

THE FIREBUGS

by Max Frisch

October 12-28, 2012

Directed by Diane Malone



Fri-Sat at 8pm; Sun at 3pm;

Tickets: General Admission - \$25, Sr (65+) , Military, SATCO - \$20, Students w/ID-\$10

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THE Classic Theatre

SAN ANTONIO

The Sterling Houston Theatre at Jump-Start,
108 Blue Star in the Blue Star Arts Complex , 1400 S. Alamo, 78204

Message from the Director, Diane Malone

THE FIREBUGS, by Max Frisch, was written in German in 1953 as an allegory about Fascism in Europe in World War II. Frisch combines elements of the Greek, the Medieval and the Absurd in The Firebugs. Frisch uses a Chorus in The Firebugs in many of the same ways used in ancient times. In the Greek theatre, dancing Choruses singing or reciting poetry in unison amplified the text to reach the thousands in huge outdoor amphitheaters. They spoke for the playwright, they commented on the action, they warned the characters of impending disastrous events, and they interacted with the characters and gave advice. We have seen their legacy in the choruses of musical theatre and we have seen their techniques used in the recent Occupy Wall Street demonstrations that used crowd repetition as the method to “broadcast” speeches and instructions.

In Medieval times, religious instructions to the masses were illustrated in Morality plays, allegories that dramatize spiritual trials and temptations of the average man. The most famous of these is *Everyman*, which is still in production today, some 5 centuries later, at Stratford and Salzburg Festivals. *Everyman* (*Jedermann* in German) confronts Death and must account for his life by enlisting the aid of human qualities, both virtues and vices, in characters such as Good Deeds, Mercy, Mischief, etc. The measure of his life depends on the weight of virtues vs. vices that elect to accompany *Everyman* to Death.

In the aftermath of World War II and all its horrors, European dramatists put their reactions on the stage in a style that came to be known as Theatre of the Absurd. It was not until 1960, however, that the Hungarian-born Martin Esslin coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd” that came to define the work of these playwrights.

In *An Introduction to Absurd Drama* (1965) Esslin wrote, “The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.”

Perhaps the best known of this genre is *Waiting for Godot* by Irishman Samuel Beckett who wrote in French. Other Absurdist were Frenchman Jean Genet (*The Balcony*, *The Blacks*), Romanian Eugene Ionesco (*Rhinoceros*, *The Bald Soprano*), Swiss German Friedrich Durrenmatt (*The Visit*), American Edward Albee, Englishman Harold Pinter, and our Swiss playwright of *The Firebugs*, Max Frisch.

In today’s climate of global terrorism, the play seems particularly timely. We are *Biedermann* (*Jedermann/Everyman*), blindly pursuing our economic success, while *Firebugs* (arsonists/terrorists) infiltrate our very homelands. The *Firemen* (Homeland Security/TSA) are there to protect us but in doing so invade every aspect of our private lives with surveillance videos, invasive searches, and GPS and computer tracking. What price freedom, indeed?

A Family Affair

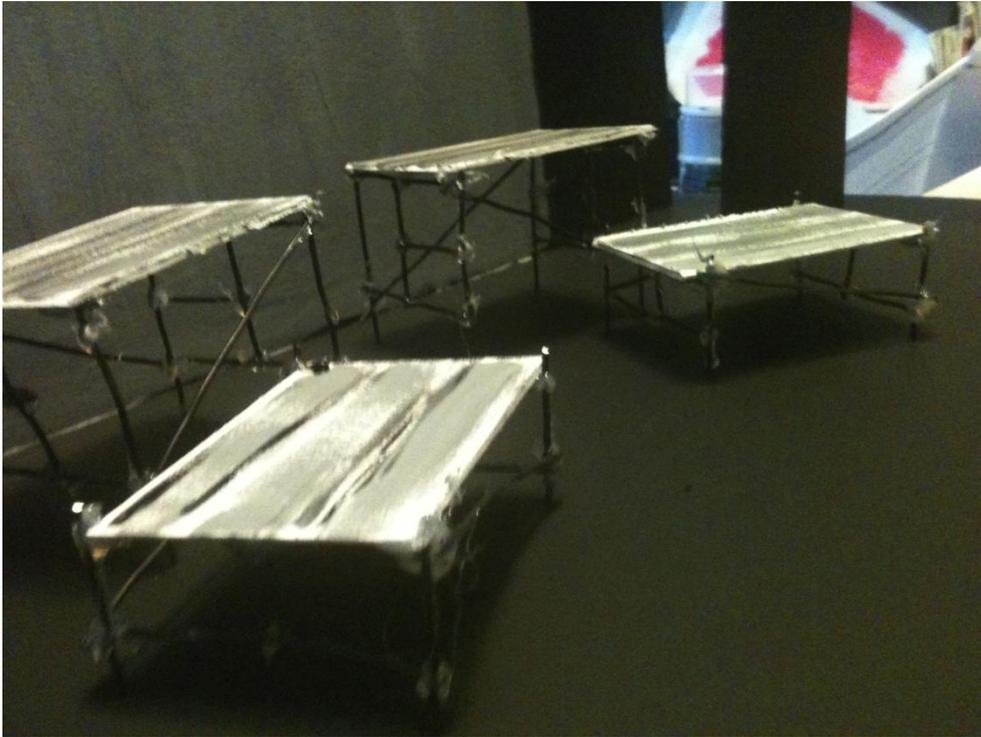


The Firebugs is truly a family affair with Diane Malone directing, her husband Rick designing sound and their daughter, Sheila, doing set and lighting design. The Malone family collaboration goes back a few years. In 1977, Diane directed and Rick designed and Sheila (age 10) ran lights for *Steambath* at the Broad Ripple Theatre Center in Indianapolis, IN. In 1980, Diane directed, Rick designed lights and Sheila ran lights for *Li'l Abner* for Dalewood Theatre in Woodbridge, VA. In 2000, Diane directed, Rick designed sound and Sheila designed lighting for the Firelight Players production of *W;t*. Sheila won an ATAC Globe award for her lighting. In 2007, Diane directed, Rick designed sound and Sheila designed the lighting for *Southern Baptist Sissies* at The Church Theatre. *The Firebugs* continues a 30-year history of family collaboration.

Lighting and Set Design, by Designer Sheila Malone

An allegory or morality play suggests a lesson or message that is applicable to multiple groups of people, crossing boundaries of nationality, age, ethnicity, gender, etc. So, the specific location and details of time recede or fade to a blurry fog or together they disappear. This rejection of realism was the jumping off point for discussions with the director about the concept for *The Firebugs*. The scenery and lighting becomes a vehicle for depicting space, tension, and movement. The scenery and properties are skeletons or placeholders for reality- for the play could (and has) happen anywhere, because people ignore the signs of compliance and the signs of culpability. The use of scaffolding seemed like the perfect metaphor for these ideas. The spaces of an attic and the rest of the house are created by different configurations of the scaffolding. The lighting will create the divisions of the play between "character" scenes of more traditional dialogue and the "chorus" scenes where the language is more poetic and ominous. *Firebugs* has both past, present and future implications so the style has a sort of industrial or post-industrial quality. The director and I are interested in creating physical depictions of the tension and terror.

Photos of Set Design Ideas



Cast

Tyler Keyes as Biedermann

Christie Beckham as his wife, Babette

Cindy Rodriguez is their maid, Anna

The Firebugs: Dru Barcus and Robert Gonzalez.

Firemen: John O'Neill, Jan O'Neill, Rachel Keeler, Lindsey Van De Kirk, Albert Penuelaz and Kareem Dahab

Directed by Diane Malone

Set and Lighting Design: Sheila Malone

Sound Design: Rick Malone

Costumes by Diane Malone

The Firebugs in Rehearsal

Rehearsals for The Firebugs began six weeks before opening night in a small classroom at the Sterling Houston Theatre.

It began with a read through:



Then rehearsals got more interesting with long discussions on subtext:



As the play took shape, things got very crowded in the classroom:



So crowded that cast members took to the outdoors to run scenes:



The Cast of *The Firebugs*



Character List

Gottlieb Biedermann: The name “Biedermann” means “everyman,” while “Gottlieb” means “God’s love.” A bourgeois boss who sells hair tonic for a living.

Babette: His wife, fragile with a heart condition.

Anna: maidservant in a white apron

Joe Schmitz: An arsonist, formerly a wrestler from the circus. Described by the playwright as “athletic, costume reminiscent partly of the prison, partly of the circus, his arms are tattooed and there are leather straps on this wrists”.

Willi Eisenring, He used to be a waiter at the Metropol before it burned down. He is wearing a “frock coat”.

The Chorus of Fireman: A chorus, in the style of the ancient Greek chorus, often dressed as firemen, who comment on the action as it occurs on stage. As in Greek theatre, some members of the chorus step out to play minor characters:

A policeman: arrives to question Biedermann about the death of Knechtling.

A Ph. D. or Professor: Joins the Firebugs as an idealist who mistakenly believes they have a noble reason for lighting fires. When he realizes his mistake, he quickly leaves.

Mrs. Knechtling: The wife of Biedermann’s business partner who commits suicide when he realizes that he will not share in an equal share of the hair tonic profits. She arrives to demand answers from Biedermann, but is dismissed.

Synopsis of *The Firebugs*

Act 1

In the opening moments of *The Firebugs*, Gottlieb Biedermann stands smoking a cigar as the Firemen chorus enters and explains their role as protectors of the city. Later, Mr. Biedermann sits in his living room reading about the arson events that have been occurring all over the town. Anna, the maidservant enters to announce the arrival of Schmitz, who is asking for a place to sleep and something to eat. Biedermann agrees to feed him and eventually allows him to sleep in the attic, although reluctantly. Schmitz is polite and gentle, but there is clearly an edge to him as he demands mustard with his meal. Knechtling, a former business partner of Biedermann’s asks to see him, demanding royalties for the hair tonic that has made Biedermann wealthy. Biedermann angrily refuses to see him, yelling that he should get a lawyer instead of begging for money. Schmitz goes to the attic for the night.

Biedermann leaves his wife, Babette, alone the next day with Schmitz still in the house. Babette believes Schmitz could be a firebug and plans to send him on his way after feeding him breakfast. Unfortunately, Schmitz appeals to her desire not to hurt anyone's feelings and she is unable to follow through with sending him away. Soon after, Schmitz's friend Eisenring arrives claiming to be a fire inspector. Throughout the night, both men bring containers of gasoline into the attic. Biedermann discovers Eisenring and the gasoline and demands that they leave. A policeman arrives announcing the recent suicide of Knechtling. When asked by the policemen what is inside the barrels, Biedermann lies and says they are filled with hair tonic. Biedermann leaves with the policeman to answer questions, allowing Schmitz and Eisenring to finish preparing the barrels of gasoline.

On his way to see his lawyer, Biedermann is approached by the Chorus with warnings and criticism about how he has handled things with the Firebugs currently living in his attic. Biedermann is defensive, acknowledges his complacency and then refuses to address the problem.

Act 2

Eisenring sits in the attic, prepping the explosives and singing quietly to himself while Babette and Biedermann discuss whether to invite the firebugs downstairs to dinner. Biedermann assumes becoming friends with them will keep his home safe and demands that a beautiful dinner be cooked for them. Biedermann joins Eisenring in the attic and learns that Schmitz has gone to look for sawdust because it helps spread the fire. While Biedermann attempts to befriend him, Eisenring searches for his lost detonator cap. Eisenring challenges Biedermann's desire to maintain a conflict free environment. Biedermann invites the two men to dinner. A professor arrives to watch over things while Eisenring and Schmitz have dinner downstairs. The widow Knechtling is waiting to speak to Biedermann but she is dismissed and told to speak to his lawyer.

As the table is set, Biedermann demands simplicity, asking the maid to remove the knife-rests and silver. In order to make the dinner guests feel more at home, he declares that all class distinctions be removed. The dinner erupts into madness as the hosts attempt to keep the atmosphere light while their guests become increasingly honest in their arson plans and the horrific events to follow. The maid is required to return all of the fine dining items she had previously been asked to remove. Schmitz rises and, using the tablecloth as a costume, plays a scene from *Everyman*, terrifying Babette. Sirens erupt from outside and it is clear that the city is burning around them. The firebugs request a match from Biedermann who continues to declare that he doesn't believe the two men are firebugs. As proof, he gives them a match. As the firebugs exit, the professor arrives and admits that the firebugs had no motive beyond the pleasure they receive from destroying things. The chorus speaks as the house explodes around them.

Acting Interview



Tyler Keyes (Gotlieb Biedermann) is honored to be making his debut at The Classic Theater of San Antonio. Some recent shows in San Antonio include *The Pillowman* (Ariel), The Woodlawn Theater; *Cries That Bind* (Johnny), Cellar Theater; *The Irish Curse* (Stephen), Attic Rep; and *D.O.A.* (Halladay), Overtime Theater. Tyler received his BA and MAT degrees from Trinity University, and conservatory training from the Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin, Ireland.

Were you familiar with the play when you heard about the audition?

I was completely unfamiliar with the piece, but liked the idea of something so different than I'd done in the past. I was definitely looking forward to checking it out.

What do you think this play is about?

To me the play is a representation of how blind people can become just to appease others. We turn a blind eye to the evil of the world rather than follow our guts, and stand up against it. In turn, our lives, and the lives of those around us, can be dramatically affected. Frisch uses the device of Biedermann to show how an everyman can succumb to these evils, even when their destructive powers are staring him right in the face.

Has your perception of the play changed as you have developed your character?

Absolutely. I've loved getting to explore the Biedermann arc, and watch him slowly figure out his mistakes as things at his house get steadily worse.

Why do you think Biedermann allows the Firebugs into his home?

Biedermann is taken in by flattery and the idea of being considered noble in the community. The idea of others considering him to be inhuman, or unwelcoming overcomes his desire to keep dangerous people out of his home.

Because this play is an absurdist piece, does that change how you approach it? How does it differ from how you have prepared for other roles you have played?

I take a few liberties with Biedermann that I would not usually, and it's turning into my favorite part about the production. Everyone is amping up the physicality and the vocal dynamics of their characters in order to show our audiences that there is a message to be found in this play, rather than a realistic story to be told. It's a lot of fun.

Quotable “The Firebugs”

Schmitz: “If anybody has a conscience, you can bet it’s a bad one.”

Biedermann: “If everybody goes around thinking everybody else is an arsonist – you’ve got to have a little trust in people, Babette, just a little.”

Chorus: “Blind, ah, blind is the weakling! Trembling, expectant of evil, yet hoping somehow to avoid it! Defenseless! Ah, weary of menacing evil, with open arms he receives it!”

Eisenring: “Above a certain income every citizen is guilty one way or another.”

Biedermann: “I don’t understand a thing!”

Biedermann: “Why must you imagine the worst? Where will that get you? All I want is some peace and quiet, not a thing more...”

Chorus: “Hoping that goodness will come of goodness. How mistaken can you be?”

Biedermann: “If I report these two guys to the police, I’ll make them my enemies. What good will that do me? Just one match and the whole house is up in flames! What good will that do us? On the other hand, if I go up there and invite them to dinner, why, then we’ll be friends.”

Eisenring: “A joke is good camouflage. Next best comes sentiment...but the best camouflage of all – in my opinion – is the plain and simple truth. Because nobody ever believes it.”

Biedermann: “I am a free and independent citizen. I can think anything I like. What are all these questions? I have the right, my dear sires, not to think at all if I like.”

Eisenring: “Give us some matches. We have no more matches. If you don’t think we’re firebugs. See how he hesitates?”

The Professor: “I was intent on improving the world; I knew about everything they were doing in your attic, everything. The one thing I didn’t know was this: They- they are doing it for the pure joy of it.”

Chorus: “Useless, quite useless. And nothing more useless than this useless story. For arson, once kindled, kills many, leaves few, and accomplishes nothing.”

Theatre of the Absurd

Scholars classify *The Firebugs* as “Theatre of the Absurd”. Theatre of the Absurd is a term used to describe a style of playwriting that began after World War II. Many artists were questioning a world that could have allowed the atrocities of the Nazi reign to occur. The term was first coined by Martin Esslin in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin used the term to describe what was happening in theatre at the time but none of the playwrights ever associated themselves with a specific style. Most often, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Edward Albee are associated with the term because of the common characteristics of their writings during a similar time period. Absurdist drama contains a sense of disillusionment with the world and elements of ancient drama like the Greek Chorus found in *The Firebugs*. This type of drama is commonly an exploration of the meaninglessness of life, the uncertainty of it and often has images of horrific tragedy mixed with over the top vaudeville type comedy. In direct opposition to the “well-made play”, absurdist drama uses language to shine a light on the silliness of conventional conversation. The plays associated with Theatre of the Absurd explore the question, “what is the point of life?” without ever answering it. Conversation, from the absurdist perspective, is virtually devoid of meaning. This is why many absurdist plays are filled with clichés and banalities in an attempt to highlight the sense of disillusionment of the post World War II era.

Everyman

The Summoning of Everyman, often referred to as simply *Everyman*, is an allegory, a morality play written in the 15th century. It is the story of Everyman’s journey to heaven where his life is reviewed in order to assess whether he has done enough to gain admittance. The overwhelming theme of the play is the inevitability of death. Each supporting character represents some aspect of moral life including Good Deeds, Beauty, Knowledge, Intelligence, and Knowledge. Each of these characters lead Everyman through his Book of Accounts until he is ready for death when only his Good Deeds remain. The moral of the play is that we can take nothing we have received in life with us when we die, only what we have given. The word “everyman” translated into German is Jedermann or Biedermann...the main character in *The Firebugs*. Biedermann represents EVERYMAN...literally the average citizen.

About the Author, Max Frisch

"I used the theater for the more political material because the theater is a public event. The so-called private material—father-daughter, father-son, man-woman relationships—that, for me, is the novel." -Max Frisch, author of *The Firebugs*



Max Frisch was born in 1911 in Zurich, Switzerland. He was the son of an architect. He was a writer from a young age and spent time as a journalist for a major newspaper in Switzerland. During World War II, he wrote detailed accounts of his experiences serving in the Swiss army. He continued to keep detailed journals throughout his life. While the neutrality of the Swiss position in World

War II allowed Frisch to remain a spectator, he had deep concerns about the violence and fanaticism of human nature. His writings reflect his frustration with the world. After the war, Frisch completed his education as an architect. His most well known project as an architect was designing a public swimming pool in the center of Zurich. In 1942, he married Gertrude Constanze von Mayenburg. Together they had two daughters and a son. They later divorced. Frisch married and divorced two more times in his lifetime. In 1947, he met Bertolt Brecht in Zurich and the two men became friends. Brecht's ideas of the Epic Theatre had a powerful affect on Frisch's future plays. It was around this time that Frisch began devoting more time to his writing. In 1951, he was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant and spent a year in the United States. During the next several years, Frisch wrote several novels and plays, including *The Firebugs* in 1953. His novels were focused on personal stories of alienation while his plays were political.

Generally, his plays explore human nature, without offering any suggestions for improving it. He asks questions but leaves it up to the audience to determine the answers. He rejects what he sees as the fallacy of human ideology, instead advocating for individual responsibility.

In his diary he wrote:

"I am here to ask questions, not to answer them. As a playwright, I would consider my task completely fulfilled if I should ever succeed, in a play, in posing a question in such a way that the audience, from that moment on, could not live without an answer – without their answer, their own, which they can give themselves only with life itself."

Max Frisch died of cancer in 1991 in Zurich.

The Firebugs was first produced in English in 1961 at the Royal Court Theatre.

A review of the production in *The London Times* said:

“Its theme is that big catastrophes have small beginnings and perhaps need not happen but for man’s incurably optimistic belief that he at least may gain some personal advantage by appeasing the maniacs who threaten (quite incredibly, of course) to bring them about. “

Classroom Activities

1) Conveying Meaning Game

Much of the Absurdist drama is focused on the meaninglessness of everyday language. This activity focuses on dialogue that has no inherent meaning. Give this simple script to your students and allow them to work in pairs or groups of three. It doesn’t matter who says what lines, as long as each line is said in order. The goal of the exercise is to convey the meaning outside the lines. Each group must decide what is happening in the scene, who the characters are and what their objectives are. This project can be done over and over again with different pairings of students.

Script:

Hi
Hey
What’s going on.
Nothing, u?
So what happened?
What do you mean, what happened?
Really?
Really.
Ok.
I will see you later.
Ok, fine.
Bye.
Bye.

2) The Chorus Speaks

Ask students to think about something they observed recently...an argument or interesting conversation, an event they attended, even a television show or movie they watched. If they have trouble coming up with an idea, use a newspaper or magazine to generate ideas. Next, ask them to imagine that a Greek chorus observed the event they selected. Have the students brainstorm on what the chorus might say or feel about the activity they are observing. Finally, have them write out the dialogue for the chorus to speak. Does the chorus speak in unison or are only some sections of the dialogue stated individually and why?

Using improvisation and the chorus dialogue they have written, perform scenes with the chorus commenting on the chosen activity. Make changes to the dynamic by splitting up the chorus lines between different groups and individuals. How does that change the effectiveness of the delivery?

3) Defining Everyman

Everyman represents the average citizen. Individually, in small groups, or during classroom discussion, write a description of the *Everyman* in our society? Is *Everyman* different for students with a different cultural background?

4) Designing The Firebugs

After reading the play or seeing the live production, ask students to make design choices. The set of *The Firebugs* requires a dining room and an attic. How would your students design the household so that the attic is represented appropriately? Discuss the use of fire and whether that design element can be represented without the use of real flames.

Here is a great resource for using fire on stage:

<http://www.birket.com/technical-library/139>

Lead the discussion on establishing the feeling of flames by using lights or sounds. If the class has seen the live production, discuss the effectiveness of the technical aspects of the play. Did they feel the element of fire was clearly established. What might they have done differently?

5) Becoming a critic

After students have seen the production of *The Firebugs*, ask them to become a critic and write a review of the show.

Here is a great resource for what it means to be a theatre critic:

<http://www.theatrebayarea.org/editorial/Critical-Discourse.cfm>

Be sure to have them evaluate the actors and character development, costumes, design elements and overall production quality. After they have completed the rough draft, discuss whether they might change what they have written if they knew the cast and design team of *The Firebugs* were going to read the review. Lead a discussion on whether or not it's important for theatre critics to maintain a sense of constructiveness in their analysis of a theatre production. What is the role of the critic?

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