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Science Takes the Stage

By TERRY TEACHOUT



Sarasota, Fla.

How do you make science stageworthy? One way is by dramatizing the lives of scientists. Another is by using their ideas as a pretext for talking about something completely different. In **"The Life of Galileo"** and **"Copenhagen,"** Bertolt Brecht and Michael Frayn seem to split the difference—but it isn't hard to see where their true sympathies lie. Though Brecht took care to portray Galileo Galilei as a rounded character, his real purpose in writing "The Life of Galileo" was to turn the great Italian physicist's fateful encounter with the Inquisition into a parable of the ability of "the slow and gentle power of human reason" to change men's minds. And while Mr. Frayn is no less adept at bringing Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg to life, "Copenhagen" is at bottom a thoroughly postmodern meditation on the ultimate unknowability of truth. That both of these knotty yet powerful plays are being performed to sterling effect by two of the best drama companies in Florida says much about the state of theater in the land of sunshine—all of it good.

Just as impressive is the fact that Sarasota's Asolo Repertory Theatre has dared to put on "The Life of Galileo," a large-cast play that is rarely seen in America, at a time when the sour economy is forcing most drama companies to steer clear of costly highbrow shows. Yet Michael Donald Edwards's staging, which fields a budget-busting cast of 24, is not a bare-bones antispectacle but a masterpiece of unified design in which Clint Ramos's modern-dress costumes, Dan Scully's ultracontemporary digital projections, Peter West's lighting and Fabian Obispo's minimalist music are blended into a production whose clean, elegant look is uncommonly fresh and involving. I've never seen a handsomer Brecht revival.

All this would be irrelevant, of course, were the title role being played by a less magnetic actor than Paul Whitworth, who gives us an earthy, Cockney-flavored Galileo (he sounds very much like Michael Caine) whose love of sensual pleasure is at war with his iron determination to follow the truth wherever it may lead. Mr. Whitworth has the advantage of being supported by an excellent ensemble, but he is definitely the star of the show, and he's more than up to the task.

Mr. Edwards, the company's artistic director, has opted to use David Edgar's new performing edition of "The Life of Galileo." This edition, which was previously mounted in the U.S. by Philadelphia's Wilma Theater in 2007, combines the three versions of the play that were left behind by Brecht into a script that is eminently speakable (if not so poetically pointed as Charles Laughton's 1947 translation of the second version). I saw and liked the Wilma's revival, but this one is in another class altogether. If all you know of Bertolt Brecht is "The Threepenny Opera," I urge you to come to Sarasota to see what Mr. Edwards and his company have done with "The Life of Galileo." Brecht has a well-deserved reputation for didacticism, but there's nothing heavy-handed about this luminous production—and now that the West is under assault by fanatics who seek to stop the ticking

clock of change, the humanist message of "The Life of Galileo" has never been more timely.

West Palm Beach, Fla.

Unlike "The Life of Galileo," "Copenhagen" is a genuinely popular play. Not only did it run for 326 performances on Broadway after opening there in 2000, but it still gets done with better-than-fair regularity by regional theaters around the country, partly because it's so good and partly because it has only three characters and needs no scenery or props. What "Copenhagen" demands is first-class acting, and Palm Beach Dramaworks' revival, directed with tautness and unexpected physical immediacy by J. Barry Lewis, supplies that commodity in abundance.

Like the company's 2009 production of Eugène Ionesco's "The Chairs," also directed by Mr. Lewis, this staging takes a difficult play and makes it cellophane-clear. Christopher Oden, Colin McPhillamy and Elizabeth Dimon, all of whom are new to me, bat Mr. Frayn's arcane conversational gambits back and forth like shuttlecocks, creating the illusion that you're watching a drawing-room comedy instead of a deadly serious play about the desperate hours when America and Nazi Germany raced against one another to build the first atomic bomb. Seeing "Copenhagen" in Palm Beach Dramaworks' 84-seat theater instead of a cavernous Broadway house sharpens the focus still further—an invaluable contribution to a play whose animating premise is that our capacity to get to the bottom of any historical event is fatally compromised by what one of the characters describes as "that final core of uncertainty at the heart of things."

It's noteworthy, by the way, that a pleasure dome like Palm Beach should also be the home of a drama troupe that not only specializes in shows like "Copenhagen" and "The Chairs" but performs them with flair. We have it on the best of authority that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people, but Palm Beach Dramaworks seems to be doing quite well for itself by operating on the opposite assumption.

—Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong," just out from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

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