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**“PARALLEL UNIVERSES” COLLIDE IN THE THEATRE:
TWO NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING PHYSICISTS TO PLAY
TWO NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING PHYSICISTS**

To all physicists, the words “Solvay Conferences” (or “*Conseils Solvay*”) carry weight. This exceptional fame finds its origin in the mythical first Solvay Conference in Physics of 1911, organized at the initiative of the Belgian industrialist and philanthropist Ernest Solvay and attended by the best physicists of the time – Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Henri Poincaré, Rutherford, Langevin, Lorentz, etc.

This year’s 100th anniversary celebration of the international conferences will be marked by perhaps another fabled event: a staged reading of Michael Frayn’s successful play, *Copenhagen*, with David Gross, a 2004 Nobel Laureate in physics, and Alan Heeger, a 2000 Nobel Laureate in chemistry, playing the roles of Nobel Laureates Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, respectively. The eminent award-winning British actor, Fiona Shaw, will play Bohr’s wife, Margrethe, and the playwright of *Copenhagen*, winner of the 2000 Tony Award for best play, will attend the reading and participate in a post-performance discussion.

Beginning with that first conference in 1911, the legendary Solvay Conferences helped give birth to quantum mechanics and shaped modern physics. Occurring every three years in Brussels, the conferences are characterized by the small number of carefully chosen participants (by invitation only), their impressive level (all the physicists who marked the development of modern physics have attended one or more Solvay conferences), and the exceptional quality of the discussions.

Fittingly, *Copenhagen* is about perhaps an even more legendary meeting, one shrouded in mystery, that took place in 1941 between physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. Bohr had been Heisenberg’s mentor, surrogate father and intimate friend, and in the years before, they had worked closely together, transforming the world of physics with their theories on quantum mechanics, uncertainty and complementarity. Yet in 1941 they found themselves on opposing sides of international conflict, and, while the meeting had something to do with atomic weapons, the precise reason for Heisenberg’s visit to Bohr remains unknown. What is known is that the meeting was a catastrophe, and the friendship was permanently destroyed.

The gala opening event was created by Nancy Kawalek, a professional director, actor, writer and the founder/director of *STAGE*, which stands for Scientists, Technologists and Artists Generating Exploration. *STAGE* is comprised of both an international script competition that awards a

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\$10,000 prize to the best new play about science and technology, and a developmental lab where professional artists create multi-media theatre pieces in which science and technology play prominent roles in content and/or form. *STAGE* is housed in the California NanoSystems Institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Kawalek asked Copenhagen's author, Michael Frayn, to come to the reading and take part in a discussion afterwards. Frayn will speak about how the production of the play ended up changing

the historical record. The play rekindled interest in the famous meeting, thereby prompting the Bohr family to publicly release Niels Bohrs' private documents ten years earlier than originally dictated. These papers, which include several drafts of letters Bohr later wrote, but never sent, to Heisenberg, provide some insight. Yet they do not ultimately solve the central mystery at the heart of Frayn's play, and uncertainty remains as to the true motives behind Heisenberg's 1941 visit to Bohr in Copenhagen.

Kawalek, Gross and Heeger have been rehearsing over the past several months at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where they are professors in film and media, and physics, respectively. Asked about her experiences working with the two Nobel Laureates, Kawalek said, "It's a bit like we're in a 'parallel universe.' I mean, here are two Nobel Prize-winning physicists playing the roles of two Nobel Prize-winning physicists – it's a bit of a collision between truth and fiction, or at least one between different truths – just like in [the play] *Copenhagen*."

The parallels don't stop there. Bohr and Heisenberg's inroads in quantum physics will be mirrored in the theme of this centenary Solvay Conference, which will be devoted to "The Quantum World." The opening playreading event will be followed by a day of reflection on the importance of basic research, and will include distinguished scientists, economists, industry leaders and politicians.

For more information:

STAGE: www.stage.cnsi.ucsb.edu

Professional Artists Lab: www.proartslab.ucsb.edu

California NanoSystems Institute: www.cnsi.ucsb.edu

Solvay Conference, Centenary 2011: <http://www.solvayinstitutes.be/index.php?pageid=4&ssid=3>

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