

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Michael Frayn – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ursula Canton

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Playwright and novelist: influences.

UC: I saw that you wrote something when you were at Cambridge. But how did you get involved with theatre? Did your family always go and you just kept on going when you lived on your own?

MF: My family weren't great theatregoers, but my father sometimes used to take us to the music hall, as a treat. There were still music halls then after the War and we lived in the South Western suburbs of London and we sometimes went to the Kingston Music Hall, sometimes to the one in Croydon. And, I first started writing for the theatre, as I have explained if you look in the introduction from the first volume of my collected plays.

UC: I remember that.

MF: You read that? I first started writing for my own puppets, for my puppet theatre, and I had to provide them with the material to perform. I had absolutely no skill whatsoever as a puppeteer and I can't remember for the life of me what kind of plays I wrote for them. I don't think that anything very distinguished. I also wrote plays for all the children in my neighbourhood to perform. And my father used to occasionally write dialogues that he and my sister and I would perform at Christmas, but they were of a comic nature. So that's how it all began.

UC: And if you say that as a child you went to the music hall rather than theatre, when and how did you start going to the theatre?

MF: The theatre? Well, when I first discovered music and poetry and art and things when I was 15, 16, 17, I knew the theatre was something you were supposed to go to, so I started going to the theatre. I didn't have any money, so I also had to go to the...in the gallery and in those days if you wanted to go to the gallery in the West End - there weren't any subsidised but just West End theatres in London - you had to rent a stool in the gallery queue, so first you paid... I don't, I can't remember what, nine pence or what and went to stool and queue and then queued up to get tickets for everyone who wanted them, and then you paid, I can't remember, a sixpence or something, for a seat in the gallery. So I spent a lot of time sitting on little canvas stools, reading newspapers or doing my homework and then sitting in the gallery which was very high up and it took me years to realise that actors had expressions on their faces when acted in the curtain because we were looking down on the tops of their heads from above and from the great distance you couldn't see whether they were smiling, laughing, or crying or whatever. And I can't remember much about what plays I saw: I remember one of the things, one of my connections from theatre is that I went to Kingston grammar school, which is about four miles down the road in that direction and there was a distinguished

old boy of the school, the only distinguished old boy was R.C. Sheriff who was a playwright who wrote *Journey's End*, which is now just being revived in London. And he took an interest in the old school and he occasionally used to take part of the boys to see his plays, not *Journey's End* which was no longer being performed, but I remember he took us to see a play he had written called *Miss Mabel* at the Duchess Theatre and *Miss Mabel* was an absolutely standard West End comedy. It was, it was a batty old lady - there was a great fashion of batty old lady plays at the time in which people appeared to be some innocent batty old ladies and then turned out to be mass murderers and this was one of them. And *Miss Mabel*, I can't remember much about it, but it turned out she was poisoning every one right, left and centre in spite of the fact that she seemed sweet old lady and that was my early experience with the West End theatre.

UC: Was the fact that actually this playwright, who had been to your own school...

MF: R.C. Sheriff

UC: Yeah, took you there? Did you think that this was something that you might want to do, or was it just -

MF: I can't remember that, no. I used to do acts in the school plays. It was a boys' school, all boys' school - it's now a mixed school, of course, and until my voice broke I played the girls' parts. I am very shocked when I have to go back to the school to judge the school's drama competitions and things I have to see that the girls' parts are played by girls, it seems very perverted and immoral, I don't know. Anyway, so I played the girls' parts and my voice broke and I played male parts. And I played Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar*, which I see that Tony Blair did at his school, but he had a rather more distinguished career as an actor than I did. But that's if I thought of anything about theatre then, I thought that I would perform, that I'd be an actor.

UC: But later on you weren't tempted anymore to become an actor?

MF: Well, I can't remember whether I have written about it or not, but my acting career ended in a performance of a Russian play, I learned, studied Russian, and we used to do plays in Russian and we did a performance of *The Inspector General* in which I played, this was at Cambridge, in which I played a very small part, the smallest part in the play, the Inn's servant, and after I had said my five lines I attempted to exit and I pushed the door, and so pulling it so it jammed in the frame and I couldn't get off stage. And I found it such a terrifying experience that I've, that I instantly gave up any ambitions I ever had to be an actor.

UC: And then, did you continue going to the theatre while you were in Cambridge ?

MF: Yes, I did. Then I first went to the Army, for National Service. That was actually when I had the unfortunate experience with the door, so I learned Russian, I trained as a Russian interpreter. Yah, I went quite a lot to the Arts Theatre in Cambridge and to theatre in London. And, of course, there was, Cambridge was a great centre for amateur theatre in general, so there were lots of amateur plays, at the ADC, the Amateur Dramatic Club and the Marlowe Society. The Marlowe Society used to do almost entirely, Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Shakespeare, Shakespeare above all, but also Marlowe. So I went to a lot of their productions.

UC: Is there anything you think that was particularly memorable or any playwright you remember you liked very much?

MF: No, I didn't in fact much like the theatre then. And I have probably written about this somewhere. I had a disaster with the theatre at Cambridge. I wrote the, there was something called the Footlights Society that put on a revue every year and every year the revue was being done at Cambridge in May Week and then come to London. And

we were all very ambitious and professional oriented so it was a great opportunity to, to catch the eye of producers in London . And in my last year at Cambridge I wrote the May, the Footlights May Week show and it failed and it didn't come to London, the first show that didn't come and I turned against the theatre very sharply. And I then became a journalist, so I was a reporter at the Manchester Guardian as it then was and then a columnist. And as a reporter I had to review the theatre, you could do everything as a reporter, write leaders, review things. And I reviewed a lot of local theatre in and around Manchester. And I was very savage, a very savage reviewer, very sarcastic about everyone's efforts, because I'd decided that I hated the theatre. And then when I started writing a column, a humorous column, I wrote a lot of pieces about how embarrassing it was to go to the theatre and just waiting all the time for the actor to forget his line or drop the props. And I suppose it was a reaction to this failure. And it took a very, very long time before I became seriously interested in the theatre again. In fact, I was in my late thirties before I started to write for the theatre.

UC: I couldn't find the old columns, unfortunately. What about, Do you think that if you're looking back now, anything from this period did influence your writing in the long run?

MF: Hmm, well, I think yes, I think this feeling about the embarrassment of the theatre certainly was one of the sources of a play I wrote much later called Noises Off, which was indeed about people dropping their props and getting it wrong and everything becoming disastrous and about the, the embarrassment that does haunt about the theatre. It is very easy for things to go wrong and it is embarrassing for the audience and the cast when things go wrong. And if you think how difficult people find it to make a speech, even just a speech in front of their family at a family wedding and how overwhelming it is as an experience. Many people... I see how difficult it is for actors performing in front of 800, 900 or 1000 strangers every night who are just waiting for you to do something wrong.

UC: Do you think that the embarrassment, or the experience of the embarrassment for the member's audience found its way into Look, Look?

MF: Oh God, you are very well informed. Hmm. That turned out to be a remarkably embarrassing experience because absolutely nobody liked it.

UC: I read some reviews, there weren't so...

MF: They weren't?

UC: I read some review and they weren't too positive about it.

MF: Who actually saw it?

UC: Yeah, I, I checked some of the old reviews when it came out.

MF: Yes. That was my failure, worst ever. Funny, I thought the audience was going to be interested in seeing a play about an audience.

UC: I think the idea is fascinating to be honest. But, if you say that you actually came to rather dislike the theatre. What did bring you back to it. I mean, you were successful with columns and novels, so why did you start writing for the theatre?

MF: Well, as you say, I wrote novels and I wrote a couple of television plays and the director who was doing a theatre show which consisted of short plays about marriage asked me if I would write one and it's a bit difficult to resist the challenge and so even though I wasn't interested in the theatre I wrote a play for him. But it was a very innocent, simple play. It was about a young couple who go back to Venice to their honeymoon hotel a few years later out of nostalgia to see it again only this time they've

got a small baby and it's just a very, very simple-minded play about the difference that children make in your life. And, I was astonished when the director phoned up about two weeks later and said me he was sorry but he couldn't do the play. The producer thought it was too filthy. The producer was a very famous man called, Alex Cohen, Alexander Cohen, an American producer, who had a reputation for doing very difficult plays in New York. He was the first producer to do *The Homecoming* in New York, which is a very, very difficult play to persuade a Broadway audience of. And I was absolutely astonished that he found my play filthy. I said what is filthy about it? And he said Alex Cohen says he could never do a play in which a baby's nappies changed on stage. So upset, so irritated, I wrote three more short plays and had an evening of my own short plays instead of being rather than somebody else's evening. And that was my first show, *For the Two of Us*. It got universally appalling notices. In those days there was a gallery clack, a group of friends who went to every first night. And sat in the gallery and they'd go out in the interval and decided if they liked the play or not and if they didn't they'd go back and barrack the actors and boo it, yeah. It doesn't exist any longer, thank God. But they decided that they didn't like my play and they came back and they barracked the cast, the actors and they booed at in the end and they booed me personally in the street afterwards, which I thought was carrying criticism a little far. So that was my first show.

UC: Considering the fact that it still wasn't quite that successful, why did you keep on doing it afterwards?

MF: Very good question. Obstinance I'd say. If you, if at first you don't succeed, then you try, try. Although it was a critical failure, it did reasonably commercially, I think. They actually made the producers money back, ran for six months, but then it did have two stars, Richard Briers and Lynn Redgrave. And I suppose I then began to get intrigued. Also another great influence on me at that time was Peter Nichols who was a neighbour in Blackheath Row then and I got to know him quite well. I was immensely impressed by his plays. I still am. And, I began to see the theatre through his eyes. And, in so far as I managed to learn anything about the theatre, which is probably not a great deal, but I learned it from Peter. So, yes, Peter was a great influence on me.

UC: Did you go to see his plays, or, I mean, as you were neighbours did he show them to you sometimes and you discussed them before they were produced.

MF: No, I went to see them. I never read any of his plays before publication until we got to *Passion Play*, which he showed me and I couldn't see anything in it at all. I didn't think it was any good. And then I actually saw it performed and was completely overwhelmed. I stupidly didn't go and see *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* because my first wife and I had a young child at the time and the wife of Jo Melia who played the lead in the show said: 'Oh, don't go and see it, you'll be terrified'. But actually she was pregnant at the time, maybe she was pregnant at the time. Anyway, we didn't go and see it. And it was years and years before we did have a chance to see it when Peter revived it himself at Greenwich. I think it's just one of the great plays. We did see most of the others, *The National Health*, *Forget-me-not Lane* and I saw some less good ones, like *The Freeway*, but *National Health* and *Forget-me-not Lane* were both terrific.

UC: As you just mentioned Peter Nichols, which other authors did you really like?

MF: At that time, when I decided to write for the theatre. David Storey. I was very struck by his plays, very struck at seeing the world of work on the stage. It's supposed, I mean people have written plays about people doing various forms of work, but in general people have assumed that plays had to be about people at moments of leisure. You saw them when they were sitting down in the drawing room, talking to each other. Even if you look at Chekhov's plays, and Chekhov writes plays about very hard working people,

you see them on the whole when they are just relaxing, sitting there, anyway, not actually doing their work. And to see contractors, Contractors was the first David Storey play I saw, and to actually see a team of people physically working on stage and actually achieving something, literally by getting a tent up in Act One and getting it down in Act Two was a revelation for me. Because after all, what most people do, for a very large part of their lives is work, and it struck me with great force that this, even this aspect of people's lives could be represented on stage. So most of my plays since have been about people, about people working. And even Noises Off really is about actors working.

UC: Apart from Peter Nichols and David Storey, which sort of plays did you like seeing, when you started writing?

MF: You mean now? Which sort of plays do I like?

UC: Yes, but say from, from the period when you started writing until now?

MF: I like a great many plays, a great many writers in different ways. I translated most of Chekhov's plays, partly because I think he's a most magnificent writer. And if you translate a play you come very close to it, you have to understand, or try to understand the mechanics of the play, how it works, as well as the nature of the characters and so on, so that was a kind of a crash course in playwriting and I hope, I've been somewhat influenced by that. What other writers? I like a great many of David Hare's plays, not all of them, it is a bit like Peter Nichols, a very hit-miss playwright: the hits are terrific and the misses are ghastly. Tremendous admirer of Caryl Churchill. I think she's one of the greatest playwrights around. Who else? I very much like Nicholas Wright's plays, like some of Nicholas Wright's plays. Oh, and Christopher Hampton has written some terrific plays, particularly Tales from Hollywood. Have you seen this? Wonderful play.

UC: Do you think that starting to write yourself has actually changed the way in which you see theatre when you go?

MF: If writing myself has changed the way I see theatre? I don't know, it's... I'm not sure. I think as a theatregoer I am just a member of the public like everybody else and sometimes I am tremendously caught by things and sometimes tremendously bored by things. I don't feel much more forgiving of plays that I don't enjoy because I'm a writer myself. The thing about the theatre is, because of the presence of the audience, because it is a live performance and because there is an audience interacting with that performance, it heightens the experience, it is a much stronger experience than either way than seeing a film or a television play. And when it's good, it can be tremendously involving and when it's bad it's absolutely horrible, I mean. If you see a rotten film you get bored and you think well, I'll go off and do something else. When you see a rotten play, I mean you feel quite vile, you'd like everyone to drop dead and all you think about is getting out eating dinner, so it's. I think all members of the audience go through that, I mean, not just members, not just people who are in the business themselves.

UC: Do you think you start to see a play in a way which differences more between the different contributions to it, that you start taking apart things and think: this is probably something the director decided or this is what the playwright did, or do you see a play as a whole?

MF: No, I see them as a whole. I do sometimes think - you're right at that one - why didn't you do one more draft and try and get it right. I often think of ways of getting plays better, as it seems to me, of tightening the plot up. I can't help feeling that, but probably everyone feels that, that they can do it better themselves. And of course if they'd tried they wouldn't be able to do it. But no, you can't help thinking sometimes... Well, I am very struck, I am particularly struck, there is a play called, what is it called Feelgood -have you seen that? -which is a satire on the present government. And Act

One was very funny indeed, extremely funny, then in Act Two it fell to pieces. And it's a shame, because he got a lot of plot; the point of the plot was a scandal in the government and the scandal is that because of genetic engineering or allowing genetic crops, some strain of beer is being produced which actually turns men into women. So this is a political scandal, that's a great hot potato for the government: are they're going to conceal it, or are they're going to cover it up or do something about it? That's quite a good idea. What I could not believe is that, having taken the whole of Act One to establish that the country is awash with funny beer, they didn't get it on stage. I mean, what you'd surely wanted in Act Two was for politicians to be just about to take up a glass of beer and somebody says: Is that the terrible sort? And then there is a journalist present who has to be convinced that it is perfectly safe. Is the politician going to drink the beer or not, I mean the possibilities are endless. They never got the beer on stage. I could not believe it. But Act One was very very funny.

UC: Does it ever happen to you...? For example if I am reading things by academics who write on the comic, I am very impressed, because it is something I consider very difficult to write about and I could never do this, but someone who has clever things to say about it definitely deserves all my admiration. Is there anything where you think that you probably could never do it yourself, but you really admire it?

MF: Well, academic writing in general, about the theatre, about comedy. I mean, I have no desire to read it, but it seems to me a very impressive skill. Couldn't read it, couldn't write it.

UC: And in theatrical terms. That you sometimes see a play and think: Gosh this is really good but I could have never done this?

MF: Yes, sure. Most of the plays.

UC: Can you think of any example or why you think you could never or where you say can say why you could never have done this?

MF: Well, just take a random example, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* which I think is a wonderful play which is written in blank verse, or was it rhyming verse even, I can't remember, it might be rhyming verse. Anyway, it was in verse, but I certainly couldn't ... All the plays, I couldn't. I think the wonderful thing about Peter Nichols's plays is that he risks embarrassment all the time. He sails so close to the wind of what is almost too painful to watch on the stage, because it's so embarrassing and I find that really ...

UC: Coming back to your own work...I remember reading in one of the interviews you gave that you said that theatre has much more, many more restrictions than any other form of writing, because all you can do is put down what people say and you said that probably it was obstinacy that got you into writing. What makes it so attractive to write in an art form that gives you so many restrictions.

MF: Well, the challenge. As soon as somebody tells you can't do something, do you want to do it, that's an absolutely universal human feeling. Somebody says, well it's impossible to write a, a play where you know what people are thinking, immediately you want to write a play where you know what people are thinking. If you know someone who can't write a play about nuclear physics, you immediately want to write a play about nuclear physics, one immediately wants to write a play about nuclear physics, obviously you want to do what they are not supposed to be able to do. And it does concentrate your mind marvellously. Great problem about writing anything is restriction. There is the great sea of everything out there and somehow you got to pick out one strand that's going to lead to another strand that is really telling us something about the whole, but you can only do it by being very, very selective. How do you select. Well, in the theatre, a lot of the selection is done for you, because there really is not very much

in going to the theatre accept of a relatively small number of people saying things. Not much else they can do, they can dance... That's about it.

UC: If I think about theatre in performance, I actually have the impression that as far as some things are concerned you've got more possibilities than in a novel because you have people on stage, you have real bodies performing. When you write, do you think about these possibilities or do you concentrate just on the text, which is your area and leave all the rest to your theatre collaborators who are going to do?

MF: What you're doing all the time when you're writing for the theatre is just imagining the thing two ways simultaneously, you're imagining the King moving around the Palace with a gold crown on his head surrounded by courtiers and you are imagining exactly the same event with an actor standing in front of a cardboard set with a cardboard crown on his hat and you've got to make sure it works both ways and you can't help but trying to imagine it both ways. What people say, what characters say in a play is just part of the action, and what you're thinking about is the action all the time, and the action may well be carried by the dialogue, but that's what the play is, is something happening, something happening.

UC: But you as a writer can't control many of the other factors. And from what I have read you seem to be someone who does not get involved very much into the process of rehearsal, so does the end product, the complete production actually correspond more or less to what you imagined while you were writing, or are there sometimes surprises, positive or negative ones?

MF: Well, I think what you have to understand in theatre and what is quite difficult to understand if you come from outside the theatre as I did, is that theatre is a collaborative business. And that actors and directors have to bring their, make their original contributions to the show. People are all the same, so writers do not have any control over what's happening. It's not like that, it's not a question of control. You bring one element, an important element, the text of the play, but the actors and the director and the designer have to bring their own contributions, otherwise it doesn't come alive. And sometimes said that if writers could specify their own robot actors, machines that did exactly, said the lines exactly as they wanted them performed, exactly as they'd wish them to perform, it wouldn't work, the play wouldn't come to life. A play is about the meeting of different human beings, both as characters and as participants. And that goes absolutely to the root of thinking plays.

UC: Has it ever happened to you that the collaboration has actually taken a way which you'd never foreseen and which you did not like very much?

MF: Yes, not very much with the first production, because most of my plays being done with Michael Blakemoore, because he is a very good friend and we think very similarly and we work very, very hard on the text together first and before that they were mostly done by Michael Rudman, and a similarly close collaboration. The revival of *Noises Off*, recently redone by Jeremy Sams, also a close collaboration. But then there are other productions that I can't possibly control. Plays, one's plays are done all over the world, you can't conceivably keep an eye on all of them and sometimes when you do go and see them you get a very nasty surprise. I wrote a play called *Copenhagen* which was about three, about two physicists and the wife of one of them, it was done by Michael Blakemoore in London and in New York very, very simply, which just seemed to me absolutely right. I went to see the first German production, because I cared very much about how it was received in Germany, particularly because Heisenberg, one of the characters was a German physicist. And it was absolutely appalling to discover it was done as a kind of circus act. You get the tone of it when I tell you that Heisenberg turned four back somersaults in the course of the play, I mean literally four physical back

somersaults. Margarete Bohr sat in a hole on the stage with a typewriter in front of her and any time anyone began to speak she began to hammer on the typewriter so you couldn't hear they said. I thought it was just awful beyond imagination. And I have to say that this production has gone all over Germany, being a huge success, everyone thinks it's wonderful. But in my thought it's just totally against the sense of the play.

UC: As you just said you usually work together with directors you know very well. Do you think that changes your writing in some way that, knowing their style in direction you count this in?

MF: Good question. I don't think so, I don't think good directors have a style. I mean, I think, quite good directors do, but really good directors are transparent, like really good writers. The great talent of Michael Blakemore, as I have said before, is to be very stupid and not to understand anything about how plays are done or what this play is about and find out and work it out very slowly as he is doing it, which is why he doesn't get the credit he should get as a director. He gets a lot of credit, but he doesn't get as much credit as some other people, because he does new plays and because he serves the play. He doesn't have people turning back some sorts to demonstrate what a clever director he is, he makes the play look good and a lot of the credit that is going for the productions he does of my plays really should go to him and not to me, because it's he who makes them work, but he doesn't have a style, he works out the style of the play, he serves the play. He did *Noises Off* in a kind of naturalistic farce style, because that was the style of the play, and *Copenhagen* he did with absolute simplicity, because again that's the style of the play. But there are lesser directors who get more credit, whose productions are much more noticeable, you can see that it's a such and such production.

UC: You said you usually worked on the text together before You said that you often worked on the text together before rehearsals started?

MF: Oh, yes, yes, we did.

UC: Does he contribute to the text?

MF: A great deal. Particularly in the case of *Noises Off*, he told me that a lot of things I had simply wouldn't work and he persuaded me to rewrite a great sways of the play. With *Copenhagen* and *Democracy* not a great deal of rewriting, there certainly was simplification. What we do is he makes me read it to him, which is always a painful experience because I have no talent at all reading I, I can't even hit the right stress for my own lines, but it means that every line is looked at and is thought about and he says: why did you say that? Easier. Do we actually need that line and sometimes take the line out all together. But it means we look at everything and think about why it's there and he gets to, it's the way he studies the play and he gets to understand it. But he has certainly, particularly with *Noises Off*, made many suggestions himself and persuaded me to do a lot of rewriting.

UC: It's just as you just said that you can't even imagine the right intonations for your own lines.

MF: Oh, in my line, they're in my head, I can't.

UC: This is what I was aiming at. So, you imagine them automatically with actors?

MF: Oh, my God, certainly, I see the whole performance in my head, I hear the whole performance, but I couldn't begin to reproduce that, that's what the actors and the director do.

UC: Thinking about the other side of the play: do you write with a certain audience in mind?

MF: I never write with any audience in mind. I never think that anyone's going to do the plays. People often ask if you think about an audience or if you think about which actors are going to perform them. Well, you can't, or my brain is simply not big enough to do this. Every channel is, has to be dedicated to thinking about what you are writing. You really don't have any, or I don't have any spare space to spare to think about are people going to like this or whatever, or is this suitable for this kind of theatre or that kind of theatre. And certainly with *Noises Off* and with *Copenhagen* and with *Democracy* I didn't think that anyone would perform them at all, I thought I was just writing them for my own amusement.

UC: But thinking especially about *Copenhagen* and *Democracy*, you use much historical material, which you obviously know very well. If you say you don't have audience in mind, how do you decide how much explanation is needed and how much can be understood, or can be supposed to be there?

MF: Well, I think you've got to make it clear to yourself and as you go along and since [...] Yes, I don't know anything about either nuclear physics or German history, or very little, so I had to find out and make the story work for myself. I think when you start thinking now how much members of the audience are going to know about, about fission, we just don't know, how much they know. Some of them are going to know less than you do yourself and some of them are going to be nuclear physicists and they're going to know a great deal more than you do. So, I think you really just got to just tell the story and make the story work. Or try to. And then, it's certainly true, that Michael Blakemore often says, look no one is going to understand all these acronyms, SPD, FDP, CDU and so forth, no one's going to pick them up on the stage. We got to get rid of this in *Democracy*, we got to get rid of all the acronyms and we did, and that's, that's very sensible. At the time when you write the thing, you don't always see that.

UC: How do you choose the topics of your plays. I read in another interview that you said most of your plays are about how people perceive things or have ideas of things...

MF: Are about what?

UC: Most of the plays are hardly about how people perceive things and order things in their minds. Do you rather have an idea of a quite abstract philosophical question, or do you rather have something very specific and then start to build on this?

MF: I think, often in my case, there's some, some problem, some abstract thing I've been thinking about for a long time and then for some reason, some story I've heard or some, something, some story that comes to my mind about particular people seems to reflect something about that idea. And then you start to think about the, about the characters and you think more and more about the characters and what they are like and what they do and how they relate to each other. But I don't think, you really think I'm going to write a play about phenomenism or whatever. Let's think, we could have one character who's like this and one character who's like that. I don't think that works. But I think you do think about phenomenism or whatever and then one day you find yourself thinking about a story about particular people which seems to reflect something about the abstract problem.

UC: Could you give an example of one of your plays where you remember exactly how you got together the general idea and the specific topic?

MF: Well, I can remember with *Noises Off*, that - I told you that my first show was four short plays *The Two of Us*, and one of them was a farce and the point of the evening

was, it was played by just two actors, one actor and an actress. And the farce had five characters in it, who were discovering each other in embarrassing positions or whatever. So the two actors had to do a lot of fast, quick changing and running through one door and to another backstage putting on a different coat or so and one night I watched it from backstage and I thought this is funnier than what's going on at the front and I must one day write a farce seen from behind. It was a very easy thought to have and it took me a very, very long time to do. Copenhagen is again, problems I've been thinking about for a long time, about quantum mechanics and indeterminacy. And then I happened to read a book by Thomas Powers called Heisenberg's War which told the story of Heisenberg's trip to Copenhagen in 1941, much written about then, but I had never come across it, and since I'd read it, I thought: this suggests, this seems to encapsulate something about the difficulty of knowing why people do what they do and there is a parallel between that and the impossibility that Heisenberg established in physics, about ever knowing everything about the behaviour of physical objects. So that idea sort of came quite quickly and it took a very, very long time then to work out how to do it. An appallingly long time. Democracy I don't know; I've always been interested in German history, particularly in modern German history for a long time. And for some reason I started thinking about the story of Brandt and Guillaume which I had been very struck about at the time. I read about it when it happened. And that began to seem to embody something both about German history and about the complexity of how human beings ever do anything.

UC: If you read the reviews of your plays: there seems to be huge gap between the earlier plays and then Copenhagen and I happen to have read on the train Alarms and Excursions, which is very much in the earlier style but came out the same year as Copenhagen. Do you perceive such a huge gap between the two groups or do you think that they are more similar than most people think?

MF: I don't really see things in groups. I just write what ideas come into my head. And I have, I have ideas for short plays and I did a lot short plays and it's just a selection of them, Alarms and Excursions, because the ideas came just as the ideas for Copenhagen and Democracy came. I certainly wasn't consciously going back to some earlier style. I don't think I group things in that way. I think it is true that Copenhagen and Democracy are different from the early work, in that they use real characters, they are fictional versions of real characters which I hadn't done before. Which I found very difficult and very inhibiting for the start.

UC: What did, I don't know, as you say it was something different. After having written two plays that involve real historical material and real characters: how do you describe the difference between writing the two sorts of drama, biographical drama and completely fictional.

MF: In the end it gets to be the same. What inhibited me when I began to write Copenhagen, was knowing that there had been an actual Niels Bohr and an actual Margarete Bohr and an actual Werner Heisenberg and that there was no way in which I could go back to actually see what they were they like and see the way they behaved and hear the way they spoke. Although I studied everything I could get my hands on that they had written and everything people said about them. I knew that I would be falsifying them as I wrote them, but what happens if you write fictitious characters, and I have said tis before, I have said all these things before, is that at some stage the characters do seem to take over and start become, to behave from themselves and say their words themselves. And that happens even with real characters, with Heisenberg and with Willy Brandt and so forth. After a lot of painful research and invention, assiduously thinking of plausible things for them to say, at some stage they do seem to take on their own reality and start speaking. And, well, you know that there's, they're

going to be fictitious characters, even though they are based on real characters, because they, there is no possibility that the real characters can have happened to be like your fiction. But at that point you just have to trust them and go with them, with the characters that are emerging.

UC: You have very long postscripts, both for Democracy and for Copenhagen, in which you explain what, which your sources are, and how much you have taken from them. If drama gives you the possibility to use more fiction in biography without anyone complaining, why, why didn't you use more invention? Wasn't it a temptation?

MF: Why did I use or why didn't I use?

UC: Wasn't it...I mean, it must have been quite a temptation that you can always claim that it's fiction and that you can change in a way which you think works better for the play.

MF: I simplified many things in both stories to make them more accessible to the stage. But I think rather the interesting thing in both the stories is that basically those things did happen. It is the case that Heisenberg and Niels Bohr did have a meeting in Copenhagen. It is the case that Willy Brandt did manage to get the Eastern treaties through and was spied upon by his personal assistant. I think it's, it can be interesting to respect reality. And even if you have to adapt it, simplify it to get it onto the stage, to actually respect the real texture of life, of what's actually happened. Not always, but I think it can sometimes be.

UC: As you just mention the texture of real life. Do you think you can, by reading about a period of history and a historical person, do you think you can find some structures which you can then use for the play, or do you think you rather impose your structures on the historical event or the historical person?

MF: I think probably you feel, you see, it might be an illusion, but you begin to see some kind of structure emerging from the history as you look at it. It does seem. What's the point of writing fiction about real events. There are a lot of things in real events which are not accessible to the historian. A lot of very important aspects of human behaviour are not publicly recordable, something is art. But a lot of what shapes human events, emotions that people feel, their interpretation of the world around them, the way they see things and often quite random movements of their own volition. And those are very difficult, a lot of them are impossible to grasp by the means that historians use because they can't be recorded and I think that it's useful sometimes to add to recorded history by taking some fiction, by trying to recreate by imaginative means what must have gone on inside people's heads, and what must have gone on, what their feelings must have been, what their intentions and hopes must have been. I also think that it's very difficult to see the underlying structure of events at the time, and it's one of the things that both historians and writers of fiction do afterwards, they do try to detect some graspable pattern in what must at the time must seem to be just a chaos, a sea of just one damn thing after another and everything happened simultaneously. It feels only with the imagination, either the imagination of writers of fiction or the historian's imagination that you can begin to find the underlying structures of events. And without that it's very difficult to have any grasp of them at all.

UC: If you say that with hindsight and intuitive knowledge you can find structures in a historical event, or present it better, doesn't that automatically mean introducing very much of yourself.

MF: Doesn't that mean...?

UC: Introducing very much of yourself.

MF: It means selecting, certainly, but that is what all art, all human communication is. It's selection. Even as we sit here. You are choosing very few words out of the whole possible range of human communication, very few question of all the questions you could ask me and I'm choosing very few words, very few answers out of all the range of answers to give you. We are both even for the purpose of this conversation being extremely selective. Not arbitrarily selective, but selective because we hope we are following, serving the purposes of the conversation. You are asking me questions which you hope are relevant to the answers I might give and the purposes of your research. I'm trying to find answers which have some relation to your questions. But that's what happens in writing a story. You select a tiny, tiny sliver of possible experience because you hope it tells you about more than itself.

UC: In Copenhagen the idea that, that past events are always presented from a perspective, and that someone always makes a selection becomes very obvious in the course of the play and with this, much of the traditional idea of biography that they inform about a life is substituted by the idea that you give an attitude towards them. In Democracy on the other hand you don't get this impression very much.

MF: Well, it's not looking back into the past, we are talking about events which occur in front of our eyes.

UC: It seems a much more traditional play, though as far as the idea of biography is concerned. Why?

MF: Why is it more traditional, or why I did write it this way?

UC: It's, it seems a bit like stepping back from some of the ideas you used in Copenhagen.

MF: Well, it's just about different aspects of things. Copenhagen was about the difficulty of grasping what is going on inside people's head, what people's intentions are. And Democracy, as I see it, it is about two things: it is about the complexity of our social relationships. The difficulty of ever getting anything done that involves more than one person, because that involves more than one person's interests, more than one person's viewpoint, and this is particularly acute in the politics, because everyone is involved in politics, but which goes absolutely through one's life, decisions in the family, business decisions, decisions about where to go on holiday. But also about, and this I suppose does relate to Copenhagen, the complexity of each individual human being. It seems to me that each individual human being is a kind of parliamentary democracy in a way with various possibilities inside each of us, that we could pursue or not pursue, the various options which people pursue or not pursue and how we actually arrive at a course of behaviour, how we actually define ourselves by what we do is extremely difficult to see. In a way that is somewhat similar territory to Copenhagen, but not compounded by the problems of memory.

UC: Do you think it is easier for another person, probably with insight, to see how certain things came to be as they are than it is, or why a person took a certain course in his or her life, than for the person itself at the time?

MF: That's certainly the argument of Copenhagen. The final suggestion of the play, I mean the play examines all the different reasons there were, that people put forward as to why, what Heisenberg was hoping to achieve by going to Copenhagen. And the final explanation it puts forward, which is my personal and fictitious one is that he went because he wanted to know what his own intentions were by trying them out on Niels Bohr. I suspect there was, the reasons that he went were very complex, as the reasons for most human actions, but I strongly suspect that that was one of his intentions That he didn't quite know what his own attitude was and he wanted to discuss it with Bohr. I

think we all do this a lot of the time. If we got something, some difficulty in our life, we want to talk about it with someone. Not because we want to be told a particular course of action, but we just want a sign, we want someone to reflect back what we are saying, to see how it looks when it's said by somebody else. I think that's very common experience. And when we first did, first rehearsed Copenhagen the cast found it very difficult to sort out what was going on and they said: Can't, I still can't really understand what Heisenberg was up to and as rehearsals went on, towards the last week or so of rehearsal they began to say, as actors always do at the late stage of rehearsal: well, nothing much more we can do now until get in front of an audience. When we get in front of an audience that'll tell us about the play. I said: that is what Heisenberg's intentions are. He wants to get in front of an audience. It's funny that actors feel very strongly they are told by the audience what the play is about. I did an adaptation once of a Chekhov play, that I called Wild Honey, that is Chekhov's first play left untitled and the central part of Platonov was played by Ian McKellen and after the press night which had gone like a dream, an absolutely wonderful press night he phoned me and said: you may think that's very stupid, but I didn't realise until we started getting in front of preview audiences and the audience last night, that this was a comedy. I thought this was a serious play. I was slightly taken aback by this, I thought there was quite a lot of evidence in that play that it was a comedy, it's not like the later Chekhov plays at all, but I think he was quite sincere. He hadn't seen that it would make people laugh and once he did, it did enable him to shape the play and to feel his way forward. And the play did indeed, the production did indeed change greatly in the course of previews. It began as an absolutely, people's spirit began to sack towards the end of the rehearsals and that, we didn't know, didn't know whether it was going to work at all, and then we had an absolutely appalling press rehearsal. Then we had our first preview audience and it plainly did catch people's fancy and from then on it just improved dramatically from night to night, we had this absolutely wonderful press night, but it was being shaped by the audience response. The audience was telling the actor what the play was about.

UC: You gave me such a nice turn into biography, that I forgot, or I didn't want to put in a other question, but as you said... It can fit in very well here now: as you say that the audience response is so important for the development of the play, what is the difference with television drama where you don't have an audience?

MF: Or with films.

UC: Yes.

MF: Well, I tell you a funny thing, if.. I haven't had much success writing screenplays, though, I'm writing one at the moment. I don't know what I do wrong. But, if you do write a screenplay - I wrote one called Clockwise which John Cleese did, which was, which was made and I had to go and see it many times before it's released with test audiences as in the way you do with films. And although it was the same piece of celluloid running through the projector each night, because of the different audiences watching it, it seemed as if the performances were quite different. You felt just as you do coming out of the preview of a play, coming out of the cinema at the end of the evening you felt like, oh, the cast was slow tonight, weren't they, they were so slow tonight; what's gone wrong, not the right, can't say they did a good show tonight, didn't they. I mean it was exactly the same performances, just the reaction of the audience that made it seem different. And it's true that the reaction of the audience doesn't affect the performances, which is why it seems to me somehow as less exciting than the theatre, and less disastrous when it's, when it's bad. And it is, it's in many ways a different skill I think, acting for the cinema. You need to talk to actors about that. But a lot of the, but cinema actors who haven't the faintest idea about going on stage, or some stage actors who can't really perform effectively for the camera.

UC: Do you feel something similar for you as a writer, that you're better in one form than in the other?

MF: Well. I've certainly done better in the theatre than the cinema. Not for the want of trying, I very much like to write a good screenplays and I'm trying to write one at the moment, but it is, it is different. It is different. And I still don't know what the difference is.

UC: Brilliant. Thank you very much.