

# PROSCENIUM

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924. The company's first production was the now little-known *The Tide* by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945. In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

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ALPHABETICAL ORDER

# PROSCENIUM

**Alphabetical Order**

**By Michael Frayn**

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**26th, 27th, 28th and 29th March, 2003  
Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre**

# Alphabetical Order

By  
Michael Frayn

Cast in order of appearance:

Leslie .....Emma Burton  
Geoffrey .....David Pearson  
Arnold .....Colin Hickman  
John.....Mark Sutherland  
Lucy.....Izzie Cartwright  
Nora .....Susi Thornton  
Wally .....David Watkins

Directed by.....Crystal Anthony  
Stage Managers .....Charles Anthony  
.....Pauline Anthony  
Assisted by.....Jeanne Hawkes  
Lighting.....Arts Culture Harrow  
Costume Supervision .....June Watkins

The action takes place in the Library of a provincial newspaper office.

## The Author: a brief chronology

- 1933 Born in Mill Hill, London. *My father was a rep. for an asbestos company and very keen that I should follow him into the business .... My mother died when I was a boy.*
- 1935 Family moved to Ewell, to the south west of London. *Everyone puts down the suburbs, but they're very pleasant places to live. It's quite amazing how little they've changed. They should be taken more seriously. Attended a dreadful private day school at Sutton.*
- 1945 To Kingston Grammar School - *merely rather dull and shabby.*
- 1952-54 National Service in Royal Artillery. After basic training sent to Cambridge on the Russian course.
- 1954-57 Emmanuel College, Cambridge on State Scholarship. Read Russian and French for the first year and then changed to Moral Sciences (now Philosophy) for his second and third years. Wrote prolifically for *Varsity* and *Granta* and in 1957 wrote the annual Footlights' Review. *Our brand of humour was what was then called by its admirers 'off-beat', which meant whimsical; carefully artless sub-Thurber cartoons.*
- 1957-59 Reporter for the Manchester Guardian. *The Guardian system seemed to me ideal. They didn't give you any formal training; you did whatever came up, a lot of routine reporting but also a lot of colour writing, interviews with the last surviving clogmaker, that kind of thing. You were also expected to do a lot of reviewing, local theatres, films, book reviews, and I also wrote a fair number of leaders. It was a marvellous life, which would probably be impossible for anyone starting in journalism now, because of union rules ... I very much took to newspapers.*
- 1959-62 Based in London, wrote 'Miscellany' column for Manchester Guardian.
- 1960 Married Gillian Palmer. They had three daughters and lived in Blackheath.
- 1962-68 Wrote a weekly humorous column for The Observer.
- 1965 Publication of first novel, 'The Tin Men'.
- 1966 Second novel, 'The Russian Interpreter', wins Maugham Award.

- 1967 Third novel, 'Towards the End of Morning', wins Hawthornden Award.
- 1968 Novel, 'A Very Private Life', published.
- 1970 First stage play, 'The Two of Us', at Garrick.
- 1971 'The Sandboy' staged at Greenwich Theatre.
- 1973 Novel, 'Sweet Dreams', published.
- 1974 Philosophical work, 'Constructions' published.
- 1975 'Alphabetical Order' staged at Hampstead.
- 1976 'Donkeys' Years' staged at Globe and 'Clouds' at Hampstead.
- 1978 Translation of 'The Cherry Orchard' at the National.
- 1980 'Make and Break' at Lyric, Hammersmith.
- 1981 Separated. Subsequently lived with Claire Tomalin.
- 1982 'Noises Off' at Lyric, Hammersmith, transferred to West End.
- 1984 'Benefactors' at Vaudeville, 'Wild Honey' at National.
- 1985 Translation of 'Three Sisters' at Manchester.
- 1986 His first film script, 'Clockwise'.
- 1988 Translation of 'Uncle Vanya' at Vaudeville.
- 1989 Divorced. 'The Trick of It', his first novel for sixteen years.
- 1990 'Look, Look' at Aldwych.
- 1991 Novel, 'A Landing on the Sun', published.
- 1992 Novel, 'Now You Know'.
- 1993 'Here' staged at Donmar Warehouse. Married Claire Tomalin.
- 1998 'Copenhagen' staged at the National, transferred to the West End.
- 1999 'Headlong' published and nominated for the Booker prize.
- 2002 'Spies' published and also nominated for the Booker prize; awarded the Whitbread novel prize.

## The Playwright

### Philosophy

Michael Billington suggests that Frayn has *the rare ability to construct farcical comedy around philosophical principles*. The philosopher whose principles seem most to have attracted Frayn is Wittgenstein whose approach certainly accorded with Frayn's belief that philosophy is *not a theory but an activity*. Since it is an activity which more than most indulges in language games, the fit is excellent - between the active language game which is philosophy, and the game-playing mesh of language and activity which is drama. In 'Alphabetical Order', John was once a philosophy don at Oxbridge (*All Saint's, all mod con*) and his dialogue is scattered with the clichés of linguistic philosophy (*the world is everything which is the case*). Moreover so keen is he to make his meaning precise that his sentences accumulate so many sub-ordinate clauses the meaning is often obscured.

### Humanity

Simon Trussler declares *how much more clearly than (say) Stoppard does Frayn reveal to us that the foolishnesses and foibles of his characters do merit our observation - sometimes even our sympathy - as well as our laughter; and how much more than (say) Ayckbourn does he persuade us that the mechanics of farcical plotting can be as much matters of human predilection as of dramatic construction*.

### Entertainment

In the 1970s and 80s Frayn and Ayckbourn both rejected the political radicalism of many of their fellow dramatists: Frayn deplored the *didactic drive* of the 70s on the grounds that it replaced drama by ideology, and stressed entertainment as sufficient motive for writing. But this did not rule out realism or sharp commentary on social pretensions and contemporary morals. *All my plays are attempts to show something about the world, not to change it or to promote any particular idea of it. That's not to say there are no ideas in them. In fact what they are all about in one way or another is the way in which we impose our ideas upon the world around us. In 'Alphabetical Order' it is by classification, in 'Make and Break' by consumption*.

## The Play

*I think 'Alphabetical Order' is about the interdependence of order and disorder - about how any excess of the one makes you long for the other - about how the very possibility of the one implies the existence of the other.*

Michael Frayn.

*The relationship between Lucy and Leslie is the best work in the play - it's good theatre ... Some of the rest, though, is a little too literary and schematic to work well dramatically.*

W. Stephen Gilbert.

*Where Ayckbourn focuses on the family, Frayn deals with organisations: the news media, a manufacturing industry, the commercial theatre. A more explicit microcosm of contemporary society than Ayckbourn's middle-class homes, the newspaper library of 'Alphabetical Order' is overwhelmed by the accretion of trivia in the piles of yellowing newsprint. While the instant redundancy of all the facts recorded in the clippings satirises the illusory nature of what our news-fixated culture considers important, the confusion of the library files is presented as organic: a sign of individualism surviving even in what is (taking newspaper slang literally) a morgue.*

Christopher Innes.

*People get what they've always wanted, and what they've always wanted turns out to be not what they wanted at all.*

Geoffrey in Alphabetical Order.

## Frayn on Writing for the theatre

*It's one of the attractions of writing for theatre, if you've written novels, that it does circumscribe one. As you know, what you need in my art is some kind of limitation within which to work...The difficulty of writing novels, it seems to me, is that you can do absolutely anything. The novel form is open: there's almost nothing you can't do. On the stage you're restricted to words being said by people, so you can't stop for description or for accounts of ideas. Really you can't give much account of what's going on in people's heads ..I think I stopped writing novels because I found it increasingly difficult to locate my own voice. One of the pleasures of writing for the stage is that it's other people's voices.*

*What people often don't understand is that writing for the theatre is a collaborative thing. If it's working at all, everyone (actors, director, designer) has to contribute creatively. The text is an important element, but it is only one element. As a writer in rehearsals, one often feels that the thing isn't being done right but equally often one is amazed to see actors doing things with the text that one just hadn't quite grasped oneself. Suddenly new life is breathed in by someone else where before there was no life or only half life. (Interview March 1980)*

## Proscenium

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## Stepping Out

By Richard Harris

Richard Harris's classic comedy about nine women and one man who meet every week in a dingy church hall to practice their tap-dancing routine. This hilarious play invites the audience to witness the characters' trials and tribulations as they rehearse for their first-ever tap-dancing show.

Directed by Janet Harrison  
Wed 4th - Sat 7th June 2003  
7.45 pm, Travellers Studio Theatre,  
Harrow Arts Centre

Tickets : £6.50