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Jeeves & Wooster in 'Perfect Nonsense'

by The Goodale Brothers

An Audience Guide

The Public Theatre

Lewiston, ME

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THE PLAY

Plot Synopsis (*Warning contains spoilers!*)

The play opens with Bertie Wooster, attempting to tell the story of his recent adventure. Bertie's friends, enamored with his raconteur ability, advise him to rent a theater and tell his story on the stage. Attempting to put on a one-man show he eventually calls upon his valet, Jeeves, to assist. Within the narrative, Bertie goes to his Aunt Dahlia's house, where he is greeted by her butler, Seppings (who has also agreed to help put on the show). Aunt Dahlia tells Bertie to go to an antique shop and haggle the price of a cow creamer so that his Uncle Tom can buy it. At the antique shop, the proprietor is already showing Sir Watkyn Bassett (Uncle Tom's rival) the cow creamer. Bassett then buys it and takes it to his home, Tottleigh Towers. Bertie, at Aunt Dahlia's request (or rather blackmail), follows him there in pursuit of the cow creamer. We also find out that Bertie's friend Gussie is engaged to Bassett's daughter, Madeline, who believes Bertie to be in love with her. Gussie, however, is terribly scared of Bassett and his partner Spode and writes scathing insults about them down in a notebook to overcome his fear. Stiffy Byng has gotten ahold of this notebook and threatens to turn it over to Bassett unless Bertie gives the cow creamer to Stiffy's intended, Harold Pinker, so he can give it to Bassett, and therefore get Bassett's approval for Stiffy's hand. However, Bertie, with the help of Jeeves, is able to work his way out of this pickle ensuring everyone gets what they want in the end.

Characters: Who's Who?

Bertie Wooster

Jeeves, Bertie's Valet - also plays:

- Sir Watkyn Bassett: A Magistrate and silver collector who once fined Bertie five pounds for stealing a policeman's helmet as a prank
- Madeline Bassett: Sir Watkyn Bassett's daughter, engaged to Gussie
- Gussie Fink-Nottle: A shy young man who studies newts and is engaged to Madeline
- Stephanie 'Stiffy' Byng: The ward and niece of Sir Watkyn Bassett, secretly engaged to Harold Pinker

Seppings, Butler to Aunt Dahlia - also plays:

- Bertie's Aunt Dahlia: A loud and authoritarian woman who employs Seppings
- Roderick Spode: An aspiring dictator and friend of Sir Bassett
- Constable Oates: The policeman who argues with Stiffy Byng over her dog
- Butterfield: The butler employed by Bassett
- An antique-shop proprietor who sells the cow creamer.

Time and Place:

The play is set in 1920s London as Bertie Wooster attempts to put on a one-man show about an eventful weekend. The play-within-a-play takes place primarily at Totleigh Towers, the country estate of Sir Watkyn Bassett, where Bertie is sent to steal a cow creamer and must untangle a series of misunderstandings.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Genre:

Play within a play is the literary device of the story within a story, the structure by which a character in a narrative text becomes the narrator of a second text framed by the first one. While Bertie, Jeeves, and Seppings are characters in the story *Jeeves and Wooster in 'Perfect Nonsense'*, they also act in the play that Bertie improvises. Bertie, Jeeves, and Seppings are all aware that we are their audience.

Metatheatre describes the aspects of a play that draw attention to its nature as drama or theater, or to the circumstances of its performance. In *Jeeves and Wooster in 'Perfect Nonsense'*, Bertie, Jeeves, and Seppings' change of roles, costumes, and set pieces are all reminders that they are acting and pretending for an audience.

Breaking the Fourth Wall is a metatheatrical device we see in this play. In a traditional proscenium theater, the edge of the stage facing the audience is considered the fourth wall. In realist plays, characters on stage and their worlds are considered real and undisturbed by the audience as they are separated by this invisible fourth wall. By "breaking the fourth wall", actors recognize that they are watched by an audience and are acting their characters rather than living them. They typically do so by directly talking to the audience or claiming that they are only acting according to a script. Costume and scenic changes on stage can also break the fourth wall. In *Jeeves and Wooster in 'Perfect Nonsense'*, we see the three characters hectically switch between playing roles and changing scenic pieces.

Quick Change in costumery is the act of changing an actor's attire by way of underdressing, quick-rigging, special effects, and more. Quick changes can be used both as a matter of practicality and for a dazzling or comedic effect. The purpose of using a quick change rather than using projections or other effects that are not tangible is that a quick change is a real transformation in front of the audience's eyes.

Brush Up On Your Britishisms:

Bally (expression) British slang/euphemism for bloody, used to emphasize or in place of swearing

Buttonhole (verb) to attract the attention of someone and then detain them in conversation, typically against their will.

Shouting across ploughed fields in high wind (expression) To speak incredibly loudly and unusually.

Out on the tiles (expression) To be out on the town, enjoying oneself at nightclubs, bars, etc. drinking.

Magistrates court (n.) A lower court in England, that is presided by a magistrate/local judge and oversees minor civil and criminal jurisdiction.

Pinching (verb) Can mean to steal, but also in British slang to arrest someone. Page 19's context means to steal.

Chum (n.) A close friend or companion

Trifle (n.) Something of little importance, not significant

Devious old guzzler (n.) an insult, someone who is clever, deceptive, sneaky greedy, and most importantly old.

Singing some light snatch (expression) Singing an uncomplicated tune/song that is short.

Mottled oyster (n.) An oyster covered in spots of color that do not form a regular pattern. Could also be a reference to the nightclub mentioned in P.G. Wooster's *Jeeves and The Feudal Spirit*.

Lulu (n.) An outstanding example of a particular type of person or thing

Pottering (verb) Another term for puttering, to occupy oneself in mundane or small unimportant tasks, that do not need a lot of concentration

Talk rot (expression) To say foolish things or talk nonsense.

Pounds and quid British currency, worth a bit more than a dollar, quid is slang for pounds. See image right.

Dorg (expression) Likely meaning dog, derogatory when used in reference to a person.

Romp To engage in sexual activity; especially illicitly.

Hotsy-totsiness (adj.) comfortable stable or secure



British Pound Note

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT & ADAPTATION

So... Who are the Goodale Brothers?

They are actually brothers and U.K based creatives inspired by their appreciation of P.G. Wodehouse's work. They collaborated on devising the original script for this play, *Perfect Nonsense*.

Alright, But Who is P.G. Wodehouse?

Wodehouse is a London-educated writer who wrote more than 90 books and 30 plays throughout the 1900s. He's best known for his development of original characters namely, Jeeves, "the supreme 'gentleman's gentleman.'" His work lives on through the renditions of his characters in works such as *Perfect Nonsense* by the Goodale Brothers and the *Jeeves and Wooster* television series from the 1990s with Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie as the titular duo.

Hey! How did the Goodale Brothers Develop this Show?

Brothers Robert and David Goodale had enjoyed P.G. Wodehouse's work since their early twenties. Although they had been pursuing separate careers in acting and documentary filmmaking, respectively, the opportunity for a large-scale collaboration never presented itself. Robert even starred in a one-man show based on P.G. Wodehouse's work, *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, and asked his brother to direct a rendition of Wodehouse's 1938 novel, *The Code of the Woosters*. But it wasn't until 20 years after those performances that Mark Goucher approached them and suggested the brothers develop another Wodehouse show. They adapted works combining some of the most iconic characters from Wodehouse's stories and the narrative of *The Code of the Woosters*, developed a script, and some revisions later the show was approved by not only Goucher but the Wodehouse estate itself.

The resulting show, *Jeeves and Wooster in 'Perfect Nonsense'*, opened October 30, 2013 at the Duke of York's Theatre in London's West End, the British equivalent of Broadway. Continued success and revivals followed.

Production Accolades:

- Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Comedy in 2014

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What do you understand about the nature of Jeeves and Woosters' relationship as butler/boss through how they interact? What is suggested about class or social hierarchy?
2. How does humor function in the play? What types of comedy techniques are employed, and what effect(s) do they have on the audience? How does humor impact the themes of class, gender, and power?
3. What is the significance of the play's title, "Perfect Nonsense?" How does it set the tone for the play? How are conflicts resolved and what does this conclusion say about the world the characters are inhabiting?

4. How does the breaking of the fourth wall engage the audience in the story?

5. If you were to make a play about something ridiculous that happened to you, what event would you choose? Who would you ask to help you put on that play?

Liz Carlson is a director and dramaturg, and teaching artist with an emphasis on new play development and ensemble practice. She is a Visiting Instructor in the Theatre Department at Bates College this year.

She has an MFA in Directing from Temple University and is an associate member of SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society). She has worked with companies throughout the northeast including Curio Theatre Company, Arden Theatre Company, Lantern Theatre (Philadelphia), Troy Foundry Theatre, Saratoga Shakespeare Company (New York), The Nora (Boston), Trinity Rep, Manton Avenue Project (Rhode Island), and The Kenyon Review Playwrights Conference (Ohio). Additionally, she serves as a dramaturge to several playwrights, choreographers, and devising ensembles. She can often be found making work in unconventional spaces including libraries, prisons, and semi-abandoned industrial sites.

This semester at Bates she is teaching, among other things, Introduction to Dramaturgy. The students enrolled in this course used this play as a project, exploring how research and engagement materials can enrich an audience's experience of a play. We hope you enjoy!