

The master of self-effacement

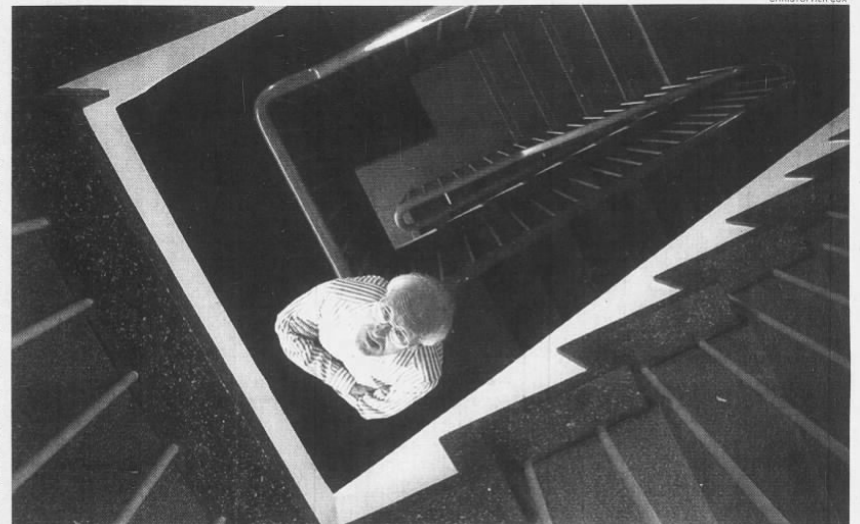
CHRISTOPHER COX

Michael Frayn's new play is about a meeting that altered the destiny of the world. He talks to **Max Davidson** about atomic physics, invisibility and first-night nerves

MICHAEL Frayn is playing his cards close to his chest. "Come and see the show," was his retort when I asked for the low-down on his new play, *Copenhagen*. A whodunit-writer, loath to disclose that it was the vicar who stabbed the baronet with the dagger of oriental design, could not have been more cagey. *Copenhagen* is not a whodunit, although it has a riddle at its heart. What happened when the German physicist Werner Heisenberg visited his Danish counterpart Niels Bohr in 1941? Before the war, the two men had been good friends, collaborating on ground-breaking work in the field of atomic physics. Now they were on opposite sides. Heisenberg was in charge of the German atomic bomb programme. Bohr would eventually escape to the United States and join the team working at Los Alamos.

At which point, he drops his voice to a whisper and says something which will send a shiver down the spine of his admirers! "The play is entirely joke-free. I am afraid." From the man who gave us *Noises Off* (1982), one of the funniest farces ever written, it is an embarrassing admission. Or is it? One of the intriguing things about Frayn is that, although he has always excelled at comedy, his work has never lost its serious undercurrent. The brilliant farceur is also the author of a book of philosophical aphorisms under the hardly rib-ticking title *Constructions* (1974). After the success of *Noises Off*, he could have continued ploughing the same furrow, keeping West End audiences rolling in the aisles. Instead he has taken a more idiosyncratic course. Where other writers might have basked in the limelight, he has often been a shadowy presence, content to take second billing in translations of Chekhov.

with John Cleese as a chronologically challenged headmaster, at the other end, *A Landing on the Sun* (1991), an abstruse philosophical novel doubling as a gothic love-story. If you had told a visiting critic from Mars that the two works came from the same pen, he would have invited you to pull the other one. Frayn's outlook on life has perceptibly darkened since the light comedies with which he made his name — *Alphabetical Order* (1975), *Donkeys' Years* (1976), *Clouds* (1976), — and it is tempting to look for explanations in his private life. His marriage collapsed in the late 1970s, and he has lived since then with fellow writer Claire Tomalin. A lot of youthful certainties have been eroded. But the zig-zagging between levity and earnestness may have literary, as well as psychological roots.



But what, precisely, happened when the two men met in 1941? It was Heisenberg who initiated the meeting, which was conducted in the utmost secrecy, with the Gestapo keeping both men under close surveillance. But what did he say to Bohr and why did the Dane take such violent exception to it? Historians have been arguing the toss ever since. Heisenberg gave one version of the conversation, Bohr a different one. Yet the destiny of the world, when you think about it, was in their hands. It is infuriating not to know.

His output since *Noises Off* has been as notable for its range as for its prolixity. At one end of the scale, there was the screenplay for *Glock-erze* (1986), a madcap comedy

extremely painful. I felt as if I had let people down." His work rate is legendary, and it is the fact that Heisenberg and Bohr worked in the same field that sparked Frayn's interest in their relationship. "I like to write about people doing real jobs. Too many dramatists write about characters who are idling, whose engines are not connected to the road." But although the characters discourse in the language of high science, it is their common humanity that binds them together. "I hope the intellectual fabric of the play is sound, but it is really about

human beings and how they relate to each other." Frayn speaks about the piece in calm detachment, almost as if someone else has written it, and there, perhaps, is the secret of his success. "I have no great body of beliefs," he says. "I just develop a series of ideas. An idea is like a seed which takes root and begins to grow. As it grows and becomes a tree, you realise that it is an oak or an elm. But the seed has taken root and become a tree long before you, the writer, know what sort of tree it is."

Impersonality, the maintenance between the writer and his material, is the key. Frayn still winces when he looks back on his early success, *Clouds*. "I was shocked when I realised how much of myself I had revealed in that play. A playwright should be invisible, like Chekhov. There are writers whose strength lies in their ability to write honestly and truthfully about their feelings. But I also think it is admirable to create a world

entirely separate from oneself." So where — I can see Frayn smiling before I have even finished the question — should one look for the real Michael Frayn? A pause. "I hope I am completely absent from all my plays." Game, set and match to the master of self-effacement.

Those who treasure Frayn's genius for comedy, and are daunted by the prospect of a play about atomic physics, need not worry. He has not deserted them. In the autumn, *Alarms (and Excursions)*, a collection of short plays starring Felicity Kendal, opens in the West End and will, Frayn promises, be "mildly funny." But those hoping to pluck out the heart of his mystery are wasting their time. In our confessional, soul-bearing, touchy-feely age, he has kept his counsel admirably.

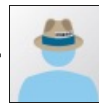
Copenhagen opens at the Cottesloe Theatre on Thursday.

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Highly impressive

Max Davidson Sunday telegraph with Frayn



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