

Review: THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG: Things Fall Apart; The Laughter Cannot Hold

By: Paul Recupero

The present-tense title suits it well. It's THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG, not THE PLAY THAT WENT WRONG, that the Barn Playhouse is currently putting on. It starts with one goof and then another piles on top of it, as the show cascades in real time into a tsunami of comic chaos, with waves building upon waves of missteps. And at the end, when the waters recede, only pure devastation, in all its helpless hilarity, remains.

Pretentious metaphor aside, this show is Murphy's Law applied to drama. Anything that can go wrong, will. I doubt five seconds passed without a laugh-inducing goof, gag, or disaster. For all the funny fumbles and stage hijinks that occur during NOISES OFF's third act, THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG says "Hold by beer." That isn't to say this play is "better" than NOISES OFF, but it certainly cranks the craziness up to 11. And, wow, is it a ride!

A plot synopsis feels unnecessary, but here's the premise. Like NOISES OFF, THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG is a play within a play. The performers play actors who are playing characters, but here the underlying play is a British murder mystery akin to Agatha Christie's THE MOUSETRAP. So everything is "supposed to be" super serious, which makes it all the more hilarious when it becomes anything but.

Eric Crist plays the in-show hopelessly amateur director, who also acts in the underlying play as the "inspector." His character seems to be the most experienced of the bunch, but that's not a high bar. As expected for a British murder mystery, there's the victim (Tony DeCarlo), as well as the suspects: the victim's fiancée (Laura Watson) who's having an affair with the victim's brother (Michael Roche), the fiancée's jealous brother (Ryan Kirchner), and (of course) the butler (Justin Lamphere). But trying to follow and solve this mystery is like trying to play chess in the middle of an earthquake, so don't bother. Meanwhile, stage blunders are dealt with (and sometimes caused by) a stage manager with larger ambitions (EB Bradigan) and a light/sound board operator with seemingly no ambitions (Adam Landon).

This cast, under Deb Braak's smart direction, is amazing. I say that a lot in my reviews, but it goes double here. Everyone is excellent in their roles and play off each other, and all the goofs, with amusement. Detailed character work clearly was done, which is crucial here because unlike NOISES OFF (last time I mention that one—I swear), we don't get to know the in-show actors playing the in-in-show roles before the curtain goes up. So the performers have to portray their "real life" characters entirely through their characters' performances in their parts in the underlying show. That's confusing to write (and probably to read), but the Barn's cast makes it look natural.

Take Roche's "Max Bennett," for instance, who is one weird actor. Unlike the other characters who panic when things fall apart, Bennett is delighted to be caught in the chaos, flashing a goofy earnest smile whenever something goes awry. He also amuses with an overly elaborate physical presence and clearly enjoys hamming up his performance for the audience. Then there's the seeming backstage rivalry that spills onstage (and ultimately takes center stage) between Watson's actor and Bradigan's stage manager. The physical comedy between them, as

well as the rest of the cast, is top-notch and moves at a rapid pace. I won't say more at the risk of spoiling the fun.

Finally, there's the set, which was apparently purchased from another theatre that did this show. But the construction and modifications done by Steve DiNenno along with others are impressive. Anything can fall to pieces, and once again I'll leave it at that. (It all seemed on the level until the second act, when the actors began sliding into despair.) The set is two stories, but the Barn stage is too short to accommodate that height. On the second floor, teaser curtains cut the actors off from the waist up. Here's an example of how Braak is a smart director: she worked this deficiency into the show. It makes perfect sense that this pitiful amateur theatre would have built a set that is too tall so that the actors on the second floor have to bend down awkwardly to be seen. It fits right into the show's concept and leads to even more laughs. I love when directors creatively turn weaknesses into strengths.

I could go on, but I don't want to give away much more. **THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG** is an uproarious comedy from beginning to end. There's no lasting message or deeper meaning here. It's just great (family-friendly) live theatre with belly-laughs throughout its sub-two hour runtime. It's also a complex spectacle that takes significant preparation and talent onstage and off to pull it off, and the Barn's production has it. There are only three performances left in this short run. Just buy your ticket already!

If You Go...

THE PLAY THAT GOES WRONG

By: Henry Lewis, Jonathan Sayer, and Henry Shields

Directed by Deb Braak

October 3-12, 2025

The Barn Playhouse

1700 Christopher Lane

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