While these are two very different productions - they are a world apart in theatrical style - they share a common reflection about what happens when Science Goes Wrong. Or do I mean: too Far, or too Weird, or when it presses on even when it can’t see what is further up the pipe. This is the Frankenstein question. What happens when the Good Doctor spends too many nights in the lab, messing about with frothing test tubes and the alchemy of Life Itself. Experimenting, as if he was …God, or somebody?

In the case of Doctor Ruysch, our pursuer of truth is in 17th Century Amsterdam, devoting all his spare time, assisted by his young daughter Rachel, to making art work of human anatomical specimens. These are not the usual displays in formaldehyde assembled for the instruction of medical students or as cautionary exhibits and mementos mori for the morbidly inquisitive. Ruysch specialises in intricately baroque sculptures, cabinet displays of severed heads with lace collars, dancing fetus skeletons and other carefully fashioned marvels of biological misadventure. Ruysch’s wonder cabinets were not, we are told, a vulgar freakshow, but a homage to the maimed and stillborn, presented with tender reverence for an awestruck but scientifically curious public.

Hilary Bell navigates this eccentric and often creepy world with a whimsical lightness which is further emphasised by Catherine Fitzgerald’s puckish direction. Against the lime white walls of the Queen’s Theatre, designer Gaelle Mellis creates a workshop space for Ruysch and his dedicated daughter. A curtain of X-ray negatives covers the back wall and white, glass-fronted cabinets, filled with artful limbs, infant humunculi, birds, shells and all manner of what-have you, stand in ranks on each side of the stage area.
Bell’s script has been developed from a text for radio and it, like Ruysch’s own exhibits, is something of a magpie’s nest. There is historically accurate detail based on documentation, including the fact that Peter the Great of Russia acquired much of the collection. Then there is the Munchausen fantasy of Ruysch and Rachel climbing, for the sake of science, into the belly of beached whale and the grim subplot that has the doctor selling the Emperor the perfectly preserved corpse of his own son, who survived just one night in the world before being kept in an exquisitely embroidered smock for thirty four years.

Paul Blackwell as Ruysch and Ursula Yovich as Rachel straddle the mixture of elements with engaging performances. Blackwell humanises the doctor with his signature comedy and by focusing on his love for his work, Yovich is a daughter from folk tale, devoted to her father, at whatever cost to her own needs. Supporting performers Astrid Pill and Sasha Carruozzo represent the harsh reality for women in childbirth and double as a rather zany pair of mermaids while Nic Hurcombe is impressive as the Cook and disconcertingly Glaswegian as Peter the Great.

The music by New York based composer Phillip Johnston is a major feature of the production, providing baroque elements, softened with understated keyboard pop. The score is pleasingly accessible and Blackwell and Yovich sing their parts well, inviting the question of whether this is really more a chamber opera than a theatre work with songs. Overall though, Catherine Fitzgerald has concluded her dedicated stint as Artistic Director of Vitalstatistix with distinction. The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Ruysch does not look very searchingly at the ethical questions it raises but in its disconcerting comedy and musical and visual charm it is both original and strangely memorable.

Michael Frayn’s Copenhagen seizes on an event in the city of Copenhagen in 1941 when the Danish physicist Niels Bohr was visited by his former student and colleague, the German theorist Werner Heisenberg. Frayn’s conceit is that this was a meeting across the barricades, a crucial moment in world history- Heisenberg, part of the German ascendancy occupying Denmark, risks his life to see Bohr and attempts to discuss the future of their theoretical work in nuclear fission. How far has each side got and how far should they go?
The German is struggling with his responsibilities as a scientist working for a regime he does not support, at the same time he is loyal to a country and culture he values. Bohr and his wife Margrethe are living in an occupied city and he will soon move to the United States to contribute to the Los Alamos project. Frayn’s play poses the paradox that it is Heisenberg who is more reflective about the implications than Bohr, who disavows the significance of his work in producing the Bomb. Late in the play the Dane notes that he was in contributed to the loss of one hundred thousand lives in Nagasaki while Heisenberg was not responsible for a single death.

In Sydney Theatre Company’s production, based by director Michael Blakemore on his original version for the Royal National Theatre in London, the notion of debate extends even to the forum seating on the stage where some twenty five or so audience members sit like a jury or a participants in a symposium. Certainly some visual element is needed because this is a very verbal play. Three players, three chairs and a whole lot of talking. It could be GB Shaw, although Frayn’s play, audacious in its simplicity is also more earnest than Shavian in its approach to an ambitious subject.

There is plenty of detail. Like Tom Stoppard’s Arcadia, and to a lesser extent David Auburn’s Proof, Copenhagen draws heavily on its subject. There is much exposition, most of skilfully handled, outlining the developments in mathematics and physics between the wars. From Quantum Mechanics to Uncertainty, the theoretical principles become metaphors in Frayn’s play for the elements of chance and chain reaction that arise from the parallel histories of two friends, two colleagues, even a father and a surrogate son. The repeated memory of the death of Bohr’s son by drowning is a motif, as is the moment when Hiesenberg appears on the Bohr’s doorstep, an event approached, as if in a cubist painting, from every angle and all angles at once.

The actors deal well with their wordy task. Jane Harders is the wary Margrethe, who has abiding suspicions of Heisenberg’s motives. She is a strong presence in the play and Frayn uses her as an interrogator of the more abstruse theorising, but she is finally the helpmate, raiser of Bohr’s children, isolated in her grief for her dead son. The centre of the play is the relationship between the two men. At its best Frayn’s text takes us into the rivalry and brittleness of academic science. At its more fanciful - especially in the lengthy flashback in the beginning of Act II when both men relive...
the palmy days of the late twenties - the play is the sort exercise in
meretricious Brainyness that makes films like *A Beautiful Mind* so
irritating. The audience is flattered into a conspiratorial understanding
that it doesn’t really have, and a kind of complacency replaces coherent
thought.

As Bohr, John Gaden is perfectly cast. He carries his duties effortlessly and
balances the melancholy of the failed father with the almost hubristic pride
of the scientific theorist who knows he’s touched with genius. Against
Gaden’s stentorian composure, Robert Menzies’s Heisenberg generates a
nervous blizzard of speculation, hesitation, anxiety and regret. Heisenberg
yearns for Bohr’s approval even across the razor wire of war. He also feels
the loss of irritating collision, the kind of intellectual scrapping which
pushes each member in a team beyond their individual capability.

*Copenhagen* is a demanding play - and there were some empty seats after
Act I. It is probably fifteen minutes too long - that spurious vignette after
interval is a hurdle, even though it offers a lighter key. Perhaps a full tilt
ninety minutes is the way to go. No symmetrical halves but rather a kind
of intellectual Groundhog Day where the same events are endlessly re-
examined and re-rehearsed - as they say, now we are all dead and gone.
Of course the consequences of these men’s work is far from dead and
gone, and Frayn’s play is a shrewd and inventive investigation into how
the world found itself with - what are they called ?- weapons of mass
destruction ?