



February 23, 2009

Review: Two scientists argue integrity, patriotism

Physics and war collide in 'Copenhagen'

By TOM BUTLER

Special to The News Journal

The confluence of science, history and art is a rare event.

Michael Frayn's "Copenhagen" creates gripping theater from just such an occurrence as director Meredith McDonough frames this tale of theoretical physics, interpersonal turmoil and geopolitical realities as a set of meandering but brilliant conversations in the Delaware Theatre Company's current production.

Quantum mechanics seems like a daunting topic for actors but the historical meeting in 1941 between Werner Heisenberg, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and the presumptive head of the Nazi nuclear weapons program, and his Danish mentor, the equally brilliant Niels Bohr, adds literally earth-shaking questions to the mix. The complex moral conflicts between scientific integrity and patriotism, between betrayal and self-preservation, between a potential nightmare and an all-too-real one evolve into a challenging and rewarding play.

Martin LaPlatney as Bohr and Mark Leydorf as Heisenberg make the men extraordinarily concrete and human despite the play's conceit that the audience is observing the memories of the long-dead participants re-examining the critical event. LaPlatney is casually dressed, yet his bearing is erect and his manner personable and charming. He makes Bohr thoughtful, persistent and approachable, exactly the sort of "father confessor" described in the text. His love for his wife Margrethe (Lee Roy Rogers) is also palpable and enduring. Leydorf presents Heisenberg as petulant and self-possessed, yet very vulnerable.

Rogers has the pivotal role. She is the emotional center of action and, as the non-scientist, voices the ordinary concerns and questions of the audience. Her timing is impeccable and she moves gracefully about the stage, using small gestures to create a sense of domesticity. Her deep love for her husband and her willingness to protect him add depth to the relationships among the characters.

Frayn uses the language of quantum mechanics to create powerful imagery for the play. He manages to have the characters explain complicated notions about particle physics without making them sound like lectures or outtakes from the Discovery channel.

The audience learns about Heisenberg's notion of "uncertainty" -- that an observer cannot precisely measure the position and momentum of a particle at the same time. It also hears about "complementarity" -- Bohr's concept that an entity may sometimes behave as a particle and sometimes as a wave.

McDonough moves the players about the stage in patterns that suggest the collisions and deflections that permeate the language of particle physics. Frayn also adds a haunting image of the death of Bohr's son in a boating accident that underscores the emotional relationships among Heisenberg and the Bohrs.

The second act takes the audience through several "drafts" of the critical events with each observation changing the conclusions. This incremental method reveals why Heisenberg came to Copenhagen in 1941 and what effect it had on all their lives.

Mimi Lien's set uses some huge mobile panels that at first seem to suggest a chalkboard with the ghosts of some famous equations or perhaps the radiographic traces of the investigated atomic particle from a cloud chamber. However, when they are moved, the panels become transparent, providing another method to establish the separation of the characters.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Copenhagen" by Michael Frayn

WHEN: 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays; 6:30 p.m. Friday; 2 p.m. Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sunday until March 8.

WHERE: Delaware Theatre Company, 200 Water St., Wilmington

COST: \$47-\$15

TICKETS AND INFORMATION: 594-1100 or www.delawaretheatre.org
