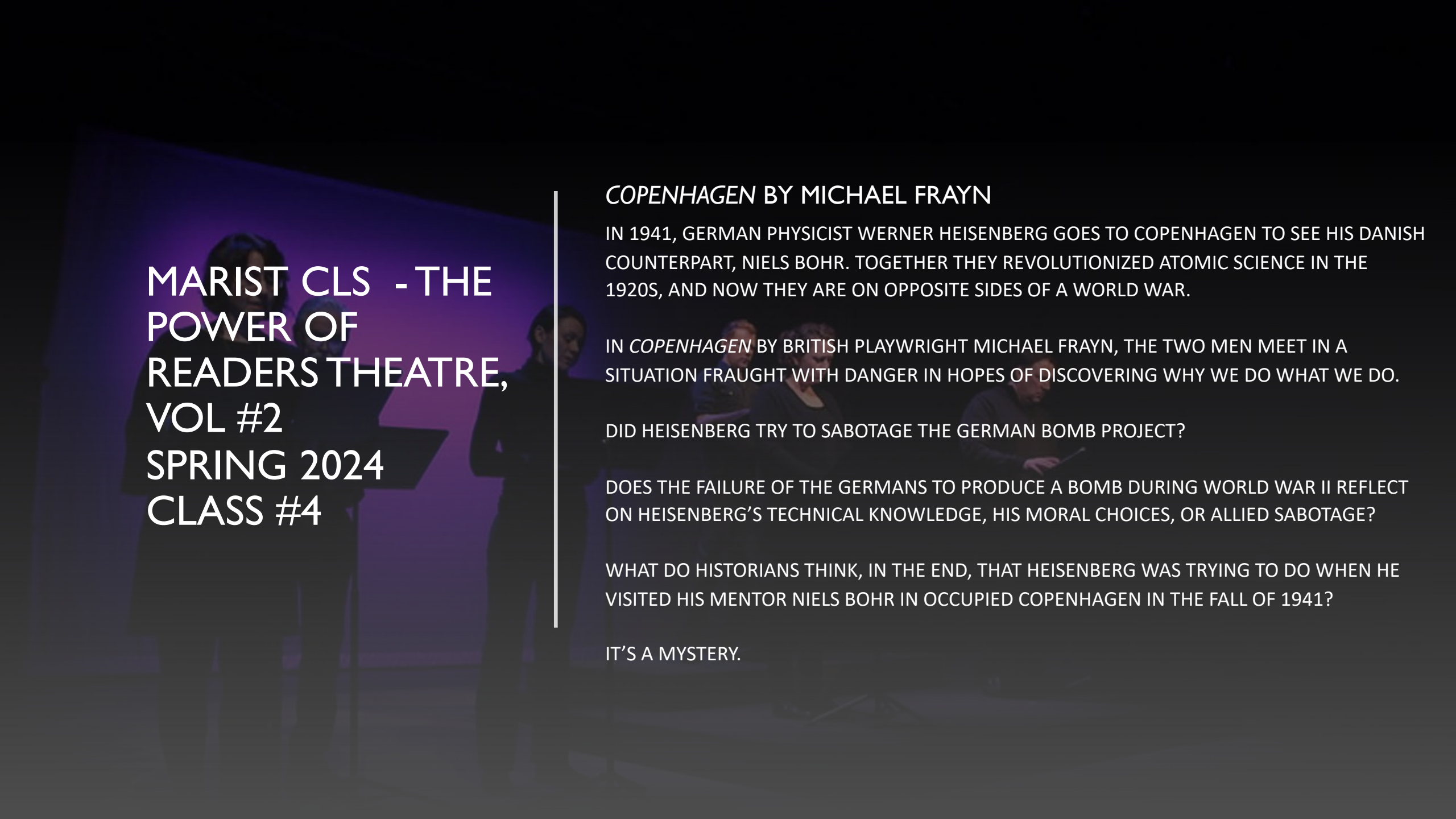




*COPENHAGEN*  
BY MICHAEL FRAYN

MARIST CLS - THE  
POWER OF READERS  
THEATRE, VOL #2  
SPRING 2024  
CLASS #4



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*COPENHAGEN* BY MICHAEL FRAYN

IN 1941, GERMAN PHYSICIST WERNER HEISENBERG GOES TO COPENHAGEN TO SEE HIS DANISH COUNTERPART, NIELS BOHR. TOGETHER THEY REVOLUTIONIZED ATOMIC SCIENCE IN THE 1920S, AND NOW THEY ARE ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF A WORLD WAR.

IN *COPENHAGEN* BY BRITISH PLAYWRIGHT MICHAEL FRAYN, THE TWO MEN MEET IN A SITUATION FRAUGHT WITH DANGER IN HOPES OF DISCOVERING WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO.

DID HEISENBERG TRY TO SABOTAGE THE GERMAN BOMB PROJECT?

DOES THE FAILURE OF THE GERMANS TO PRODUCE A BOMB DURING WORLD WAR II REFLECT ON HEISENBERG'S TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE, HIS MORAL CHOICES, OR ALLIED SABOTAGE?

WHAT DO HISTORIANS THINK, IN THE END, THAT HEISENBERG WAS TRYING TO DO WHEN HE VISITED HIS MENTOR NIELS BOHR IN OCCUPIED COPENHAGEN IN THE FALL OF 1941?

IT'S A MYSTERY.



# COPENHAGEN

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*COPENHAGEN* IS A FICTIONAL ACCOUNT OF AN ACTUAL EVENT DURING WORLD WAR II, IN WHICH TWO PHYSICISTS EXCHANGE HEATED WORDS AND PROFOUND IDEAS.

ONE MAN, WERNER HEISENBERG, SEEKS TO HARNESS THE POWER OF THE ATOM FOR GERMANY'S FORCES.

THE OTHER SCIENTIST, NIELS BOHR, IS DEVASTATED THAT HIS NATIVE DENMARK HAS BEEN OCCUPIED BY THE THIRD REICH.

IT'S THE FALL OF 1941 AND GERMANY IS AT THE HEIGHT OF ITS POWER. THE AMERICANS HAVE NOT YET ENTERED THE WAR.





IN 1941, GERMAN PHYSICIST HEISENBERG PAID A VISIT TO BOHR. THE TWO SPOKE VERY BRIEFLY BEFORE BOHR ANGRILY ENDED THE CONVERSATION AND HEISENBERG LEFT.

MYSTERY AND CONTROVERSY HAVE SURROUNDED THIS HISTORIC EXCHANGE.

ABOUT A DECADE AFTER THE WAR, HEISENBERG MAINTAINED THAT HE VISITED BOHR, HIS FRIEND AND FATHER-FIGURE, TO DISCUSS HIS OWN ETHICAL CONCERNS ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONRY.

BOHR, HOWEVER, REMEMBERS IT DIFFERENTLY. HE CLAIMS THAT HEISENBERG SEEMED TO HAVE NO MORAL QUALMS ABOUT CREATING ATOMIC WEAPONS FOR THE AXIS POWERS.

INCORPORATING A HEALTHY COMBINATION OF RESEARCH AND IMAGINATION, MICHAEL FRAYN CONTEMPLATES THE VARIOUS MOTIVATIONS BEHIND HEISENBERG'S MEETING WITH HIS FORMER MENTOR, NIELS BOHR.

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*COPENHAGEN* IS SET IN AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION WITH NO MENTION OF SETS, PROPS, COSTUME, OR SCENIC DESIGN. IN FACT, THE PLAY DOES NOT OFFER A SINGLE STAGE DIRECTION.

THE AUDIENCE LEARNS EARLY ON THAT ALL THREE CHARACTERS (HEISENBERG, BOHR, AND BOHR'S WIFE MARGRETHE) HAVE BEEN DEAD FOR YEARS.

WITH THEIR LIVES NOW OVER, THEIR SPIRITS TURN TO CONVERSATION OF THE PAST AS THEY TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE 1941 MEETING.

DURING THEIR DISCUSSION, THE SPIRITS TOUCH UPON OTHER MOMENTS IN THEIR LIVES, SUCH AS SKIING TRIPS AND BOATING ACCIDENTS, LABORATORY EXPERIMENTS, AND LONG WALKS WITH FRIENDS.



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THERE IS POETRY TO BE FOUND IN THE WORKINGS OF AN ATOM, AND FRAYN'S DIALOGUE IS MOST ELOQUENT WHEN THE CHARACTERS MAKE PROFOUND COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE REACTIONS OF ELECTRONS AND THE CHOICES OF HUMANS.

*COPENHAGEN* WAS FIRST PERFORMED IN LONDON IN 1998 AS "THEATER IN THE ROUND."

THE MOVEMENTS OF THE ACTORS IN THAT PRODUCTION AS THEY ARGUE, TEASE, AND INTELLECTUALIZE REFLECTED THE SOMETIMES-COMBATIVE INTERACTIONS OF ATOMIC PARTICLES.







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THE THIRD ELECTRON

AT FIRST GLANCE, MARGRETHE MIGHT SEEM TRIVIAL.

BOHR AND HEISENBERG ARE SCIENTISTS. EACH ONE HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON THE WAY MANKIND UNDERSTANDS QUANTUM PHYSICS, THE ANATOMY OF THE ATOM, AND THE CAPABILITY OF NUCLEAR ENERGY.

BUT MARGRETHE IS ESSENTIAL TO THE PLAY BECAUSE SHE GIVES THE OTHER CHARACTERS AN EXCUSE TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN LAYMAN'S TERMS. WITHOUT THE WIFE EVALUATING THEIR CONVERSATION, THE PLAY'S DIALOGUE MIGHT DEVOLVE INTO VARIOUS EQUATIONS.

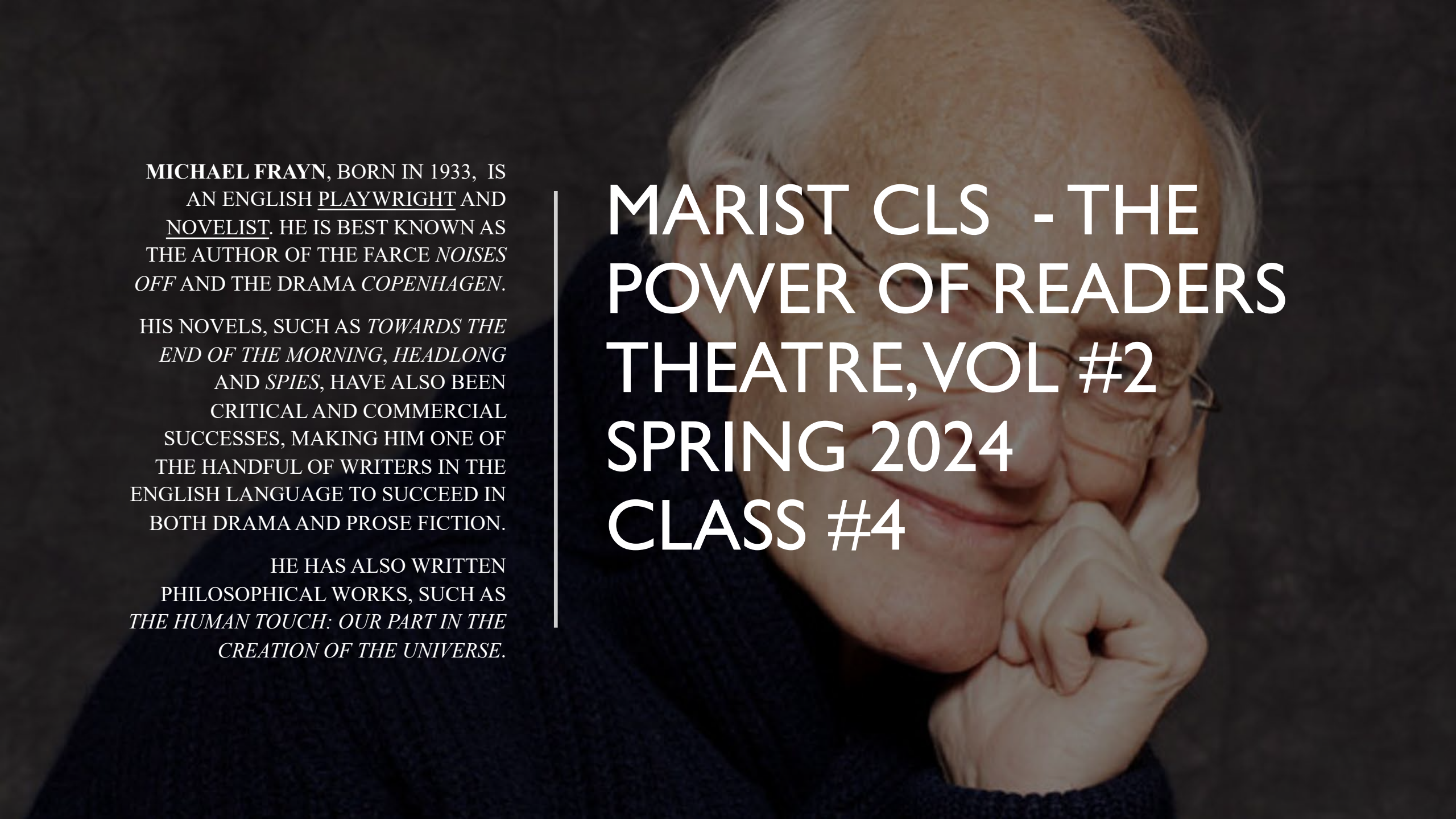
THESE CONVERSATIONS MIGHT BE COMPELLING FOR MATHEMATICAL GENIUSES BUT WOULD BE BORING FOR THE REST OF US! MARGRETHE KEEPS THE CHARACTERS GROUNDED.

SHE REPRESENTS THE AUDIENCE'S PERSPECTIVE.

MICHAEL FRAYN, BORN IN 1933, IS AN ENGLISH PLAYWRIGHT AND NOVELIST. HE IS BEST KNOWN AS THE AUTHOR OF THE FARCE *NOISES OFF* AND THE DRAMA *COPENHAGEN*.

HIS NOVELS, SUCH AS *TOWARDS THE END OF THE MORNING*, *HEADLONG* AND *SPIES*, HAVE ALSO BEEN CRITICAL AND COMMERCIAL SUCCESSES, MAKING HIM ONE OF THE HANDFUL OF WRITERS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO SUCCEED IN BOTH DRAMA AND PROSE FICTION.

HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS, SUCH AS *THE HUMAN TOUCH: OUR PART IN THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE*.



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BOHR'S CONCEPT OF COMPLEMENTARITY MEANS THAT ONE CAN OBSERVE THINGS AS A WAVE OR A PARTICLE, BUT NOT BOTH AT ONCE. SO IT IS WITH PEOPLE AND THEIR CONTRADICTIONARY TRUTHS.

AS BOHR PUTS IT, "WE HAVE TO CHOOSE ONE WAY OF SEEING THEM OR THE OTHER. BUT AS SOON AS WE DO WE CAN'T KNOW EVERYTHING ABOUT THEM."

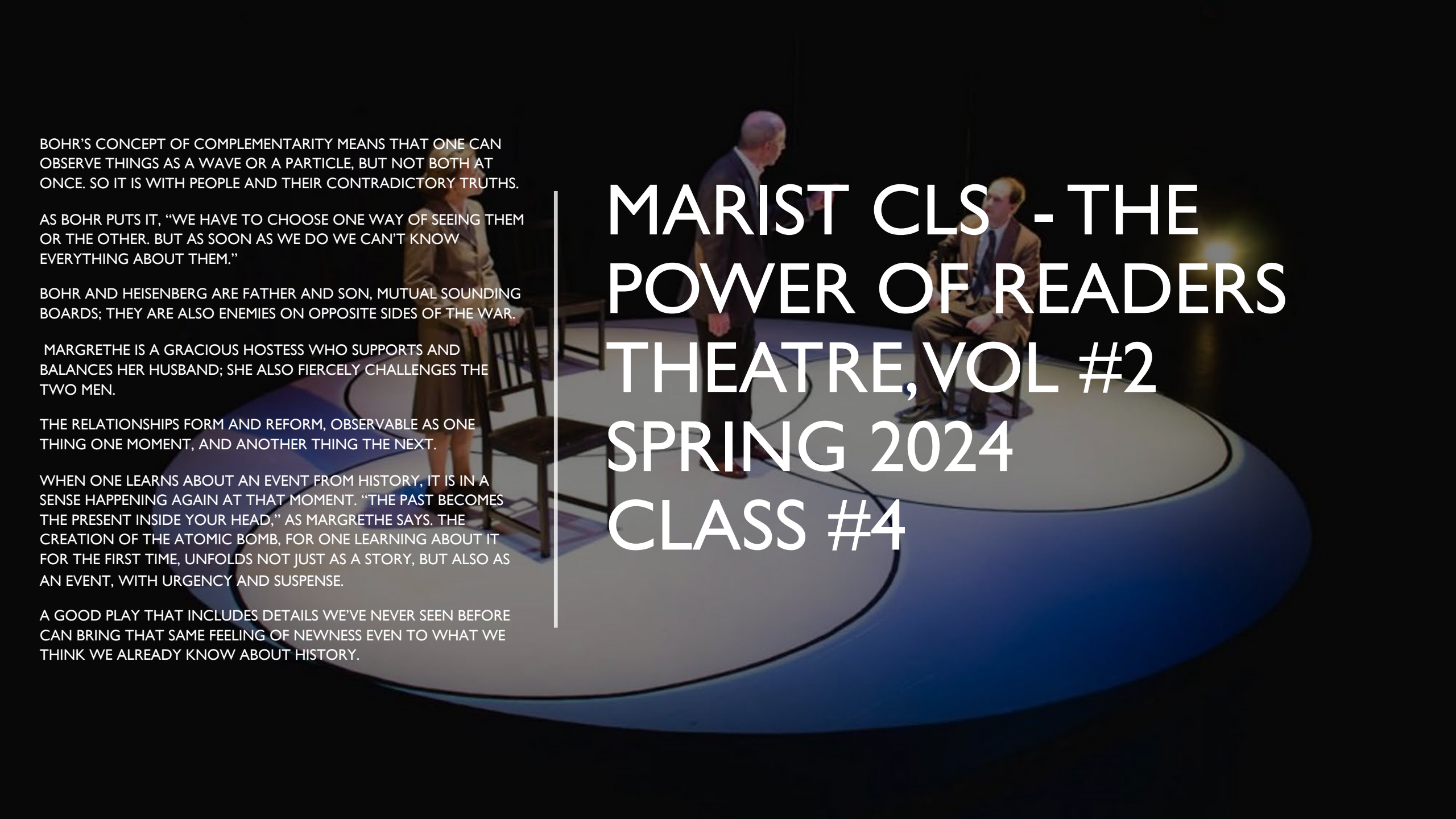
BOHR AND HEISENBERG ARE FATHER AND SON, MUTUAL SOUNDING BOARDS; THEY ARE ALSO ENEMIES ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE WAR.

MARGRETHE IS A GRACIOUS HOSTESS WHO SUPPORTS AND BALANCES HER HUSBAND; SHE ALSO FIERCELY CHALLENGES THE TWO MEN.

THE RELATIONSHIPS FORM AND REFORM, OBSERVABLE AS ONE THING ONE MOMENT, AND ANOTHER THING THE NEXT.

WHEN ONE LEARNS ABOUT AN EVENT FROM HISTORY, IT IS IN A SENSE HAPPENING AGAIN AT THAT MOMENT. "THE PAST BECOMES THE PRESENT INSIDE YOUR HEAD," AS MARGRETHE SAYS. THE CREATION OF THE ATOMIC BOMB, FOR ONE LEARNING ABOUT IT FOR THE FIRST TIME, UNFOLDS NOT JUST AS A STORY, BUT ALSO AS AN EVENT, WITH URGENCY AND SUSPENSE.

A GOOD PLAY THAT INCLUDES DETAILS WE'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE CAN BRING THAT SAME FEELING OF NEWNESS EVEN TO WHAT WE THINK WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT HISTORY.

A photograph of a stage performance. Three people are on a circular stage. A woman in a dark dress stands on the left, looking towards the center. Two men in suits are seated on the right, facing each other. The stage is lit with a blue glow. The background is dark.

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A RENOWNED PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, WHO HAS SPENT YEARS STUDYING AND TEACHING THE BRILLIANT AND DIFFICULT METAPHYSICAL SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE, HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH TERMINAL OVARIAN CANCER.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PLAY, SHE REFLECTS ON HER LIFE THROUGH THE INTRICACIES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, ESPECIALLY THE USE OF “WIT” IN THE METAPHYSICAL POETRY OF JOHN DONNE.

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**Next Week: Wit by Margaret Edson**

# w;t

A PLAY BY  
MARGARET  
EDSON

From rest and sleep,  
which but thy pictures be,  
then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones,  
and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate,  
chance,  
kings,  
and desperate men,  
And dost with poison,  
war,  
and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke;  
why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past,  
we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more;  
Death,





AND NOW...

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