

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Matchbox Theatre

Michael Frayn

Faber and Faber

Released 16 October 2014

Michael Frayn might be best known as a prolific and much-loved playwright but is a versatile wordsmith who has also penned autobiographical memoirs and novels good enough to be shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Even for him, *Matchbox Theatre* is a new departure. It comprises "Thirty Short Entertainments" of typically 5 to 10 pages.

The presentation is a novelty too, being set out in landscape rather than portrait form like the ubiquitous matchbox on which it is designed, complete with card sleeve.

As the appellation entertainment suggests, there is very little weight or depth to anything in this book, merely a fleeting view of a conversation or event designed to amuse and occasionally make the reader think a little.

In many cases, these slivers of drama read like attempts to create short scenes that might develop into something more substantial or even extracts from complete plays that never quite materialised.

Some are so ephemeral as to be instantly forgotten, while others will create a brief smile of acknowledgement and occasionally a genuine laugh.

Although they are theoretically intended to be part of a theatrical performance, many are conversations with little connection to the theatre other than the medium's possibility of staging them.

For those of a theatrical bent, the undoubted highlight is *Outside Story*, a tiny gem that, following a brief allusion to *The Cherry Orchard*, provides a considerable amount of fun in the realm of good Prince Hamlet.

This is soon followed by an *Interval* and hard on its heels a *Memorial* giving its due to that often neglected theatrical occasion.

Blackout Number wittily pays homage to those invisible scene shifters who do such a fantastic job before our eyes but get so little credit for their efforts. While likening them to moles for effect, the author generously acknowledges their skill and dedication in the most trying circumstances.

As one would expect, Frayn saves the best for last. *Aught for Naught* is a witty Shakespearean pastiche that also launches a jibe at our own era's vacuous frivolity.

Matchbox Theatre is rather patchy but at its best can be great fun, while at the same time shedding a light on the vast array of character types that make up our diverse society.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)