

PROSCENIUM

Benefactors

By Michael Frayn

Benefactors

Wednesday 9th to Saturday 12th November 2016
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Benefactors

Michael Frayn

The Cast:

DavidCharles Anthony
JaneHannah Lester
SheilaClare Wooster
ColinMark Sutherland

Directed byBen Morris

Assisted ByAnne Gerrard

Stage ManagerCrystal Anthony

Assisted ByDebbie Ellis

Lighting and Sound OperationArnold Glickman

PropertiesJanet Harrison, Shirley Wootten

CostumesEvelyn Moutrie

London : Late 1960s, Early 1980s

There will be one interval of
15 minutes between Acts 1 and 2

Thoughts on *Benefactors*

It's a serious play, but there's some comedy in it. No *Noises Off*, no business with doors, nobody falling downstairs. It's a play about helping people and being helped...you don't take two years to write it, find four fine actors and a fine director, and then sum it up impromptu over lunch.

*Frayn interviewed by Mandrake
Sunday Telegraph, 11th March 1984*

The play was also about a change which has occurred in Europe, and I think in America as well, since the Sixties, and a shift from a feeling that we could actually change society, which I believe was the commonly accepted wisdom at the time by most people. I think that view has largely disappeared, and we are more pessimistic now...*Benefactors* is actually charting the new feeling. I don't think this new pessimism is terminal; things will change back. In the play itself, the positions of the characters are beginning to shift back again...My play is not really about Le Corbusier; it's about British architects of the period. Some of them believed very passionately in high-rising buildings; others didn't but were forced to build high because that was government policy. The government assumed that this was the answer to problems and forced architects to build high...

*Frayn, interviewed by John L DiGaetani,
A Search for a Post Modern Theater (1991)*

It seemed to me essential that it move like a movie, very quickly. The tail end of one scene provides an ironic comment on the first line of the next scene...What happened was what I hoped would happen, which is that the American cast, not knowing or particularly caring about the nuances of social position in England and where these people are coming from, would simply examine it in terms of situations, emotional content, the ups and downs of the characters...What the play is saying was not really picked up in England, or at least not seen as central. It's a very important play, in that it sums up the dilemma of our time – which is that so many of the political solutions and attitudes which we hoped would work to improve things have in fact proved somewhat moribund and people don't know in which direction to put their good will any more. If you're a person of good will – and the play is not incidentally called *Benefactors* – where can you turn?

*Michael Blakemore (director of first production),
interviewed by Leslie Bennetts,
New York Times, 30th December 1985*

Frayn has some wonderfully perceptive things to say about the way in which people can be kind only to be cruel; of how to need to be needed by others can be a dependence quite as enslaving as to need others; and of how love or even liking is not a prerequisite of friendship.

*Francis King,
Sunday Telegraph, 8th April 1984*

Michael Frayn

Michael Frayn was born in 1933 to a deaf asbestos salesman in Mill Hill, grew up in Ewell, Surrey, and was educated at Kingston Grammar School. Following two years of National Service, during which he learned Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists, Frayn read Moral Sciences (Philosophy) at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, graduating in 1957. He then worked as a reporter and columnist for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, where he established a reputation as a satirist and comic writer, and began publishing his plays and novels. He is married to Claire Tomalin, a biographer and literary journalist.

Plays

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|------|--|------|---|
| 1970 | <i>The Two of Us</i> (four one-act plays for two actors) | 1988 | <i>The Sneeze</i> (based on short stories and plays of Chekov) |
| 1977 | <i>Alphabetical Order, Clouds, Donkeys' Years</i> | 1989 | <i>First and Last</i> |
| 1978 | <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> (trans. Chekhov), <i>Balmoral</i> | 1990 | <i>Exchange</i> (trans. Yuri Trifonov), <i>Listen to This: Sketches and Monologues, Jamie on a Flying Visit; and Birthday, Look Look</i> |
| 1979 | <i>The Fruits of Enlightenment</i> trans. Tolstoy | 1991 | <i>Audience</i> |
| 1980 | <i>Liberty Hall</i> (revised version of <i>Balmoral</i>), <i>Make and Break</i> | 1993 | <i>Here</i> |
| 1982 | <i>Noises Off</i> | 1995 | <i>La Belle Vivette</i> (a version of Jacques Offenbach's <i>La Belle Hélène</i>) |
| 1983 | <i>Three Sisters</i> (trans. Chekhov) (revised 1988) | 1998 | <i>Alarms and Excursions: More Plays than One, Copenhagen</i> |
| 1984 | <i>Number One</i> (trans. Jean Anouilh's <i>Le Nômbri</i>), <i>Benefactors, Wild Honey</i> (trans. Chekhov) | 2003 | <i>Democracy</i> |
| 1986 | <i>The Seagull</i> (trans. Chekhov) <i>Uncle Vanya</i> (trans. Chekhov) | 2008 | <i>Afterlife</i> |
| 1987 | <i>Balmoral</i> (further revised version) | 2014 | <i>Matchbox Theatre: Thirty Short Entertainments</i> |

Novels

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|------|---------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|
| 1965 | <i>The Tin Men</i> | 1991 | <i>A Landing on the Sun</i> |
| 1966 | <i>The Russian Interpreter</i> | 1993 | <i>Now You Know</i> |
| 1967 | <i>Towards the End of the Morning</i> | 1999 | <i>Headlong</i> |
| 1968 | <i>A Very Private Life</i> | 2002 | <i>Spies</i> |
| 1973 | <i>Sweet Dreams</i> | 2012 | <i>Skios</i> |
| 1989 | <i>The Trick of It</i> | | |

London Council Housing – Regenerating the Aylesbury Estate

Aysen Dennis's flat is on the Aylesbury estate in Walworth, in the London borough of Southwark. The Aylesbury was built between 1967 and 1977: a relatively late addition to Britain's pioneering and unusually large-scale programme of high-rise public housing. The estate's population has fluctuated since, from about 7,000 to perhaps 10,000. No one has ever been exactly sure how many people live in its sometimes overcrowded flats – which numbered more than 2,700 at the estate's peak, in five-dozen enormous buildings linked by raised pedestrian walkways. But for decades, the 60-acre wedge formed by the estate has been one of the biggest housing complexes in Western Europe...

...For many more people, on the left as well as the right, her flat and the hundreds of thousands like it are remnants of a huge housing disaster. In January, David Cameron wrote in the Sunday Times that council estates epitomise the failures of the state: "Some of them, especially those built just after the war, are actually entrenching poverty ... [On] these so-called sink estates ... you're confronted by concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers." The prime minister announced a scheme to identify the hundred estates most "ripe for redevelopment". "For some, this will simply mean knocking them down and starting again." ...

... For almost half a century, the estate has been at the centre of Britain's unresolved arguments about class segregation in cities, about whether architecture can cause social dysfunction, about how to provide homes for the growing millions too poor to buy or rent privately, and whether the state should be involved in that project. Now, with the threat of demolition or radical redevelopment looming over the Aylesbury and dozens of other estates, these questions have never been more urgent. Is the Aylesbury, and council estates like it, an insoluble problem – or do its turbulent past and present contain clues about how to house 21st-century Britain?...

...Since 2012, small portions of the Aylesbury, on its western and northern edges, have been replaced by neat, understated brick homes for sale or rent. During 2014, Southwark emptied a much larger section of the estate of all but a handful of its residents, and rehoused them elsewhere – or "decanted" them, in the sometimes cold jargon of council estate management. Working with Notting Hill Housing, a long-established London housing association, Southwark now plans to transform the whole Aylesbury into a more attractive, more mixed, less isolated settlement of almost 4,000 dwellings – 50% more than on the original estate.

“This is an opportunity to do the best,” said Nathalie Websdale, who wrote Notting Hill Housing’s successful bid to regenerate the Aylesbury, when I met her on the estate. Websdale is a persuasive woman of left-of-centre views, who has been involved in social housing for more than 20 years. “We want the area to have more intimate, more properly used open spaces,” she said. “Normal London streets. More houses. Homes with more bedrooms, to accommodate the bigger families that often come with immigration. We want there to be fewer cars, more local shops – at the moment, all there is on the estate is one convenience store. We want the area to feel more open to people from off the estate.”...

...Southwark hired the giant contractor John Laing to build the Aylesbury in 1967, cheaply and fast. Huge cranes, moving in parallel lines through the site, swung all the identical concrete panels into position. This construction method – and the fact that, unlike now, inner-city populations were falling – gave the estate its spacious layout. Urban council tenants, it was thought, could, and should, be given plenty of room. Garages, launderettes, personal storage cupboards on communal landings: the Aylesbury, for all its frill-free architecture, was an elaborate system of collective provision...

... But long before it was completed, a hostile climate had been created for it: by influential books such as Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s subtle, regretful 1957 study of the social costs of estate development, *Family and Kinship in East London*; and Oscar Newman’s rather less subtle 1972 study of the links between crime and estate architecture, *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City*. At the Aylesbury’s official opening in 1970, a local Conservative MP, Ian Andrews, condemned the estate as “a concrete jungle and just not fit for people to live in”. The same year, the *Architects’ Journal* described it as “dehumanising”. In 1983, the famous scholar of British architecture Nikolaus Pevsner called the Aylesbury one of “the most notorious products of industrialised building”. “An exploration can be recommended,” he wrote, “only for those who enjoy being stunned by the impersonal megalomaniac creations of the mid-20th century.”...

... Aysen Dennis has moments of defeatism. “At night time, I look out of my window and see red lights all around in the distance – the red lights of cranes. Gentrification is happening everywhere in London.” She glances at her precious 60s kitchen cupboards. “I want to take them with me if I have to leave.” Then she rallies: “We will delay and delay Southwark. We’ve already delayed them for over 15 years. And when we stop them, the Aylesbury will get a proper repair.” It is possible, just, that the infamous, unlovely Aylesbury will be where the long war against council estates comes to an end.

*Andy Beckett, “The rise and fall of the council estate”
The Guardian, 13th July 2016*

“Some elegant concrete block in the East End blew up last week”

Ronan Point was a 22-storey tower block in Newham, East London, which partly collapsed on 16 May 1968 when a gas explosion blew out some load-bearing walls, causing the collapse of one entire corner of the building. The incident killed four people and injured 17. Although casualties were relatively few, the spectacular nature of the failure – caused by both poor design and poor construction – led to complete loss of public confidence in high-rise residential buildings, and major changes in UK building regulations resulted. At approximately 5:45 am on 16 May 1968, resident Ivy Hodge went into her kitchen in flat 90, a corner flat on the 18th floor of the building, and lit a match to light the stove for a cup of tea. The match sparked a gas explosion that blew out the load-bearing flank walls, which had been supporting the four flats above. It is believed that the weakness was in the joints connecting the vertical walls to the floor slabs. The flank walls fell away, leaving the floors above unsupported and causing the “progressive collapse” of the south-east corner of the building.

A New Urban Vision

(Post 1945)...the country was still faced with large areas of slum housing with many houses described as unfit to live in... Many of these houses had been due for demolition under slum clearance plans devised before the war and had been neglected since. Inner city populations were growing rapidly and the shortage of good quality housing combined with inner city vacant and derelict sites left by the bombs created an opportunity for modernisers to promote a new urban vision. Architects and planners favoured a modernist approach and the 'streets in the sky' were devised...

...The increased development of high rise blocks of flats during the 1950s and 60s can be directly attributed to a response to the Government's subsidy system. From 1956, subsidy was confined to new houses built to replace those lost to slum clearance and there was more money available for blocks of more than six storeys high. Helped by this subsidy, neighbourhoods all over the country were being demolished and rebuilt according to modern town planning concepts of mixed estates with low and high-rise building. Council house building redoubled in London and by the 1960s over 500,000 new flats had been added to London's stock. Many of the new dwellings were in the form of multi-storey tower blocks...

...Councils could act under slum clearance powers to compulsory purchase inner urban land and housing for redevelopment, most of the existing housing was old and lacked any modern amenities. However, there were some communities saved from redevelopment following protests from local residents who fought and saved their neighbourhoods from 'slum' status and demolition. Following in the themes of modernist ideas, many local councils built pre-fabricated blocks of flats...

The History of Council Housing, University of the West of England

Our Next Production

The Seafarer by Conor McPherson

It's Christmas Eve in a scruffy house in Baldoyle, Dublin and Sharky has returned to look after his irascible, ageing brother, who's recently gone blind.

Old drinking buddies Ivan and Nicky have called in too, hoping to play cards. But with the arrival of a stranger from the distant past, the stakes are raised ever higher. In fact, Sharky may be playing for his very soul.

Directed by Sheila Harvey and Crystal Anthony

1st to 4th February 2017

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 250 615

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk

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