

Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA
Copenhagen by Michael Frayn. Directed by Eric Hill.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Invisible shadows”

Berkshire Theatre Group is extending the season with an intellectual exercise in partial biography, Michael Frayn’s play “Copenhagen” about the 1941 visit of physicist Werner Heisenberg to his former colleague and mentor Niels Bohr. Bohr and his wife Margarethe live in Nazi occupied Denmark and Heisenberg works in his native Germany for the Nazi regime. Both men are interested in quantum mechanics, mathematics and the results of splitting the atom, each in his own way working on the development of Atomic fission and the possibility of an atomic bomb. They are loving friends and colleagues who are wary of each other’s politics. Bohr’s wife is the careful counterpart of her irrational husband and she represents us, the audience, in her reactions to everything these two men do or say.



Harry Smith as Heisenberg, Corinna May as Margarethe, David Adkins as Bohr;
Photo: David Dashiell

All three characters are long dead. In their own particular after-life they come together to review the circumstances of their final break-up. Friends for over 20 years this 1941 visit is both traumatic and dramatic. In life it lasted for only a few hours. Their arguments and their errors in judgement were never revealed so the dialogue and situations are the inventions of the playwright. Considering each man’s outlook and inner sustenance it is probable that Michael Frayn hit on unwritten truths in creating the men as characters in a very intellectual play.

Intellectual is not a bad word here. It is a descriptive. The play asks you to listen carefully to every word spoken, including the words spoken by Margarethe. She is no ordinary wife; she is the wife of a mathematician and scientific genius who has learned much through her relationship with him and his students over the decades. She is a mother and helpmate who knows more than she says and she says a lot. In fact, she sets the rhythm of the play and she works hard to maintain it. Corinna May is excellent at playing such a role. She holds back her emotions for the most part and in doing so she limits the emotional outbursts of both men. . .most of the time. Discussions about her children often interrupt the thrust of the play, but they are important for our understanding of who she is and how she has lived with Niels Bohr for so long. May is marvelous in restraint, never dominating the action of the play, never stepping in front of the men unless she has to in order to make a point. When she does this she is riveting to listen to and observe. Margarethe knows more than we realize and she tells us so.



Corinna May; Photo: David Dashiell



Harry Smith; Photo: David Dashiell

Heisenberg is played by Harry Smith. Heisenberg's involvement with quantum mechanics and nuclear fission keeps the relationship alive and vivid and Smith does a nice job playing a man whose real work is often at odds with the political needs of his leaders. He brings a calm style of restlessness to the role, a dichotomy that sometimes seems to limit his reactions but which actually opens him to the peculiarities of his friend Niels Bohr. His apolitical sensibility, his denial of interest in nuclear weaponry, keep his character interesting and, again, Smith plays this aspect of his character with an almost militant reluctance.

Director Eric Hill has used the concept of a circle to bring his three people into the realm of the afterlife. They rarely ever touch, they maintain distances that seem perfect for their actual relationships. He sometimes lights the perimeter of the playing space to underscore the emotional content of a moment. He uses projections on the semi-circular rear scrim to emphasize the outcome of the work these two men did in their lifetimes. Lighting Designer Matthew E. Adelson sometimes lights the forestage in a disturbing way that throws the characters' shadows on the side walls of the theater which is often distracting and a bit disturbing, but this is seemingly what Hill intends for the stage lights play a major role in this work.



David Adkins; Photo David Dashiell

David Adkins plays Niels Bohr in this production. He is the recounter of historical fact and the reliver of historical friendship and the remarker of personal tragedies. Bohr, in fact, is the principal character in this play and Adkins under-plays him brilliantly, making his audience constantly aware of Bohr's presence and his decisions. He never leaves us in doubt about an emotional reaction to anything said or done by Heisenberg. He plays Bohr as a living man who could only be grateful for this representation of himself in a play. It is easy, watching this performance, to believe we are seeing Niels Bohr on the Stockbridge stage.

The Unicorn Theatre gives everyone the opportunity to witness this show close-up and that makes this a very personal experience. May's sense of reactions, so allied to the audience's need to react and speak, to ask questions, helps the show make its points even when they are delicately presented. You feel like a neighbor, rather than a spectator, and that is very unusual, especially in a play whose dialogue is so distancing. The look of the show helps enormously. The set designed by Randall Parsons works well for the three actors. Elivia Bovenzi Blitz's 1940s costumes are character specific and do their job. Adam Lewis has created marvelous projections which help underscore the themes of the play and Scott Killian's sound design for this show is perfection and his final moments are dynamite.

It's a week of intellectual plays and this one, perhaps, tops the list. Read a little about the time and the development of the nuclear bomb before you go, if you can, just to get you up to speed. You may not love this play, but you will admire the work and the workers and think about them a lot afterward.

+ 09/30/2023 +

Copenhagen plays at the Unicorn Theatre, on Route 7 in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, through October 29. For information and tickets go to Berkshiretheatregroup.org or call 413-997-4444.