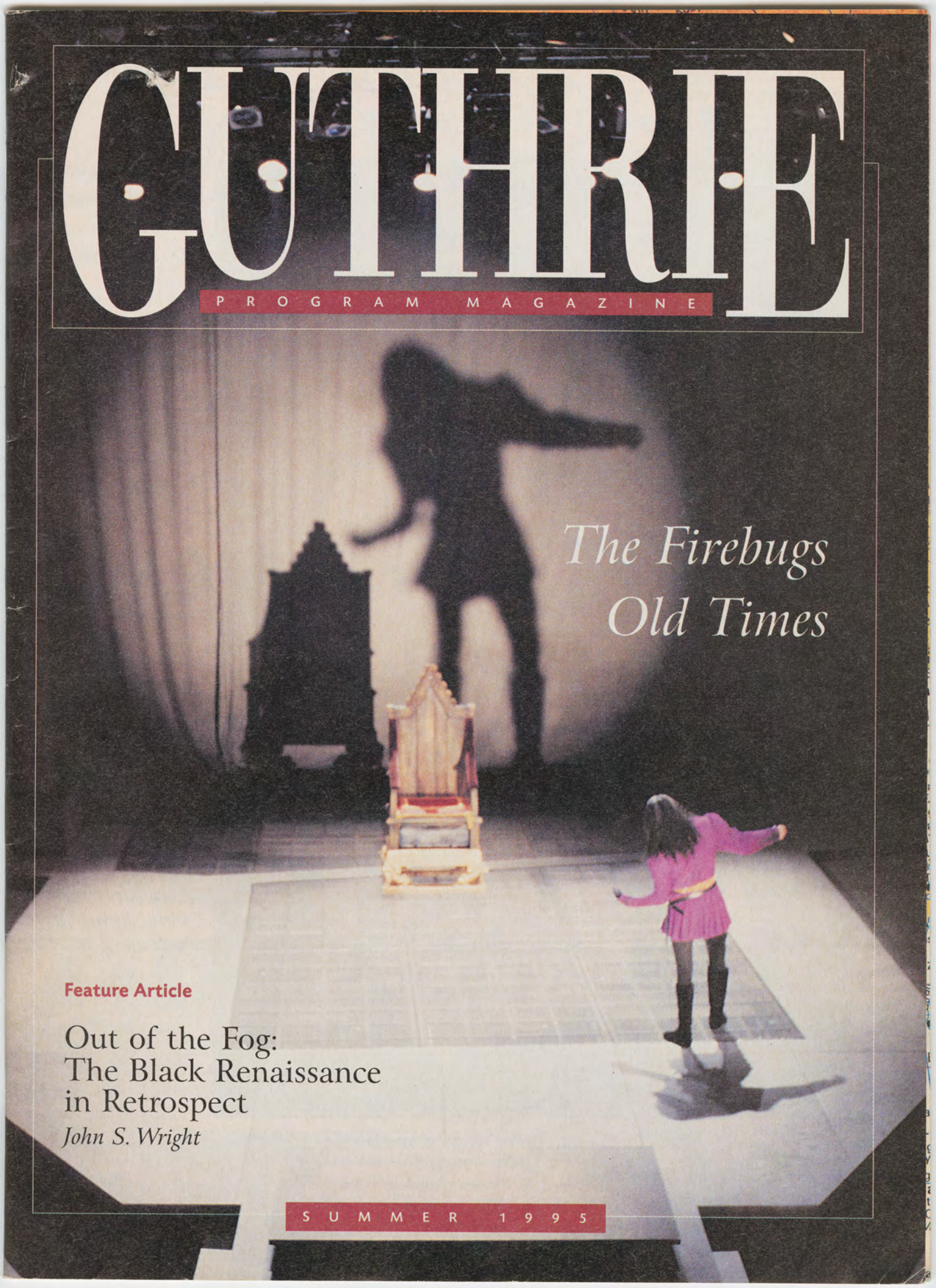
GUTHRIE

PROGRAM MAGAZINE



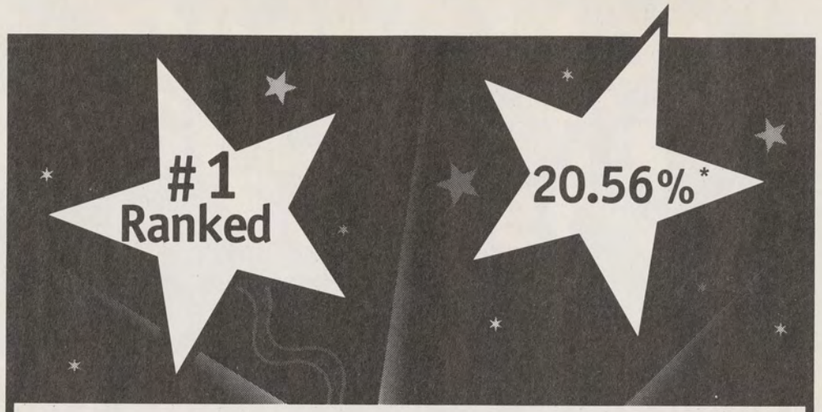
The Firebugs
Old Times

Feature Article

Out of the Fog: The Black Renaissance in Retrospect

John S. Wright

SUMMER 1995



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† Performance of the Fund's Investor A Shares as ranked by Lipper Analytical Services, Inc. for the year ended 3/31/95.

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With this production the Guthrie honors the generosity of First Bank System Foundation

Characters

Mr. Gottlieb Biedermann
Babette, his wife
Anna, their maid
Joseph Schmitz, a wrestler
Willi Eisenring, a waiter
A Policeman
Widow Knechtling
A Professor
The Chorus,
consisting of men and women of the Fire Brigade

Ensemble

J.B. Adams*
Christopher Bayes
Susan Blackwell
Scott Cunningham*
Saidah Arrika Ekulona**
Karen Graham*
Julie Briskman Hall
Dan Illian
Charles Janasz
Zaraawar Mistry
Isabell Monk
Richard Ooms
Lola Pashalinski*
Andréa Smith*

Additional members of the Fire Brigade
Robert DeMars, Dean Holt, Leif Jurgensen, Emma O'Donnell, Jacqueline Thurik

THE FIREBUGS

(Biedermann und die Brandstifter)
a moral play with no moral

by Max Frisch
translated by Michael Feingold

Director	David Gordon
Assistant Director	Chuck Finlon*
Set designed by	Marina Draghici
Costumes designed by	Adelle Lutz
Lighting designed by	Jennifer Tipton
Dances constructed by	David Gordon
Dramaturgy	Michael Lupu
Vocal Coach	Mira K. Kehoe
Movement Coach	Marcela Kingman Lorca
Stage Manager	Michael B. Paul
Assistant Stage Manager	Gina Perille
Design Assistants	Laurie Bramhall, Devon Painter (costumes) Michael Burgoyne (lighting)

Interns: Jacqueline Thurik (directing), Michael Maletic (dramaturgy), Tracy Davis (stage management)

THERE WILL BE ONE INTERMISSION.

Musical selections in this production are from "Ten marches to miss a victory" (1978-79) by Argentinian-born composer Mauricio Kagel.

*Member of David Gordon's Pick Up Performance Company. The Pick Up Performance Company provides a working structure through which David Gordon can create and present his work in live performance and media on a project-by-project basis. Although the performers vary by project, the company includes dancers and actors with whom Mr. Gordon has an ongoing relationship.
** This Actor appears as an Equity Professional Theater Intern.

Understudies for the Ensemble
J.B. Adams*, Susan Blackwell, Jennifer Blagen, Bruce Bohne, Scott Cunningham*, Bob Davis, Saidah Arrika Ekulona**, June Gibbons, Karen Graham*, Julie Briskman Hall, Dan Illian, Charles Janasz, Zaraawar Mistry, Isabell Monk, Stephen Pelinski, Marquetta Senters, John Shuman, Andréa Smith*
Understudies never substitute for performers unless announced prior to the performance.

In accordance with the Minnesota Clean Indoor Air Act, smoking is prohibited in the Guthrie Theater, lobbies, and Walker/Guthrie foyers.
Cameras, pagers, cellular phones, and recorders are forbidden in the theater. Please check them with the House Manager.

Max Frisch

A Selected Chronology

1911	Born May 15 in Zurich to Franz Bruno (architect) and Karolina Bettina Frisch.
1924-30	Secondary education in German.
1931	Attends Zurich University.
1932	Father dies. Leaves the University to support his family as a free-lance journalist.
1936-41	Studies Architecture in Zurich.
1944	Writes his first play, *Santa Cruz*. Produced, as were many of his subsequent plays, at the Shauspielhaus, Zurich.
1946	*The Chinese Wall*.
1947	First meets Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas on theater had a lasting influence on Frisch.
1948	Visits Prague. Writes a short story, *Burlesque*, later to become the play *The Firebugs*.
1949	*When the War Was Over*.
1951	*Count Oderland*.
1952	*Biedermann and the Firebugs* (radio play).
1953	*Don Juan, or The Love of Geometry*.
1954	*I'm Not Stiller* (novel).
1957	*Homo Faber* (novel).
1958	*The Firebugs* (developed from the earlier radio play) and *The Great Fury of Philipp Holtz*.
1961	*Andorra*.
1967	*Biography: A Game*.
1975	*Montauk* (novel).
1978	*Triptych*.
1979	*Man in the Holocene* (novel).
1981-83	Resides in New York City.
1991	Dies April 4 in Zurich.

(All titles are plays unless otherwise indicated.)

Synopsis

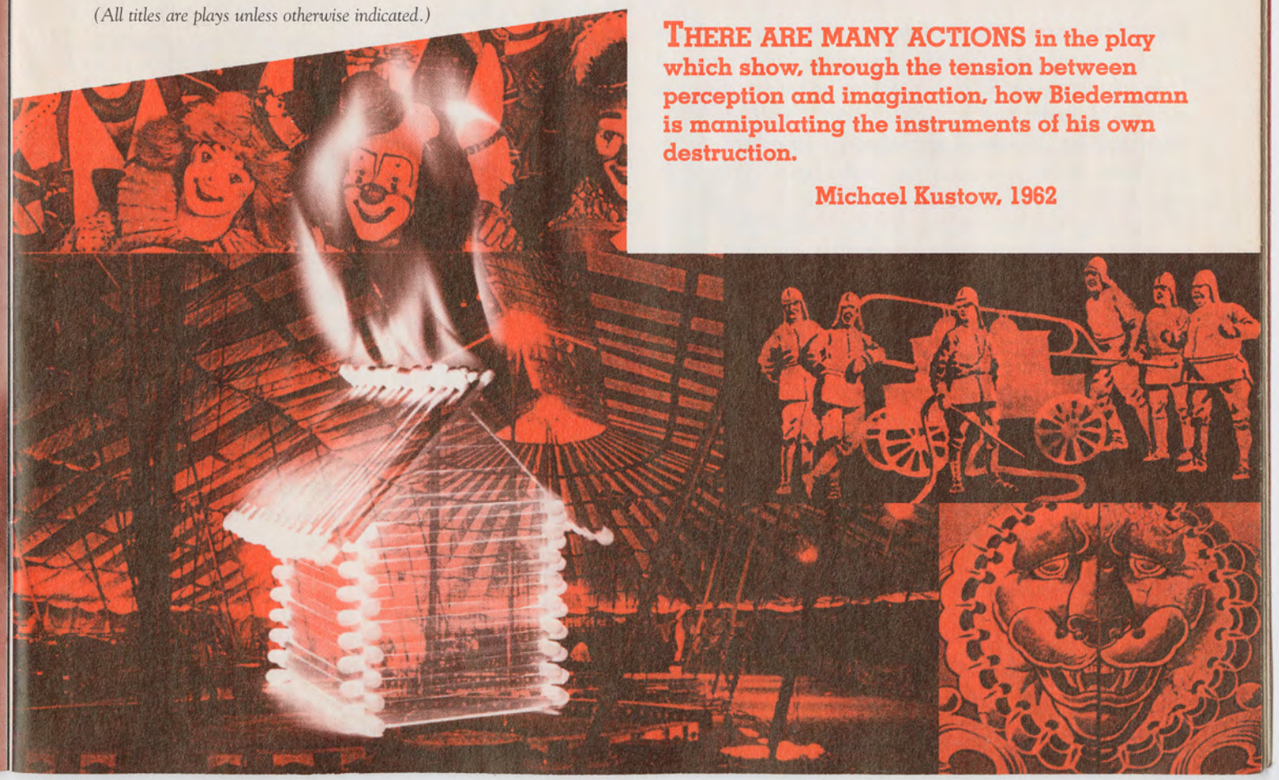
In an unnamed city a rash of fires threatens the safety of homes and citizens to the dismay of the watchful chorus of firemen. They deplore the trouble, and call for vigilance. At the same time, Gottlieb Biedermann, a respectable homeowner, castigates the authorities' inability to counter such disruptions of peace and order. But his actions contrast with his tough statements. To compromise seems for him the best self-preserving policy, so he allows an unknown peddler to move into the attic of his house.

In no time the intruder is joined by a friend. Methodically they begin to stockpile barrels of gasoline and incendiary devices in the Biedermann household. No matter how obvious it becomes that the two men are the very arsonists who have been menacing the city, Mr. Biedermann maintains the false hope that a show of goodwill can fend off the impending disaster. He ignores both the material evidence and the repeated warnings of the chorus. A third intruder appears in the attic. Mr. Biedermann tries to cheer up his wife, and invites his 'guests' to dinner.

The firebugs show up for the occasion, but nothing dissuades them from their task. As the genteel social conventions break apart, the dinner party turns ominous and grotesque. In a show of supreme trust, Mr. Biedermann gives his visitors the matches they ask for. While the house burns to the ground, the chorus of firemen laments the doomed attempt at appeasing the arsonists.

THERE ARE MANY ACTIONS in the play which show, through the tension between perception and imagination, how Biedermann is manipulating the instruments of his own destruction.

Michael Kustow, 1962



The Fire This Time

by Michael Feingold

A Note from the Translator

Before David Gordon asked me to work on *The Firebugs*, I thought I knew exactly what it was about, what it "meant." Now, having been through every line of it a few dozen times, I'm much less sure. It is evidently a satire, but what does it satirize? Violence, gullibility, middle-class complacency or insecurity, the urge to destroy? The answer could be any or all of these things. A man and woman own their own home; they allow into it people who are self-evidently destroyers of homes, among other things. At the same time, they turn away an old and trusted employee, who kills himself. Are the two stories connected? Once again, it isn't easy to say.

While I worked on *The Firebugs*, the news from Oklahoma City kept coming over the radio. Sometimes I didn't know if I was translating an old play or writing up tomorrow's news story. The immediate screeches about "Arab terrorists" interested me because I immediately discounted them. (What would Arab terrorists want in Oklahoma City?) I thought of Babette looking for firebugs under the bed every night. In the wake of the bombing, the firebugs themselves began to trouble me: The translator of a play, like its author, has to identify with the characters, to write their speeches from their point of view and not his own. I had to find things to like about Joe and Willi, and I was sure I couldn't find anything I liked about Timothy McVeigh while bodies were being dug out of the rubble. On the other hand, I thought about people who infuriated me, and the violent fantasies I'd occasionally had about getting rid of them. In the shadow of Timothy McVeigh, Joe and Willi started to become understandable to me, at least.

A LARGE AUDIENCE both surprises and pleases me; no matter what, it is an indication of interest. ... Students, like anyone else, expect a play to provide answers. The need for a guiding hand comes out again and again. ... I would consider that I fulfilled my job as a dramatist if a play of mine ever succeeded in posing a question in such a way as to compel the members of the audience that from that moment on they were unable to go on living without an answer—their answer, their very own answer, one they can derive only from the reality of their own lives.

Max Frisch, 1946

What people believe, what they say they believe, and what they actually do are like the points of a triangular compass; each of us is a needle fluttering endlessly between them. To steady the compass, to align belief and action, is the impossible task of our lives. None of us succeeds at it, but if we are a little cautious, and try to avoid the most glaring disparities, we can keep ourselves on a reasonably steady track. The disparities Frisch puts into his dialogue, between what the characters say and what they do, or between what they seem to be thinking and what they say, interested me immensely, because they seemed at once so foreign and so familiar, relics of a vanished European culture still echoing uncannily through our own. America did not always seem to me as full of disparities as it does now.

The public statements people make these days—politicians, business executives, celebrities, leaders of extremist groups—intrigue me, as a writer, because they constantly force me to wonder: Do these people realize what they are saying? Do they see the great gap between their premises and their conclusions, or the frighteningly narrow one between their words and the actions that might logically follow? I am constantly puzzled, as well as terrified, to know that there are small sects of people—including some here in the northern Midwest—who can call themselves Christians and at the same time talk about exterminating nonwhites. I'm Jewish; how did my definition of Christianity come to have so much more to do with the teachings of Jesus than theirs? Frisch's chorus of firemen, which talks in the big, sententious periods of Greek tragedy and doesn't do any of the big things it says, starts to seem like more than a mere literary caprice.

THEATRICAL DIAGNOSIS: Do the things I see and the things I hear bear any relation to one another? If not, if the point is made by words exclusively, ... then the stage may seem fallow, and what I perceive there is not a theatrical event, but an irrelevant situation performed in a theater. ... Drama, dialectical conflict, in which one is enticed time and again to discern ... the quintessential element of theater, will always depend on the stage only to the extent that the stage reminds one of a ring, it has something of a circus ring, an arena, a public forum.

Max Frisch, 1948

LET'S DISCUSS IF TODAY'S WORLD can be shown on the stage. ... Brecht's well-known answer [was] that the contemporary world could be reproduced on the stage provided that this world were conceived as changeable. The question may be more upsetting than the answer, because of the assumption that it was ever possible to depict the world. When? ... The closer we come to our present time and the more familiar we are with the actual contemporary world, the more obvious becomes the impossibility of reproducing this complicated reality; a theater piece, even a great one, is always just a piece, a reduction, and precisely because of that a release for a few hours. No matter how the theater defines and presents itself, it is art: the play is a response to the world's undepictability. What it becomes is poetry.

Max Frisch, 1964

Right action is a puzzle, like choosing the right word when you translate. "What would you have done then, in my place?" asks Frisch's hero, and the people who feel most sure of their answer are probably the ones who most need to see *The Firebugs*. We all choose our actions for more complex reasons than we think, and what we choose is never exactly right, just as there is never an exact translation for a really meaningful sentence in a foreign language. We can't ever give up, though, because if we did—"There goes the gasworks." So what do we do? Become Biedermanns, become firebugs, find some decent way of not being either? Or do we wait, and watch, and do nothing? Those are good questions for the end of the twentieth century, and although I don't have any answers, I am glad Frisch made me ponder them, because I have been feeling lately that I live near the gasworks, and the number of unexplained fires has been getting distressingly large...

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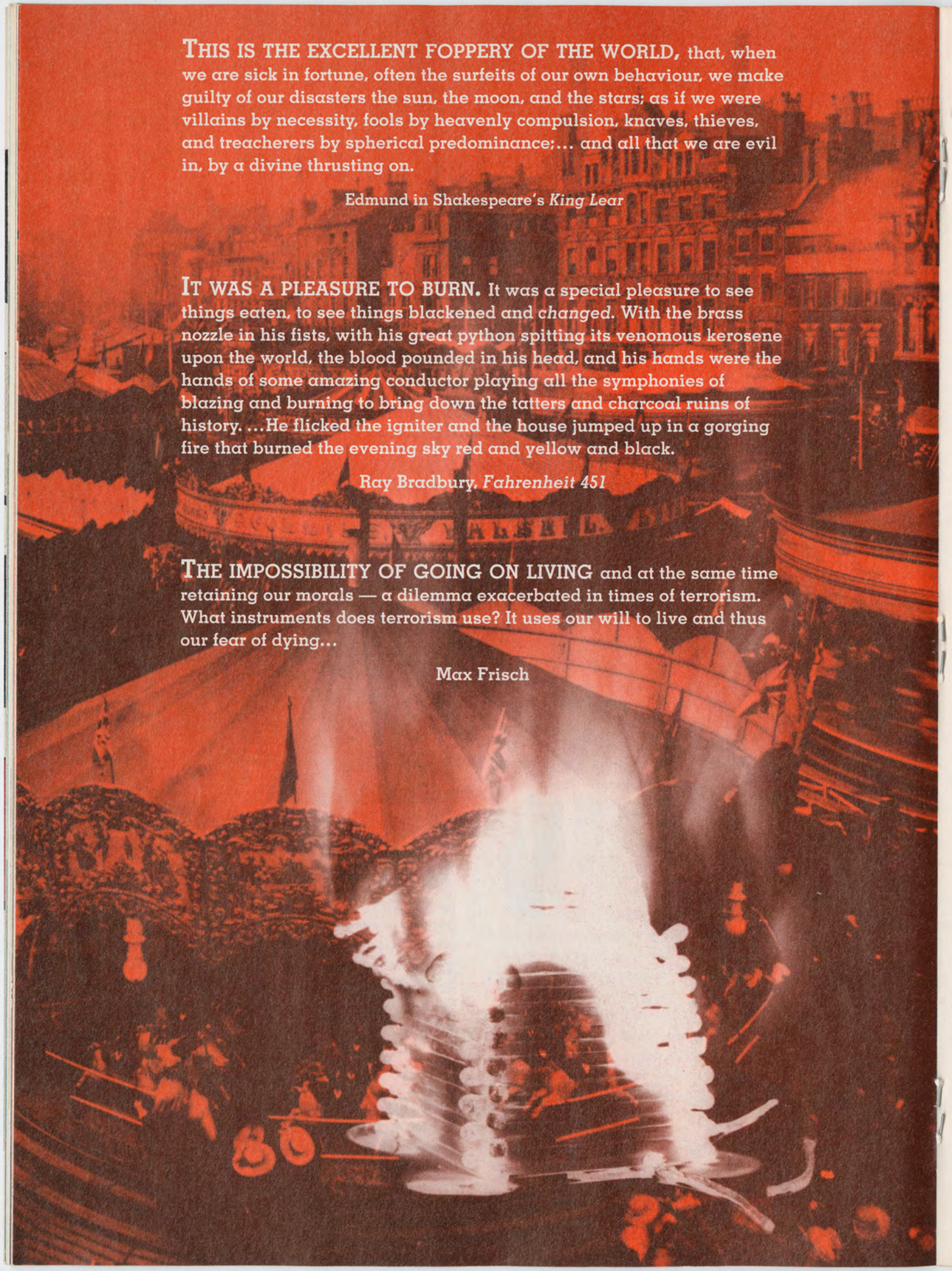

THIS IS THE EXCELLENT FOPPERY OF THE WORLD, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treacherers by spherical predominance;... and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BURN. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with his great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history. ...He flicked the igniter and the house jumped up in a gorging fire that burned the evening sky red and yellow and black.

Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GOING ON LIVING and at the same time retaining our morals — a dilemma exacerbated in times of terrorism. What instruments does terrorism use? It uses our will to live and thus our fear of dying...

Max Frisch

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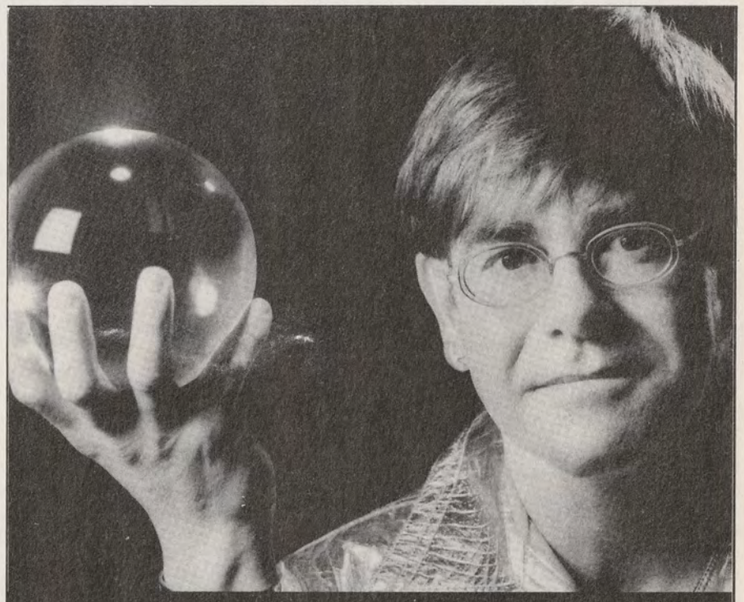

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