

DRAMATIZING GERMAN HISTORY: MICHAEL FRAYN ON DEMOCRACY

Michael Frayn's play Democracy premiered at the Royal National Theatre in London on September 9, 2003. It had its American premiere at the Brooks Atkinson Theater in New York on November 18, 2004. Two weeks before the New York premiere, the German Historical Institute, the Goethe Institut and Theater J of the DC Jewish Community Center invited Michael Frayn to Washington DC for a public conversation about "Dramatizing German History." The conversation, which took place on November 1, was moderated by Peter Marks, theater critic of the Washington Post. Excerpts appear below.

Born in London in 1933, Michael Frayn studied philosophy at Cambridge and worked as a reporter and columnist for the Guardian and Observer. He is the author of numerous award-winning plays—including Noises Off (1982) and Copenhagen (1998)—and novels, including Headlong (1999) and Spies (2002).

Writing a Play about German Politics

I have focused *Democracy* on a rather dramatic instant. It's a story that's very painful in its own right, whatever I've done with it. It's the story of the chancellorship of Willy Brandt and its ending when his personal *Referent*, his personal assistant, was unmasked as being a spy for the Stasi. Guillaume had worked very faithfully for Brandt and very skillfully. Brandt didn't like him very much; he found him servile, but he appreciated his skills, and Guillaume had come not just to respect Brandt, but possibly even to love him while he was working for him. At the same time, he was working loyally for his other master, the East German foreign intelligence service, to undermine Brandt.

Why did I write it? I first went to Germany seriously in the 1970s and up until that point, I suppose, I shared all the usual British prejudices and preconceptions about Germany. And when I got there and actually began to look at it seriously, I was completely overwhelmed by it. One of the things that seemed most astonishing and perpetually interesting about Germany is not the Nazi period, which is what English people seem to be fixated on, but how Germany recovered from the Nazi period. Every time I go to Germany, still, I'm intrigued and moved once again that after that terrible disaster, which left Germany in physical and moral ruins in 1945, Germany was able so quickly to construct one of the most stable and decent parliamentary democracies in Europe in spite of the fact they had very little tradition of parliamentary democracy to go back to. So that's one of the threads of the play.

I also wanted to write something about the complexity of the political process in general. It's astonishing that even two people can get together and make common cause to do anything. Each of us has a different outlook on the world, each of us has different interests. If you get the cake, I don't get the cake. If I get the cake, you don't get the cake. And, of course, we can make compromises and agree that we both share the cake: we have half of it each. In that case, you end up with half a cake less than you might have had, and so do I. When you think about national politics and you think of reconciling the different viewpoints and different interests not of two people, not of three people, but of tens of millions of people, it does become absolutely astonishing, to me at any rate, that it can ever be done. And it's a very complex process.

Germany is a particularly good case about the complexity of politics for three reasons. Because of the federal system, for a start. Germany is divided into *Länder*, each Land has its own parliament and there is a federal parliament, the politics of which have to be combined with the politics of all the different *Länder*, more familiar of course to Americans than to English people. But secondly, because all politics in Germany since the Second World War has been coalition politics. Every government has been a coalition. Coalitions are inherently unstable enterprises. They're thought of in Britain to be almost unworkable. We had a coalition during the war and people have occasionally suggested coalitions since, but people back away every time because they think that they would never last. In this country, I think, a coalition is a more or less unthinkable proposition. So that's the second reason for the complexity of German politics. Every government has had to balance the different interests of two political parties and find some way of working with two parties. And the third thing that has made German politics very complex is that, for the greater part of the second half of the twentieth century, Germany was divided into two separate states, antagonistic to each other—in fact, on opposite sides in the Great Divide that ran through the world during the Cold War, and this made for hideous complexities in Germany. So that was the second string of my play.

But the third reason I wanted to write [this play] was that it seems to me that each of us in himself or in herself is a kind of parliamentary democracy. Each of us has different possibilities, different ways we can go in life, different interests that have to be resolved. And how each of us manages to resolve those different factors, those different forces, is almost as complicated as how a national government manages to do the same.

Those three stories came together in the story of Brandt and Guillaume because the events that led to Brandt's resignation were very complicated. The occasion for his resignation was certainly the discovery that one of his personal assistants, Guillaume, was a spy and the realization

that Guillaume may well have, almost certainly had, passed back to his masters in East Germany the details of Brandt's extramarital liaisons, which, it was suggested, would make Brandt—and by extension the West German government—blackmailable. But in fact, although that was the occasion of his downfall, the causes of it were much more complicated. Some of them were public matters, some of them had to do with world politics because the oil producers had put up their prices and produced an economic crisis throughout the western world, and particularly in Germany. Some of them were internal political German reasons because the SPD, the Social Democratic Party, had lost popularity dramatically in Germany and there were many people in the party, including some of its most influential members, who thought the time had come to get rid of Brandt and to replace him.

But [there is also] the complexity of Brandt himself. I think he was a great man. He did an extraordinary thing: He pulled off one of the great triumphs of postwar politics. He persuaded his fellow West Germans to accept an accommodation with the Soviet Union and its allies in the East, even though the cost was terrible. The Soviet Union would not sign a peace treaty with West Germany until West Germany had renounced all possible claims to the territories it had lost in the east at the end of the war and until it had recognized the division of Germany. It was very, very difficult to persuade West Germans to do that, for good reason. Millions of people had been driven out of their homes in the territories they had lost in the east. Millions of people had fled from the DDR and millions of people in the West had relatives who were still trapped inside the DDR. But until that move was made, there was no possibility of beginning to scale down the Cold War. Brandt managed to do it, with great difficulty, and only by the skin of his teeth. So that was his great achievement.

But at the same time Brandt had considerable weaknesses. He was a womanizer, he was a drinker; many politicians are womanizers and drinkers and manage to survive. He had more serious weaknesses still. He was depressive. He was what Germans call *wortkarg*, he was very unforthcoming. He was *konfliktscheu*, he didn't like confronting people and he found it very difficult to take decisions. These are really serious weaknesses in a politician. All politicians have to confront people at every hour, every day, and they have to make decisions at every hour of every day. In spite of this, Brandt pulled off his great achievement. So, he was a very complicated person. Guillaume obviously was a very complicated person because he was both loyally serving Brandt and undermining him. So that was what made me interested in this story.

I'll tell you what made me first think I could really do it. I vaguely remembered the story when I started to research the play, but I didn't know any of the details and I had to do a great deal of research. And I

discovered that when Guillaume was first suspected of being a spy, the security people didn't have enough evidence to charge him, so they came to Brandt and said: "The only way we can get the evidence is to keep him in post and to watch him at work, and you must not tell him anything." It was just, let him go on, same access to documents, same job as before, while we watch him. So from that point onwards, effectively not only was Guillaume spying on Brandt, but Brandt was spying on Guillaume. And any dramatist who discovers that he's got two people who are in this complex relationship with each other must think: I've got a play on my hands.

Writing about Real Characters

It is daunting to take on real characters. I'd never done it before I wrote *Copenhagen*. When I first began to write *Copenhagen*, I was completely intimidated by the task. I thought, however much research I do, there is no way I can go back and actually talk to Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and Margrethe Bohr and get a feeling of what they were like as people. I can read everything that I can get my hands on that they wrote. I can read everything that people wrote about them, as I did, but I still, whatever I do, whatever efforts I make, I'm never going to get back to the real people. But after a time, when you start to write, the characters do start to take on a life of their own. It happens with fictitious characters, but it even happens with real characters. And you know they can't really be like the real characters and I know that my Brandt can't really be like the real Brandt or my Guillaume like the real Guillaume, but they do at some point start to speak and start to do things. You just have to accept that that's the characters they're going to be.

One of the frightening aspects of *Democracy* is that not all of the characters in the play are dead. Helmut Schmidt is still alive. And [his character] is a slightly sharp portrait of him because, by all accounts at the time, when he was minister in Brandt's government, he was very impatient and very ambitious and although he genuinely revered Brandt and regarded him as his political mentor, he was immensely impatient with his dithering because he was an extremely competent man and he thought, "I can do this. Why do I have to sit here and watch Brandt hesitate and put things off and never make a decision?" And who else is still alive? Reinhard Wilke and Horst Ehmke, who both worked in Brandt's office, Horst Ehmke running the chancellery, Wilke as his immediate departmental leader. They're still alive and they came to see the play in London. I happened to be in Germany at the time and when I came back I found the cast absolutely enchanted by their visit because there's a lot in the play about how everyone in the SPD at the time had

drunk far too much, and what they'd drunk was red wine. And Horst Ehmke and Reinhard Wilke had arrived with large supplies of red wine, which they took around back stage afterwards and sat talking to the cast and drinking far into the night and telling them indiscreet stories about life in Brandt's government. I thought the nicest tribute to the actors, to the production in particular, was at the end of the evening, as they left to go, Horst Ehmke's wife flung her arms around Roger Allam, the remarkable actor who played Willi Brandt, an absolutely astonishing performance, and said: "You even smell like Willi!" But I did meet [Wilke and Ehmke], finally, because they also came to the first night of the play when it was done in Berlin and they were extremely generous about it and they said that one of the things they thought I hadn't got right was that in the play they call each other Horst and Reinhard. They both said they would have never done that: "We would have called each other Herr Dr. Wilke and Herr Dr. Ehmke."

Wilke and Ehmke also said that I made Guillaume too interesting, that he was a very dull man. And this is certainly partly conscious dramatic license. I've certainly felt perfectly free to make Guillaume more interesting than he was. Brandt didn't like Guillaume. He found him servile and *kumpelhaft*, he didn't like him. But he did appreciate his skill and his devotion. [When Wilke and Ehmke told the actors that they] found Guillaume very dull, uninteresting, one of the actors said to them, "Well, he did manage to fool you for five years, so he can't have been as stupid as all that." And Ehmke thought about this for some time and said, "Yes, perhaps he was more intelligent than we thought." In the play, I've made Brandt indeed begin to take more of an interest, when he thinks that Guillaume may be a double playing two different roles. And in actual life, according to Klaus Harpprecht, Brandt's speechwriter, Brandt did make serious efforts to detect Guillaume in the act. He used to leave hairs in books and pencils at certain angles on his desk to see if they had been disturbed in the morning and, as Harpprecht said, he found this rather touching. He thought Brandt had probably got this out of some boy's story years back.

The Cold War Context

I would say that [Guillaume's spying] hastened the acceptance by East Germany of the seriousness of Brandt's intentions. At any rate, that's what Markus Wolf, the head of the East German Foreign Intelligence Service, says in his memoirs. He says Guillaume bringing down Brandt was a terrible own goal, but he also says that what Guillaume told them about what was going on in the Chancellor's office in Bonn helped them to believe that Brandt was serious. After all, when Brandt first came to

office as Chancellor, his reputation was as a Cold Warrior. He had been mayor of Berlin at the time when Berlin had been resisting the efforts of the Soviet Union in East Germany to absorb West Berlin into East Germany, and Brandt had been the great champion of West Berlin. So the Russians and the East Germans were not unreasonably suspicious of him. The thought was: Has he really changed or is this just some political ploy? And according to Wolf, the reports from Guillaume did help the East Germans to trust in Brandt's seriousness. And the other irony is that one of the things that Brandt persuaded the Federal Republic to do was to accept as permanent the division of Germany. Up until that point no one had wanted to accept that there was a separate state in East Germany because they hoped it would go away. They hoped it would somehow be reunited with the Federal Republic. But Brandt said, "We have to recognize reality," and he persuaded people to do so. But his persuading West Germany to accept this is one of the things that undermined East Germany because now the Russians felt that they could trust West Germany and they didn't feel the same need to prop East Germany up. After all, every time there had been a rising in another Soviet dependency in Eastern Europe—in Poland or in Hungary or in Czechoslovakia, indeed in East Berlin in 1953—Soviet tanks had gone in to ensure that the status quo was not changed. But when the DDR began to fall to pieces in the late 1980s, they didn't get any support from the Soviet Union. There are many reasons for that and, of course, a lot of it had to do with the pressure under which the Soviet Union had been placed by America, and partly to do with the genuine humanity of Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. But it was also because they no longer needed to prop up east European states in the same way.

Working with the Play's Director

Was it easy for Michael Blakemore to direct *Democracy* because we'd worked together before? I think this is the sixth or seventh play we've done together and we were old friends even before we'd started working. We've been trying to work out what it is we have in common. What we have in common is stupidity. We're both as thick as two short planks. Michael cannot understand anything about my plays. I can't understand anything about the subjects I'm writing about. So I have to go out and find out about the physics or the German politics or whatever, and he has to find out about the play and in both cases it's a slow and laborious process. But if you manage to find out enough about physics, say, to be able to write the play, if you can understand it yourself, you have a chance, possibly, of making it comprehensible for other people. And if Michael can find out enough about my play by talking to me—and we

talk about it at great lengths: He makes me read every line to him and I have no ability as an actor, I can't even hit the right stress on my own lines, it's a very painful process. And he asks very stupid questions, like "Why does she say that?" or "Why does he do this?" and I get very impatient and then in the end I see why he's asking. And in the end, we've done things so closely together, we've cooperated so closely together, that I let him get on with it and direct it, and I just go and look at the finished result.