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Laughing at ‘The Play That Goes Wrong’ is all that’s right with comedy

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Let’s hear it for schadenfreude. You know, that emotional hiccup that allows us to view the misfortunes of others as a laugh riot.

It’s why we have affection for memories of Dick Van Dyke somersaulting over an ottoman to open his show in the 1960s, echoing the silent-era comedians who hung precariously from buildings or clung to the front of steam engines.

Mischief Theatre Company is single-handedly bringing back the pratfalls and spit takes of yesterday in a big way, by creating “The Play That Goes Wrong.” The play started in a small London theater and now has made its way to Broadway and the Tony Award for best set design. It’s a play that exists with no other agenda than to fill theaters with laughter.

With that and worldwide testimonies of madcap comedic timing as a calling card, the United States tour of the show kicked off this week at the Benedum Center.

The mere idea that these eight performers survive the wrongs that beset them is a marvel. If you walk in holding onto a bad mood and come out with one, that is through no fault of any of the bold, brave cast members who put their bodies in the line of fire, sometime literally, all in the name of laughter.

The framework that barely contains the action is that the theatrically challenged Cornley University Players, a small-town British troupe, is having its big break at a big American theater. The inept Cornley cast and crew are ready to deliver the performances of their lives in the mystery “The Murder at Haversham Manor.” And they do, only not in the way they intended.



There’s a corpse that won’t stay still, disastrous missed cues and props and scenery that appear to be doing their own thing, separate from the script that the actors-playing-actors are delivering.

And that’s just a small taste of the wrongs that make this play so right.

Among the players, Ned Noyes comes from the Broadway company to portray an actor named Max, who plays two characters, Cecil and Arthur, in the mystery. And he does so delightfully, constantly breaking the fourth wall and raining smiles on the audience. “I love that guy!” exclaimed a woman seated behind me.

She couldn’t contain herself. “The Play That Goes Wrong” brings that out in people.

The actor Dennis as the butler Perkins (did he do it?) is Scott Cote, whom some of you might recall from Pittsburgh Public Theater’s “Noises Off,” a comedy in a similar vein, with a play-within-a-play gone terribly off course. Mr. Cote’s Perkins has never met

a word he can’t mangle, while Yaegel T. Welch moves to his own beat as the victim Jonathan, who hasn’t met a cue he can’t miss.

Peyton Crim, who possesses a stage-dream baritone, and the women of the troupe, Jamie Ann Romero and Angela Grove, have some of the funniest and most gasp-worthy moments. Mr. Crim is called on to do seemingly impossible balancing acts, while the two women are on a collision course — with slamming doors and each other.

Ms. Grove’s Annie and Brandon J. Ellis as Duran Duran-loving stage manager Trevor are crew who find themselves front and center in hilarious circumstances. They are first onstage and may just ask a tall audience member near the front for some assistance.

I first saw the play in London at the more intimate 479-seat Duchess Theatre, where preshow hijinks were more pronounced and the ending was more, shall we say, dramatic. There was a malfunction at a climactic moment

on Wednesday that assuredly will be worked out on this first stop of the national tour. At the 2,800-seat Benedum Center, the buildup begins when the faux stage managers bring people onto the stage and with the first crash of a prop and the appearance of duct tape.

As the chaos mounts on stage during the course of the play, Toronto native Evan Alexander Smith as Cornley lead actor/director Chris Bean tries desperately to keep it all from going wrong as the inspector who comes to Haversham to solve the murder mystery. The lanky Mr. Smith delivers a bad actor’s ideal of a classic British leading man, who is watching his world crumble around him. At one point he begs the audience to stop laughing at all the chaos, eliciting laughter with every plea to desist.

Chris hadn’t counted on the schadenfreude sweeping the audience. It’s one of the many insights into comedy and our need to let loose that the creators of “The Play That Goes Wrong” get so right.