Tom Haas, Artistic Director
Victoria Nolan, Managing Director

Indiana Repertory Theatre and its Educational sponsor Target Stores present

A Study Guide for

Benefactors

by Michael Frayn

February 1-24, 1990

Directed by Tom Haas

Scenic Design Craig Clipper
Costume Design Kathy Jaremski
Lighting Design Michael Lincoln

Sound Design Michael Bosworth
Production Stage Manager Joel Grynheim
Assistant Stage Manager David Dreyfoos

Cast

David----------Peter Davies
Jane------Ann-Sara Matthews
Sheila--------Cary Anne Spear
Colin----------Ron Siebert

Playwright Biography

Michael Frayn was born in 1933, in the suburbs of London. He began his career as a reporter on the *Guardian*, then became a newspaper columnist: for the*Guardian* from 1959 to 1962, and for the *Observer* from 1962 to 1968. At that time he began writing for television, and after two teleplays turned his attention to theatre. His plays include *The Two of Us*, *The Sandboy*, *Alphabetical Order*, *Donkeys' Years*, *Clouds*, *Liberty Hall*, *Make and Break*, *Noises Off*, *Benefactors* and several translations and adaptations. He has also published five novels. For some years after he left the *Observer* he continued to contribute features to the paper on foreign countries, among them Cuba, Israel, Japan and Sweden, and he has written and presented a series of personal films for BBC Television on Berlin, Vienna, Australia, Jerusalem and the London suburbs in which he grew up.

Benefactors: A Synopsis

Benefactors is natively theatrical in form: that is, it contains direct address narrative to the audience and it flows backward and forward through time, with the fluidity that only the theatre can provide. Each character reviews the events of the play from their personal viewpoint: they realize that life is too complicated to unravel, even when looked at from a distance of time. Their perspectives shift and alter our audience view of the events we also witness.

Benefactors spans about a fifteen-year period in the lives of two British couples. One couple are the "benefactors" of the title: David, an architect and Jane, his anthropologist wife, befriend an old college buddy, Colin and his insecure wife, Sheila, who have moved in across the street. The couples share dinners, child care, problems and professional jealousies in a match of wits somewhat like a game. David and Jane sense the troubles in Colin and Sheila's difficult marriage and attempt to assist them by providing all kinds of physical and moral support: Jane regularly volunteers to chauffeur Sheila (who doesn't drive) on child errands; when Colin and Sheila's home life finally crumbles, David agrees to employ Sheila as a his secretary.

The play is etched within the matrix of David's professional rise and fall: early in the play he receives a commission to design a large housing redevelopment project, and through the course of the play this project takes over the lives of all four characters: David, in the eye of the storm,

designing and redesigning, changing his perspective as the requirements of the job change; Jane, who surveys the housing needs of the inhabitants who crumbling Victorian houses are going to be demolished to make way for David's new scheme; Sheila, who becomes completely devoted to David and his work as she spends more and more time with him; and Colin, who comes out in opposition to the scheme in a sinister and threatening way.

The problem is that life, like the architectural redevelopment project that occupies David's attention, has too many variables: it resists simple solutions. Well and good for David and Jane to think: "We want to help poeple; Sheila and Colin need help, therefore, we will help them." But such a simple formula contains many hidden pitfalls. David and Jane begin to feel abused when they are asked for mare help than they desire to give; Colin doesn't like the holier-than-thou attitude he senses from David and Jane; Sheila becomes so dependent on the help of her friends that she loses all identity; Colin dislikes Sheila's dependence; Sheila dislike's Colin's ingratitude; Jane dislikes Sheila's intrusion; David dislikes Colin's abusive behavior. The resentment builds on both sides until not only the friendships, but the marriages as well, threaten to crumble into weak and shifting foundations.

Eventually, Colin runs unsuccessfully for Parliament on a platform of opposition for David's scheme; Sheila divorces Colin and attempts to find her own path to happiness; David's project fails and his business dwindles into small remodelling work and Jane finds a job with a housing preservation trust.

Why do David and Jane and Sheila and Colin tell us their story in the past tense, with fifteen years' hindsight? Perhaps because, in the end, Benefactors is about the toll taken by time, about change and the absence of change. While we lead our lives and decide our futures, the variables of life continually thwart us. Time trickles on, building, then eroding—too slowly for us to notice, too quickly for us to control.

The Nature of Benefaction:
Michael Frayn's *Benefactors* on IRT's Mainstage

Selected by the Drama Critics Circle as best new foreign play of the 1985-86 season, Michael Frayn's play, *Benefactors* achieved long-run success in both London and on Broadway. It will receive its Indianapolis premiere at Indiana Rep February 1-24, directed by Artistic Director Tom Haas.

Hailed as a "dazzling new play" by New York Times critic Frank Rich, *Benefactors* is a serious comedy about helping others, professionally, personally, readily and reluctantly, and focuses on the intriguing relationship between two couples. Told in flashbacks, the action of the play spans over a decade in the friendship between two neighboring English couples: David and Jane—an idealistic young architect and his supportive anthropologist wife; and Sheila and Colin—he, a cynical and spiteful college chum of David's, now a minorly successful journalist, and she, a helpless stay-a-home wife—together they are intrusive and dependent on David and Jane for moral support, child care and almost nightly dinners.

When David takes on an ambitious urban housing project in a shabby section of South London, hiring Sheila as his assistant, Jane finds herself moving in sympathy with the families who will be displaced by the development, and Colin sets out to destroy the deal singlehandedly by becoming a squatter in the same slum that David's project is meant to replace.

This kaleidoscopic work reveals the disillusionment of an era: the play begins in 1968 when these couples are still in the glow of post-collegiate liberalism and child rearing, and takes them into the 1980's with its growing pragmatics and increased personal responsibilities. In the words of *Washington Post* critic David Richards, the characters in the play are: "outpaced by events and invariably hoodwinked by their feelings. . . . Benefaction itself is Frayn's subject, and he finds it as dangerous as a land mine. Both the helper and the helped can go up in the blast." With devious brilliance we see friends become enemies, the helpless become driven, jealousies surface, marriage disintegrate and values and viewpoints alter. And when all is said and done, the characters remain strangers despite their daily intimacies.

Artistic Director Tom Haas originally saw *Benefactors* on Broadway in 1984 (with Sam Waterston, Glenn Close, Simon Jones and Mary Beth Hurt) and recalls being quite struck by it. "It's a very powerful play that remains in your mind long after you've seen it for reasons that are subtle and difficult to articulate. Certainly it is striking because of its innate theatricalness: both the past and the present of the characters are made to exist simultaneously on the stage. It is also enormously human: all of us have experienced what these characters attempt to describe—how our opinions change, our feelings alter to the place where you can't remember how you came to change your mind or stop loving someone."

Notes from the Director

A friend for many years—though time and space distant—called me to join him for the Broadway production of *Benefactors* a few years ago. We had both recently passed through hard times in life and while I yearned for the sociability of the occasion, I was not in the moment for "theatre." However, to the theatre we went.

What unfolded in *Benefactors*, and struck me most strongly, was the progress of life through time—the changes that are wrought, most often subtle, small and hardly momentous at the moment, but when years have advanced, are seen as life-changing. Being in a moment of great change in my own life—change that was inarguably dramatic and visible—I was overwhelmed by the insight that playwright Michael Frayn brought to bear on change that is *not* earth-shaking but is, nonetheless, very powerful and moving. It made me realize that too often, the only changes we value are the huge ones, that we have been taught to gauge our lives by these alterations in our circumstances, and therefore often overlook the potential power of the more subtle tides in our lives.

The metaphor for change within the play is architecture—the dreams, the yearnings, the efforts to rebuild a particularly unloved section of south London. Through time, the dreams, the scale drawings, the actualities, change. The metaphor is brilliant, for not only has architecture come to epitomize the post-modernist movement in the arts in these closing decades of the twentieth century, but architecture is perhaps the art form which contains the closest, most practical interaction with human life, but also the art form that we think of as permanent. Performing arts complete themselves and disappear from view (except in the audience memory). Visual art seems to be permanent, but canvasses and sculpture can be religated to the basement. A building, we think, stands. And stands.

The architect, David, believes his redevelopment project will stand forever to chart a new course in living; his buildings will change lives. The crowning irony, of course, is that his life is changed by the building rather than the inhabitants, but the changes are quiet, fluid with daily life, and imperceptible. Life at the end of *Benefactors* is radically different from life at the beginning—much as it might have been for the dwellers in the slums his buildings would clear. But whereas the residents of Basuto Road could point to glass and concrete as the source of their change, David has nothing but a tissue of air.

Because of the haste of time and memory, the play constantly flows from the present tense—how it happened, why it happened, in an effort to understand *what* happened—to recollections of the past and dreams of the future. When memory of the past is all we have, how is the past actually altered by the filter of memory? Space and time, rooms and clocks, curiously blend or remain shadows; images of plans and intentions slip

away as moments in time are remembered differently. *Benefactors* catches the process of living and memory in our time. It is startling in its ability to find the internal rhythm of our own change; and although it is a quiet play, which came and went on Broadway at least without great fanfare, it may very well be remembered as one of the landmark plays of our era.

Tom Haas

Excerpts from "A Watershed in the History of Architecture" by architect Christopher Alexander reviewing A VISION OF BRITAIN, by Charles, The Prince of Wales, in *Metropolitan Home*, December 1989 issue.

For the first time, a powerful and worldwide respected person has openly come out against the extraordinary lockstep of esoteric architecture and money that has ruined the world in the 20th century. . . . [The Prince of Wales'] point of view is based, at root, on human feeling. It looks for a kind of architecture and a kind of building in which we feel ourselves deeply at home....the profession of architecture must restablish a world in which the harmony of what is, and the good of the people on the earth, and the simple straightforward questions of comfort and good sense are the driving forces, the driving motives, and the inspiration of the profession. . . . The new architecture of the 20th century did not have life as its goal, and has been totally unable to produce it. The reason is that life as a structure was never properly defined, and therefore could not be attained. Instead, architecture had a more egocentric goal: to make the individual architect self-important. . . . The vision of England as a garden, in which buildings, trees, people, cottages, cathedrals, exist together with the lovely fields of England . . . this is a reality which is in rapid process of destruction. The destruction is of our making. But the momentum of this destruction has not, so far, been stopped because no one with a voice loud enough has stood in the way of it. . . . [With this book] one of the most powerful persons in the Western world has opened the door to a completely new understanding of our physical world, in which ordinary feelings rule. I believe it is a watershed.