

**T**O find an admired writer of light comedy such as Michael Frayn stepping into the terrain of nuclear physics sounds like a Theatre of the Absurd fantasy. But Copenhagen turns out to be the most astonishing departure in Frayn's theatrical career. It's Frayn's fascinating and abstruse meditation on what may really have happened when two famous nuclear physicists met in the midst of the Second World War. At a time when the Blair administration raises the flags of philistinism, it's cheering to see Trevor Nunn's National Theatre present such complex, challenging drama.

The play is set in some ghostly limbo, where its three characters obsessively brood over a key event of their lives. The meeting between Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr in 1941 was peculiarly rich in piquancy. The German-born Heisenberg had come to Nazi-occupied Copenhagen to see his old mentor Bohr.

The disastrous encounter between the two great nuclear physicists has been a source of puzzled speculation for historians and scientists ever since. Had Heisenberg perhaps come as a secret Nazi trying to extract crucial information or to pass it on?

Those like me, without a shred of scientific knowledge, may well find themselves hugely daunted by the intimidating, recondite thrust of Frayn's dialogue. But even if you are left mistily puzzled by the detail of the argument, the passionate main-lines of Copenhagen are discernable and grippingly so.

On Peter J. Davison's bare stage, with its white-globed shape floor,

# A meeting of obsessive minds

Copenhagen ★  
Cottesloe

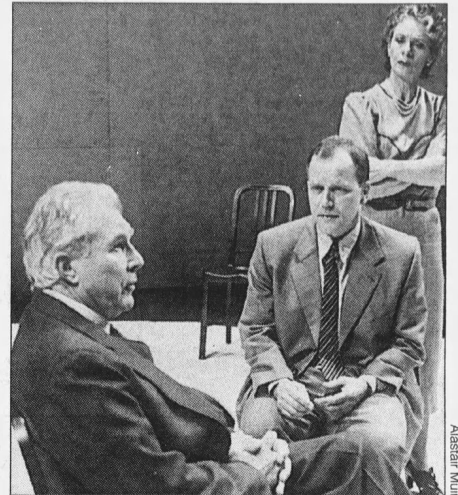
NICHOLAS DE JONGH

Bohr, his wife Margrethe and Heisenberg sit on upright chairs or wander anxiously about the stage. Each time they re-enact the encounter it comes into clearer view.

In the last resort Heisenberg and the play itself eloquently succumbs to a variant of the uncertainty principle he himself unravelled. That Heisenberg

did not supply Germany with the terrible gift of nuclear weapons was because of his failure to make the crucial calculation which would have revealed the amount of plutonium required. The reasons for that dereliction remain elusively shrouded. Michael Blakemore's fine production invests a play trading in large ideas with a vibrant urgency, superbly intensified by Matthew Marsh's anguished Heisenberg, the needling fervour of Sara Kestelman's Margrethe and David Burke's quizzical mellowness.

● In repertoire. Box Office 0171 452 3400



Alastair Muir

In limbo: David Burke, Matthew Marsh and Sara Kestelman

## EVENING STANDARD THEATRE CLUB

FOLLOWING the enormous success of the film, *Brassed Off* has now been adapted for the stage by Paul Allen. Featuring live music from the Redbridge Brass and Aveley and Neham Band, the play runs for 17 performances only at the National Theatre. Gold Card members can buy tickets for £15 (normal price £22) and Blue Card holders £17. Offers apply for the first three evening previews on 4, 5,

tickets to see *New Edna* at the Haymarket Theatre.

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