

StarTribune

Friends, war and the atom bomb in 'Copenhagen'

Article by: CLAUDE PECK

Star Tribune

April 30, 2012 - 3:04 PM

The promotional tagline for "Copenhagen," the drama about atomic scientists that opened Friday in a top-notch production in Minneapolis, could be, "Not just for physics and math majors."

With a kicker that says, "but it helps."

I don't know the Uncertainty Principle from the Peter Principle. To me, "complementarity" is fancy-pants for "goes together nicely." Yet playwright Michael Frayn peppers his script with physics lingo so adroitly that one feels oneself getting smarter by the minute while rarely feeling overwhelmed.

The thrillingly complex play centers on a human story -- and a mystery. Why, in 1941, with a war on and Denmark occupied by Germany, did brainy German scientist Werner Heisenberg (Michael Jurenek) visit the Copenhagen home of physics legend Niels Bohr (Bob Malos) and his wife, Margrethe (Muriel Bonertz)?

Maybe Heisenberg sought to trick his mentor into passing secrets about the Allies' nascent nuclear-weapons program. Or, as the second act explores, was there a much less (forgive the pun) calculating motivation?



Bob Malos, Michael Jurenek and Muriel Bonertz in "Copenhagen."

Provided,

COPENHAGEN

Who: By Michael Frayn. Directed by Bryan Bevell for Workhouse Theatre.

When: 7:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Ends May 13.

Where: The Warren, 4400 Osseo Rd., Mpls.

Tickets: \$15, 612-216-1583, workhousetheatre.org.

Decades roll in and out as the scenario unfolds. In contrast to the bleak war years, the 1920s are portrayed as a golden time of giant breakthroughs in quantum theory and atomic physics, whose destructive applications were still unguessed.

"We talked nonstop for three years," Bohr recalls. He and Heisenberg became "as close as another electron on the inmost orbit of the nucleus." Each won a Nobel Prize in physics.

Bryan Bevell found a near-perfect cast for "Copenhagen," and he directs them with absolute confidence. The spartan staging - three chairs and a pitcher of water in a 40-seat theater -- is nonetheless absorbing and rewarding. I can imagine a spendier production, but not a better one.

Blond and handsome, Jurenek animates Heisenberg with irrepressible passion and energy, at one point claiming that one of his papers "shattered the objective universe!" Malos is superb -- by turns sarcastic, avuncular, angry, doting, hurt and reflective. Ankles neatly crossed and hands folded in her lap, Bonertz is a revelation as Bohr's wife and mother of their six children.

When the men fly ever higher into techno-speak, Margrethe grounds them with her uncanny perceptiveness about the role of human nature and politics, even in the hermetic world of subatomic particles.

Follow Peck on Twitter: [@claudepeck](https://twitter.com/claudepeck)