HON 201, Three Plays
Fall 2010
F 1-1:50, BH 114

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Office hours  F 10-11, or by appointment

Seminar outline  The seminar consists of reading and discussing the issues arising from three plays involving scientists. The plays are "Proof" by David Auburn, "Copenhagen" by Michele Frayn, and "Breaking the Code" by Hugh Whitemore. "Proof" is entirely fictional, whereas "Copenhagen" and "Breaking the Code" are about real scientists. At the end of reading each play there will be an assignment of writing a short essay summarizing the work done in class. The essays will be corrected and returned the following week. At the end of the semester the three corrected plays will be put together as a final assessment.

Texts  David Auburn, Proof, Dramatists Play Service, Inc
       Michael Frayn, Copenhagen, Anchor Books
       Hugh Whitemore, Breaking the Code, Samuel French, Inc

First Play  During the first three or four of the course we will study and discuss the play "Proof" by David Auburn which had a long run on Broadway, followed by runs in major cities in USA and Europe. The play has also been made into a movie. The play raises several issues about the way mathematicians work, and the nature of creative work in general. It is of special interest to us as it is set in Chicago.

Format for "Proof"  We will use the following format. The play will be divided into four parts:
(i) Act 1, Scene 1 (pp.5-20)
(ii) Act 1, Scenes 2, 3, 4 (pp. 21-41)
(iii) Act 2 Scenes 1, 2 (pp. 42-55)
Students will take turns to read these sections of the play, and there
will be a general discussion afterwards. On the final day there will be a discussion of the whole play and the issues raised in it.

Note: Where the playwright has written "beat," he means "let a moment pass," i.e. a pause. A director might say "take that beat over" meaning try playing that moment again, differently. In that case, a "beat" may include words. A "beat" is really a musical term.

Here are links to some broadcasts of L.A. Theatre Works' performance of Proof. They allows you to listen to their broadcasts on-demand via their website.

http://www.bigcontact.com/latw/proof-hour-one
http://www.bigcontact.com/latw/proof-hour-two
http://www.bigcontact.com/latw/proof-web-bonus-dr-carrie-bearden
http://www.bigcontact.com/latw/proof-web-bonus-steven-strogatz

Assignment for Friday 9/17/10: Write three pages on "Proof" in the following format.

I The plot: Describe the story behind the play

II The issues:

(i) The central theme of the play is the proof written by Catherine. Discuss the conflicts between Hal and Catherine over this. Should Hal have trusted Catherine or was he justified in carrying out an investigation?

(ii) Why was Catherine willing to hand over the notebook to Hal? Could she not have published her proof and become famous?

III How are mathematicians depicted in the play? Creativity and madness: does this apply to other fields?

Make I and III short, II a little longer. When making some assertion that needs to be justified, give the page number in the play.
Second play  The play ”Copenhagen” raises several issues about the way physicists work, and the moral dilemmas regarding the use of their work in lethal weapons. The play centers around a visit by Heisenberg to Copenhagen in 1941, during the Second World War. He and Bohr have a discussion, and no one else knows what this was about. We know that Heisenberg was directing the Nazi atomic research program. So what did he tell Bohr?

Some of the past history is as follows. Bohr and Heisenberg worked together in Copenhagen in the 1920’s. They formulate the famous “Copenhagen Interpretation” of quantum mechanics. In 1927 Heisenberg becomes famous for his “Principle of Uncertainty”, and is made a full professor at Leipzig. War breaks out in 1939, and Bohr and Heisenberg are on opposite sides. The Germans occupy Denmark. Heisenberg visits Copenhagen in 1941 to give a lecture, and meets Bohr. In 1943 Bohr escapes to Sweden. Meanwhile the atomic bomb is developed in America, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki are bombed in 1945. It turns out that the Germans never built an atomic bomb.

For the second essay, discuss the following:

(1) A brief description of the play

(2) The relationships between the characters: Heisenberg and Bohr, Heisenberg and Margarethe.

(3) Heisenberg’s Copenhagen visit, 1941: What does Heisenberg want to tell Bohr and what does he actually tell him? Are there ambiguities in the play?

(4) The attitudes of the characters towards building an atomic bomb.

(5) How is the principle of uncertainty used with different meanings in the play?

Here is a link to Frayn’s remarks on the DVD. There are five parts.
http://www.pbs.org/hollywoodpresents/copenhagen/id/

Third play  Read the whole play ”Breaking the Code” and the article ”The Code-Breakers”. The article is available at
http://www.math.uic.edu/~srinivas/codebreaker.pdf

Write a 3-page essay addressing these questions:

(1) A summary of the play

(2) What is your perception of the personality of Alan Turing? How does he wish to lead his life?

(3) How does he relate to his mother, his colleagues such as Knox, to his friend Ron and the policeman, Ross?

(4) Does his personality fit in with his alleged suicide?

Schedule for the rest of the semester:
11/19/10: Finish discussing the play
11/24/10: Submit third essay (location tba)
12/3/10: Corrected essays returned
Put three corrected essays together and submit by 12/7/10