of theatre.</p> <p>Theatre Arts II, III, and IV (TEKS 117.202(b)(3)): Evaluate the roles of actors, directors, and playwrights, understanding their contributions to the theatrical experience.</p> <p>Theatre Arts II, III, and IV (TEKS 117.202(b)(4)): Develop advanced skills in performance and presentation.</p> <p>Theatre Arts II, III, and IV (TEKS 117.202(b)(5)): Engage in collaborative projects, contributing to group discussions and providing feedback to peers.</p>

| STAGE |

The 39 Steps Goes Low Tech for Laughs

JESSICA GOLDMAN | JULY 27, 2017 | 11:51AM



Photo by **Christopher Diaz** Elizabeth Bunch and Todd Waite in the Alley Theatre's production of *The 39 Steps*.

The setup:

Whaddya get if you mix Alfred Hitchcock's suspense with Monty Python's humor? No, this isn't the setup for a joke about British film/TV masters and their respective genres. Rather, the mashup is a fitting description for this year's Alley Theatre murder mystery Summer Chills feature, *The 39 Steps*.

Originally a sweeping 1935 black-and-white classic Alfred Hitchcock heroes-and-dames movie, *The 39 Steps* is today perhaps better known for Patrick Barlow's 2006 adaptation, which turned the story into a farce, winning awards and delighting audiences in London, New York and beyond. Beyond in

this case already including Houston and the Alley, which originally produced the show in 2010.

Some of that original production remains intact for this iteration – lead actors Todd Waite and Elizabeth Bunch and director Mark Shanahan are reprising their duties. Two visiting artists, Bruce Warren and Mark Price, round out the cast on a set originally designed for the pre-renovated Alley stage, now adapted for the space's enhanced abilities.

The plot, of course, remains the same. Richard Hannay, a 37-year-old Canadian bachelor living in 1930s London, meets Annabella Schmidt, a mysterious woman on the run from foreign spies. He agrees to hide her in his apartment, but she is murdered in the middle of the night. Richard must then go on a wild chase to find the leader of the spy ring so he can clear himself of any connection to Annabella's murder and stop the spies from smuggling important national secrets out of the country.

The execution:

The scenic design is the runaway star of this production, but not in the way it usually is at the Alley. Unlike the ornately sumptuous set of last year's Summer Chiller, *Spider's Web*, or the projection-heavy, multimedia extravaganza that was the TUTS presentation of the comical murder mystery *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, the *39 Steps* set is about as low tech as you can get. Well, low tech for the Alley, anyway.

Framing the space is a large, tarnished bronze stage arch, supporting two private boxes on either side. The nearly bare stage is made up of a bleached wooden floor onto which are wheeled only a handful of items. Steamer trunks double as beds, desks, trains, cars and fireplaces, a leather club chair is sat on by almost everyone at one point, and a single door frame provides entry into and exit from all manner of situations and scenes. Scenic designer Hugh Landwehr throws in a few more odds and ends, but nowhere in sight are the big-ticket set items we're accustomed to seeing at the largest theater in town.

This unplugging, if you will, of the Alley's grandness is a breath of fresh air. Not only because it shows off the cleverness of the design team but because it forces director Mark Shanahan and his talented cast to rely almost solely on their physicality and comic timing to captivate our imagination and keep our attention.

Although far too old to be playing the 37-year-old Richard Hannay, Todd Waite lithely deadpans throughout this whirlwind of a story. Energetically, he takes his tweed-suited, proper chap of a character cross country on the run from the cops, in pursuit of the villain and wooing more than one woman along the way. As the murdered Annabella, a Scottish farm girl, Pamela, and Margaret, the woman Hannay comes to love, Elizabeth Bunch is also punching well below her age, but that doesn't stop her from bringing a good amount of camp to the material.

However, it's the supporting roles (more than 100 if one is keeping count) played by Mark Price and Bruce Warren in quick-change, quick-witted fashion that deservedly get the most laughs. A hat put on and taken off, a coat thrown over a uniform, Price and Warren continually impress with their ability to switch characters within a matter of seconds and with just a simple prop. A gorgeously timed train scene that has the pair playing dozens of characters, all confined to a rail car and later atop that same

car in pursuit, is actorly simpatico in motion.

This isn't to say that there aren't some minor rough spots in the production. The accents are all over the place, with our Canadian hero sounding British, and the Scottish characters sounding vaguely Irish at best and just plain silly at worst. Odder still is the decision to make Annabella's accent sound more speech impediment than foreign tongue, and for the master spy to sound vaguely Russian despite his seeming allegiance to Hitler's Reich. No, mastering dialect isn't the main concern of a farcical show such as this, and no, the odd cadences didn't discourage the laughs, and in some cases even caused them. Still, they seemed sloppy in a show at this level.

More problematic were the too many times Shanahan had his leads running around like dogs chasing their tails in order to portray their "on the run" status. Whereas so much of Shanahan's direction was beautifully controlled chaos, these moments, with Waite and Bunch scrambling in circles, aimlessly around the set, stopping to do cutesy dance moves for variation, felt like killing time in the laziest way possible.

The verdict:

But really, no one comes to *The 39 Steps* to nit-pick on minor issues such as these. This is a physical comedy for folks who like their theater to go down easy with a slightly unexpected but easily digestible plot turn here and there. Fans that want to escape the Houston summer heat, sit in a cool, dark space and laugh at inconsequential matters for two hours.

Even if this type of show isn't normally your thing, given what's going on in the world outside that cool, dark place, doesn't two hours of respite sound like a tempting option right about now?

In an era of such upheaval, it's theater's job to provoke, address and push. But every once in a while, I'd argue that it's also the job of theater to act like a sorbet, and for a brief moment cleanse our woe-stricken palates. To make us laugh at silly acting done well so we can go back out into the glare of reality, recharged and ready. Or at least somewhat rested.

I'm pretty sure neither Barlow nor the Alley nor even Hitchcock himself would mind if that's what we take away from this "Good Eeev-en-ing" in the theater.

The 39 Steps has been extended through September 3 at the Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. For tickets, call 713-220-5700 or visit alleytheatre.org. \$26-\$81.

Correction: An earlier version of this article mistakenly referred to A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder as an Alley Theatre production.

Story Map – *Noises Off*

Title: *Noises Off*

1. Characters
 - a. List of Main Characters:
 - b. Lloyd Dallas (the director)
 - c. Dotty Otley (the aging actress)
 - d. Garry Lejeune (the leading man)
 - e. Brooke Ashton (the young actress)
 - f. Frederick (the nervous actor)
 - g. Poppy (the stage manager)
 - h. Tim (the stagehand)

Character descriptions are available in printable format on Alley Re-Sourced

2. Setting
 - a. Location: A theater stage and the backstage area.
 - b. Time Period: Modern day (the play was written in the 1980s).
 - c. Description of the Setting: Briefly describe the physical layout of the stage and how it changes between acts.
3. Plot
 - a. Exposition: Introduce the characters and the premise of the play within a play, where the actors are preparing for a performance of "Nothing On."
 - b. Rising Action: Highlight key events leading up to the first performance, including character conflicts, romantic tensions, and comedic mishaps.
 - c. Climax: Identify the peak moment of chaos during the final act of "Nothing On," where everything goes wrong on stage.
 - d. Falling Action: Describe how the characters deal with the aftermath of the performance, including personal revelations and relationships.
 - e. Resolution: Summarize the conclusion of the original play and any final comedic moments that wrap up the story.
4. Types of Conflict
 - a. Character vs. Character (e.g., romantic tensions between Garry and Brooke)
 - b. Character vs. Self (e.g., Lloyd's struggle with directing and managing the cast)
 - c. Character vs. Society (e.g., the pressures of theater and performance expectations)
5. Major Themes
 - a. The chaos of theater and the nature of performance.
 - b. Relationships and misunderstandings.
 - c. The thin line between reality and acting.

6. Personal Reflection:

- a. What moments from the play resonated with you?
- b. What did you find funny or impactful?
- c. This play has been produced *thousands* of times globally in the 40 years since its debut. Why do you think the show is so popular among theatres and audiences alike?