

# Mortal Combat

**Theatre: *Copenhagen* by Michael Frayn, produced and directed by Prakash Belawadi**

On a cold September evening in 1941, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, two of the fathers of modern particle physics, set out from Bohr's home on a fateful walk together into the streets of Copenhagen. Heisenberg, the mathematician most famously responsible for the Uncertainty principle, was by this time firmly rooted in Germany, working against his will on weapons development for Adolf Hitler's government. He was visiting Denmark on the pretext of delivering a series of lectures under the benign gaze of the Nazi propaganda ministry. Heisenberg's real agenda, however, as he later claimed, was to catch his old friend Bohr alone. Niels Bohr, the distinguished theoretical physicist who had mentored and guided Heisenberg in his early years, was, like his younger colleague, highly regarded for his ground-breaking work on the structure of the atom.

As they walked, Heisenberg revealed that he had recently initiated a nuclear program for the Nazis, and that, much to Bohr's astonishment and revulsion, given adequate time and resources, it was indeed possible for them to manufacture an atomic weapon. What Bohr might have replied to this revelation has been disputed furiously by generations of historians and scientists. The subsequent actions of the two men, however, realigned the genetics of world politics: Heisenberg returned to Germany to continue work on the Nazi nuclear program, while Bohr escaped first to Britain, and then to the USA, to begin work on the Manhattan Project. How much of these decisions were affected by individual politics, ethics and egos has been subject to much speculation. In a recently-discovered unsent letter from Bohr to Heisenberg, Bohr says, "A great matter for mankind was at issue, in which, despite our personal friendship, we had to be regarded as representatives of two sides engaged in mortal combat."

Nearer home, the last weekend at Rangashankara, a rapt audience was invited to speculate on the nature and effects of the 1941 meeting at a showing of Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*. "*Copenhagen* uses physics as a lens to explore the politics of identity, on the one hand, and the politics of power, on the other," explains Prakash Belawadi, the director of the play. "The physics is merely an excuse to examine the nature of relationships."

Starring Belawadi as Bohr, Balaji Manohar as Heisenberg and Smitha Chakravarthy as Bohr's wife Margrethe, *Copenhagen* began with the critical handicap of lacking a plot, a narrative arc or a determinate ending, while overflowing with explanatory conversation. Over roughly two hours, it deconstructed and reconstructed, over and again, the meetings between the two Bohrs and Heisenberg, and the various aspects of their relationship – the momentum supplied by intense monologues, punctuated by deep silences and classical music. Belawadi, however, believes that the discourse in *Copenhagen* outweighs the necessity for plot and action. "I am always excited by idea plays, those that don't conform to the standard idea of a plot, that essay a situation rather than a story. That being the challenge, I was amazed that Pampa Chowdhury, the sponsor of the play, had the courage to put money into such a production. The other thing that greatly amazed me was the audience's response to it."

A response that was not inconsiderable, owing much to a nuanced performance by the three cast members, as well as the dialectic element of the play. Belawadi thinks that such a

reaction is only appropriate from the residents of what is often branded the Knowledge City. With this confidence, he reveals that *Copenhagen* is to be the first in a series of three plays on science – he will next direct Sundar Sarukkai's play about Einstein, and another by Alan Brody on Newton – the beginning, if the new physics is any indication (and if the city's audiences continue to emulate fissile isotopes) of a fortuitous chain reaction.

*The Hindu Metro Plus, Bangalore*

*Vinayak Varma*