INTRODUCING THE FRAYNS
BY DAN REBELLATO

Democracy cast

It is a most remarkable coincidence that British culture has produced two equally renowned but entirely different writers, both called **Michael Frayn**. One is the ferocious intellectual, distinguished translator of Russian, author of two works of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy and a distinguished series of prize-winning serious novels. The other is a prolific humourist, who has delighted readers with his witty, sometimes absurdist newspaper columns, sketches, plays and books, and author of *Noises Off,* perhaps the funniest and most brilliant comedy of the twentieth century currently enjoying a successful revival at the Old Vic in London. It only adds to the improbability of the situation that these **Michael Frayn**s not only share a name, but also inhabit the very same body. The scientists are baffled.

But they must be used to it. Two bodies occupying the same location in space; the same entity taking two contradictory forms; the co-existence of two incompatible models of the universe; these curious phenomena are part of the ordinary landscape of modern physics and, of course, form the paradoxical territory of **Michael Frayn**'s 1998 play, **Copenhagen**. Its title, like so much in the quantum world, has two meanings depending on how you look at it: it represents the location of Bohr and Heisenberg's mysterious encounter in 1941. It also refers to the 'Copenhagen Interpretation', the 1920s attempt to hold together classical physics (still held to describe the macro-world, characterised by stability, predictability and determinacy) and quantum mechanics (which described the subatomic world, characterised

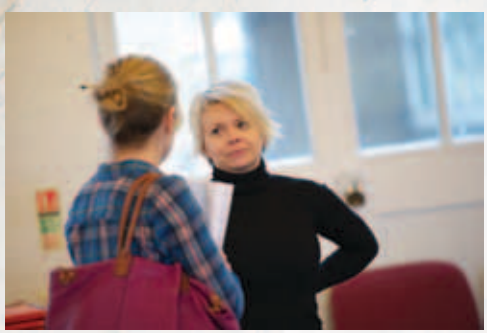
by complexity, uncertainty, and indeterminacy). The instability of this scientific coalition was noted by figures like Schrödinger, he of the unfortunate cat (or, should I say, the simultaneously fortunate and unfortunate cat).

Contradiction and uncertainty spreads right through **Copenhagen** from the theoretical physics that they explain to one another right, through to Niels Bohr's antithetical habits of speech: the sharpest criticisms are prefaced with 'not to criticise, but...', the sharpest contradictions announced by 'not to disagree, but...'. We discover that Heisenberg wanted Bohr to say 'yes' and 'no' simultaneously; he wanted to work and not work on the German Atomic Bomb at the same time. Most significantly, just as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle insists that the very act of observing an electron alters its movement, the very act of recounting a memory changes that memory. The play gives us three different, incompatible explanations of Bohr and Heisenberg's walk, allowing all three to coexist in the same location in space and time.

It is in these three plays – **Benefactors**, **Copenhagen**, **Democracy** – that the two **Michael Frayn**s develop their own theatrical Copenhagen Interpretation. Each play is simultaneously a fiercely intelligent investigation and a gripping thriller, the result of deep research and a profoundly moving personal story. Out of, let's face it, unpromising subject matter – urban redevelopment, quantum mechanics, and German coalition politics –the twin contributions of the Frayn duo create something intellectually invigorating and preposterously entertaining.

Re-reading these plays I am struck that their achievement hasn't been fully recognised. They represent the development of a distinctive and important new theatrical form that can move fluidly between narration and representation, showing and telling. What this produces in all the plays is both an intense scrutiny of the world and the self, but also an agonised recognition of the limits of our understanding and knowledge. **Benefactors** is, on the face of it, a story about a failed housing development, but the first two lines – *'Basuto Road! I love the name!'* / *'Basuto Road. How I hate those sour gray words'* – signal its real theme: how our desire for community and friendship battles with the individuality of our attitudes and perspectives. As the play develops, we see the elegant square of relationships pulled apart, each change of attitude on one side, inducing in the structure a progressive collapse. The play asks, how far can we know each other? By the end it asks how far we can know ourselves. *'I can't imagine how you must feel, David'* says Sheila. *'How I must feel?'* he replies. *'I don't know'*. There is a kind of emotional entropy that creeps through the characters hearts. The Kitzingers begin proudly leaving their front door open and end keeping it locked. David begins by placing people at the heart of his vision for the new building; by the end he admits to preferring buildings to people.

Democracy is all complexity and uncertainty. Perhaps because democracy is all complexity and uncertainty. *'Every coin has two faces,'* says the spymaster Kretschmann, and so, it seems, does every character in the play. At its heart Günter Guillaume is both loyal assistant to the German Chancellor and a loyal spy for the East German regime. The complexities of coalition politics force everyone in government to be all things to all people. Willy Brandt has been many things, lived under many names,



Abigail Cruttenden and **Rebecca Lacey** (Benefactors)

Copenhagen cast

has spent a life under cover, dodging the Nazis in his youth, conducting numerous secret liaisons in middle age. Seen through the frames of these multiply shifting loyalties, a political speech can also be an exercise in seduction, a family holiday an interrogation, a father spending time with his son is a letter drop. Democracy, **Democracy** seems to say, is a kind of model for the self; we are ourselves a kind of coalition of voices, with one of those voices, every so often, and only temporarily, raised above the chorus. Guillaume is asked whether the East Germans can be trusted: *'Yes? No? What do I say? Which one of me's going to answer?'*. Again, ultimately, it is oneself that ultimately becomes the most mysterious. Willy Brandt is haunted by thoughts of leaping to his death into a chasm; the feeling grows through the play that he's contemplating his own destruction in the bottomless abyss of his own personality. 'I'm not a spy,' he reflects. *'Just a suitcase with a series of false bottoms'.*

The form of these plays allows characters to step in and out of the story, the location to be changed in an instant, time to be sped forward, wound back, for us to jump sideways across the multiverse, exploring different perspectives and possibilities. We see stories through their eyes, the provisionality of memory acknowledged, and the possibility of truly knowing the world and ourselves achingly bobs away from our grasp. This might be frustrating or arch in another form, but here it's intensely theatrical. Any production of a play is an exercise in theatrical Copenhagenism. We're looking at an actor and we're looking at a character, who exist in quite different and incompatible worlds, but the complete understanding of the experience requires us to understand the figures before us both as actor and character, wave and particle. The simple device of letting characters break out from a story to address us makes us helpless therapist in **Benefactors**, agonised historian in **Copenhagen**, and complicit spymaster in **Democracy**. The theatre, like electrons and politicians, is always facing two ways at once: think of the way a good play is never about what it is about, never, as the philosophers say, identical with itself. **Democracy**, a play about Willy Brandt, seemed to its first audiences a play about Tony Blair (Brandt's conversion of a political party with a high-minded addiction to defeat into a party of the centre left did seem oddly familiar). As we pass into an age of Coalition politics, the play may speak to us in yet new ways - Brandt's 'new middle' perhaps evoking the 'squeezed middle'. Under Copenhagen rules, the play is and is not talking about these things. In vain must the author(s) protest that the play is actually about Willy Brandt. The more we try to fix its position, the more its momentum slips beyond our grasp. It's Heisenberg's theatrical

uncertainty principle and it tells us that the dynamics of the theatre are promiscuous and disloyal. The Frayns' genius is to see in this multiplicity something profoundly exhilarating and exhilaratingly profound.

Niels Bohr describes himself in **Copenhagen** as 'a mathematically curious entity: not one but half of two'. **Michael Frayn** and **Michael Frayn** are two of our finest playwrights, at their best when writing together, when neither is one, but half of two. While **Michael Frayn** makes us laugh, gasp, and feel deeply, **Michael Frayn** enriches the work with fathomless paradoxes, and profound reflection on some of the most intractable mysteries of the world and the self. The only precedent for this remarkable collaboration I can think of is that remarkable moment in the 1740s when the two Voltaires decided that humour and philosophy were best enjoyed together. It is a rather brilliant idea to bring these three plays together for the first time; it will go a long way to marking the achievement of this work, the way in which ideas and feelings are twisted together in theatrical form, impossible to ignore. Edward Albee once said that a good play should tell us something about the world and something about the theatre. What Bohr might call the complementarity principle in these plays, bringing into a kind of superposition theatricality and thought, reality and fiction, suggest a playwright – one? two? – driven by a restless concern for both.

By Dan Rebellato

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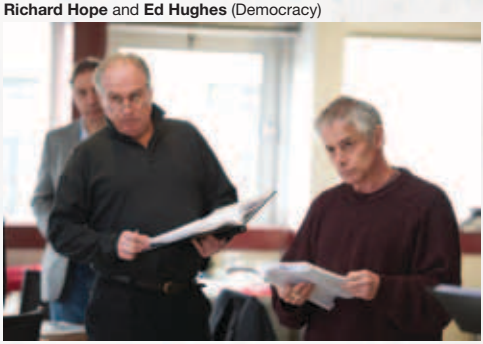
Geoffrey Streatfeild and **Henry Goodman** (Copenhagen)

Richard Hope and **Ed Hughes** (Democracy)



Richard Hope, Rupert Vansittart and **Andrew Bridgmont** (Democracy)

William Hoyland, **David Mallinson**, **Aidan McArdle** and **Ed Hughes** (Democracy)

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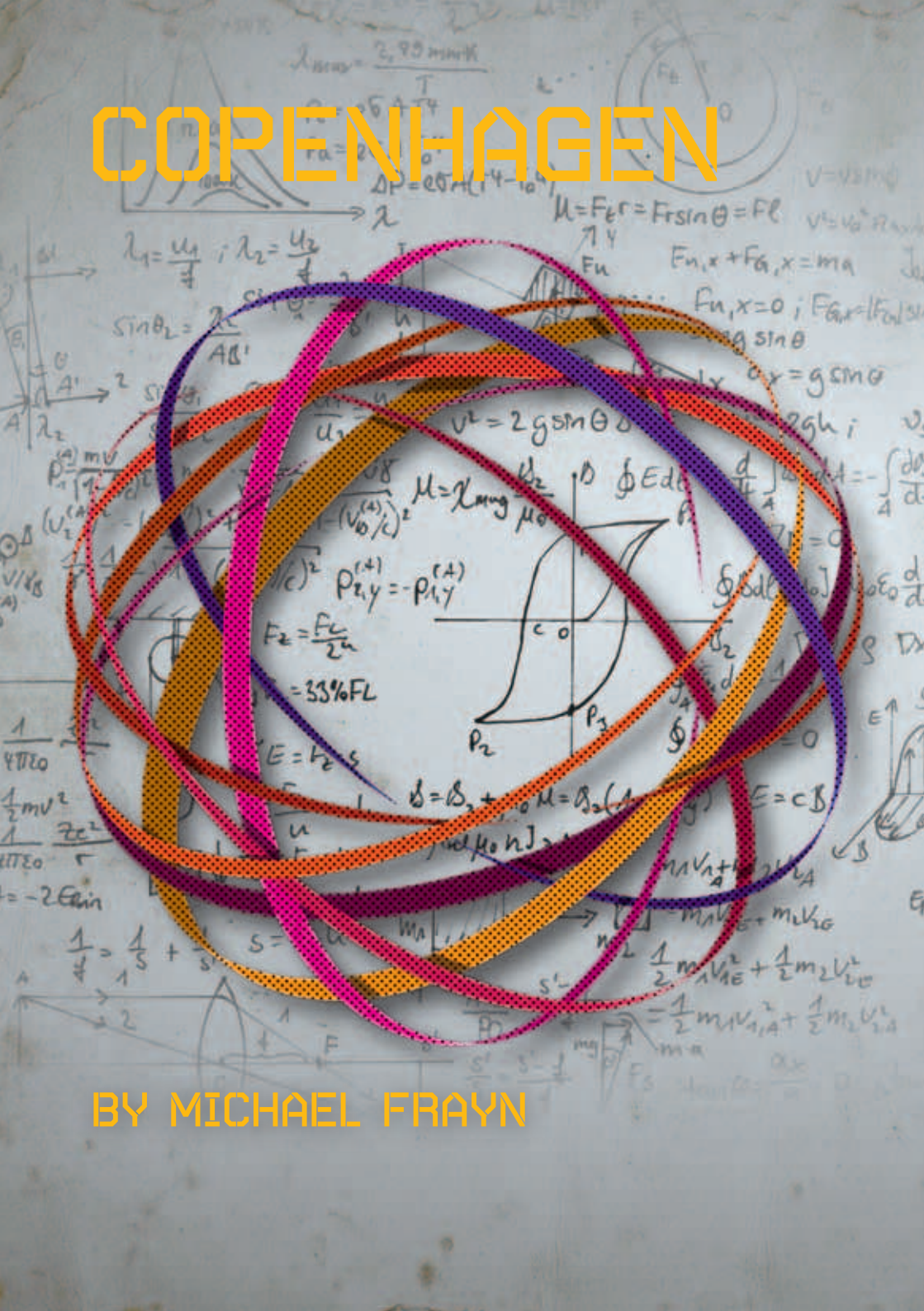

BY MICHAEL FRAYN