

## Clarence Brown Theatre Produces High-Speed Farce With Tom Stoppard's 'On the Razzle'

By George Logan

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Clarence Brown Theatre's producing artistic director Cal MacLean introduced [\*On the Razzle\*](#) as "a profoundly silly show," and he was right about that.

"One false move, and we would have a farce on our hands," one character says early on. As it happens, there are lots of false moves, and we do indeed have a farce on our hands. What transpires is "a real razzle of a day, packed with adventure and hijinks."

It's the classic mistaken-identity, disapproving-parent, jealous-pursuit romp turned up a few notches. It's like a long Marx Brothers routine, with about a dozen Marx Brothers, and no musical breaks.

The play, which debuted in 1981 as one of Tom Stoppard's lighter efforts, has a pedigree even more complicated than the plot. It's the contemporary Czech-born Englishman's version of an 1842 Viennese playwright's version of an English playwright's original, but the Viennese version had already spawned Thornton Wilder's *The Merchant of Yonkers* and *The Matchmaker*, which begat a major Broadway musical. So *On the Razzle* is, essentially, a first cousin, once removed, of *Hello Dolly!* There's no Dolly character in *On the Razzle*, but you'll see some family resemblance.

According to the program, Stoppard "updated" the 1842 play, but only by about half a century, to the 1890s. It explores an interesting time and place, analogous to ours in some ways, a time in which urban cultural diversity was savored, and reveled in. One café scene features Japanese lanterns, French food, Scottish plaids, and a bit of Italian language. Vienna was a crossroads of a rapidly changing world.

Clarence Brown Theatre took some pains to be true to the *fin de siècle* style, even with the architecture of the complex and interesting set. CBT's sets are dependably more interesting than most actual buildings. Even if you have no patience for funny plays, you might like to buy a ticket just to behold the set.

That degree of attention makes some anachronisms all the more puzzling. When the script calls for pretzels—in 1890s Vienna, perhaps the all-time height of the big, fat knotted pretzel—they present Nabisco-style pretzel sticks. If real pretzels are unavailable at Kroger, I know bakers who would have been proud to supply them.

The script is silly enough, but when they embellish it with a lame Uncle Buster fart joke—“It must have been the pupu platter”—it wasn’t just the unworthy anachronism that seemed out of place.

Directed by visiting Connecticut actor Gary English, the large cast, with locally well-known pros in the lead roles, does the job as well as you’d expect them to. Veteran Neil Friedman is a natural as the malaprop-prone Zangler. David Brian Alley is Weinberl, Jacques Durand is Hupfer, and Jed Diamond is the randy coachman. Among the student stand-outs were MFA students Micah-Shane Brewer, who plays the key role of Melchior, the manipulative servant; Angela Graham as Lisette; and Jess Milewics as Hildegarde. They brought some clarity to their roles, setting them apart without sacrificing humor.

Jayne Morgan, a well-known local pro who’s not a Clarence Brown regular, may be a legend after this past weekend. She played two different roles, with very different costumes and makeup. The show was over at 9:30 p.m., half an hour before the curtain of her 10 o’clock play, [\*Forbidden Knoxville Goes Psycho\*](#), of which she’s ostensibly director, at Big Fatty’s, five miles away in Bearden.

There’s also a robot parrot and a technically clever ladder scene that Buster Keaton’s ghost wishes he had thought of.

In general, the pace seems about 15 percent too fast. Sometimes it works, but a lot of the jokes could have landed more punch with more judicious timing—a thoughtful pause now and then. They kept up the headlong pace as if hurrying to the next scene, and the end of the semester, perhaps worried the audience might leave before they’re done. It was rollicking, sure enough, but I suspect I missed several jokes I might have enjoyed, and perhaps some plot points.

Speaking of timing, the opening night crowd for the last major production of the season, a comedy with a big, popular cast, was sparser than it should have been, perhaps because it was also opening night of one of the only five operas being performed in Knoxville this year. *Cinderella*, the closest Italian opera gets to slapstick farce, and *On the Razzle* were remarkably similar in wacky tone, in sumptuous presentation, and in plot, with romantic urgencies, disguised identities, and sharp class distinctions laced with hypocrisy, plus cocky manservants playing uncustomarily key roles. If Knoxville had a Ministry of Culture, it would have forbidden these two productions to be shown the same weekend—either that, or it would have identified both of them as part of the same Wacky Euro-Farce Festival. I’m not making a suggestion.

Another thing about opening night: It’s only natural that it should be the night theater students attend. The problem is when they find it hilarious just to see people they know onstage. Last Friday, the audience seemed divided between an amused majority trying to follow the flocks of words flying toward them off the stage, and a very vocal minority who found every gesture hysterical, almost too much to bear without sharing their glee.

It's worth seeing. Dialed back a touch, it'd be better.

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