

Blowing Up the House

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The fire(bugs) this time

By Michael Feingold

*Editor's note: Michael Feingold's new translation of Max Frisch's *The Firebugs* had its premiere at The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis on Friday, August 4, directed by David Gordon. The following essay incorporates materials from the Translator's Note in the Guthrie program, remarks made at a symposium before a preview performance, and a brief speech at a reception given for the theater's Board of Directors prior to the opening night performance.*

I've gone through a very strange trajectory with this play. When David Gordon phoned last fall and invited me to work on it, I had not read or thought about *The Firebugs* for a very long time. I remembered it from the '60s, when it had first been published in English, and had a brief vogue in our theaters, as a very simplistic allegory about the rise of Nazism, extremely theatrical but one-dimensional. I didn't say this out loud, because I wanted the job, and especially not to David, because I thought that his amazing theatricality might get something out of the play if anyone could. So I kept my own counsel and went back to the original German text to see what I could find.

I learned very quickly that *The Firebugs* is neither simple nor one-dimensional. The story it tells may be simple to the point of obviousness, but the manner of telling makes it both subtle and complex. It is a satirical fable, in which right and wrong choices are clearly indicated all the way through, but since the characters invariably make the most outrageously wrong choice in every situation, the target of its satire is extremely hard to locate; their motives seem more of a mystery in each scene. With each successive day of work on the play, I've found it more disturbing and deep, till I've come at last to see it as a work of nearly tragic stature.

Though it has always been called *The Firebugs* in America, its full name in the original is *Biedermann and the Firebugs*. In German, "Biedermann," which is a common name, is used as a colloquial expression, slight-

ly contemptuous in tone, for the average middle-class citizen. Not exactly average, for in German the name faces two ways: On the one hand it suggests *Jedermann*—"Everyman"—as in the great 15th-century morality play of that name, to which Frisch's text makes several allusions. On the other it suggests *Biedermeier*, that early-19th-century epoch of German taste that we associate with ornately carved furniture, plump cushions, and a certain smug complacency.

Frisch's Mr. and Mrs. Biedermann are affluent, upper-middle-class homeowners who, against their own stated beliefs, admit to their house two men who are self-evidently destroyers of homes. The two firebugs are masters at telling people what they want to hear, and the Biedermanns believe—or at least affect to believe—everything they're told, instead of the plain evidence of their senses. And when the firebugs tell the truth as explicitly as possible, the Biedermanns decline to believe it. Living as they do in a world where truth is not usually spoken, when it is, they "read" it as a joke, a stratagem, a plea for sympathy—anything but the truth.

This is extremely funny, but also painful. The Biedermanns' house goes up in flames because of it, and not only their house: The firebugs have targeted five similar houses—one imagines a little neighborhood full of Biedermanns—located in a circle around the city gasworks. The flames spread, the gasworks blow up, and the town is destroyed, which is definitely not funny. Did the Biedermanns do this, did they allow it to happen, or would it have happened anyway? This, like most of the play's questions, Frisch carefully leaves ambiguous.

There is a kind of abortive subplot, so sketchy that, to my surprise, the plot synopsis offered in the Guthrie program doesn't even mention it: Biedermann owns a hair tonic factory. He has just laid off an employee of 14 years' service, a research chemist named Knechtling, who has created the successful formula for the hair tonic. Knechtling, an old man with an ailing wife and three children to support, needs money. He asks for royalties. Biedermann says, "Let him

get a lawyer, or let him stick his head in the oven." Knechtling chooses the latter course, and the play's second half has some ominous business about a wreath the Biedermanns send to the funeral and the appearance of Knechtling's heavily veiled widow.

It isn't hard to find analogies to this part of the story in recent American experience, just as it isn't hard to reason from the exploding gasworks to Oklahoma City. What makes it so intriguing is the unspoken link between the two. Pitiless to Knechtling, Biedermann is polite, at times almost tender, to the firebugs, who know the Knechtling story and use it to torment the Biedermanns. His actions don't make rational sense: Fearing outsiders, Biedermann allows outsiders to destroy his home; at the same time he destroys the life of someone else with whom one would expect him to feel a much closer kinship.

Biedermann often talks about human kindness, equality, the absence of class barriers, and other abstract ideals in which he demonstrably doesn't believe. What ultimately destroys him is the gap between his belief system and his reality. Like the story, this notion is funny and at the same time tragic. It's also, it strikes me, very much like America right now. The American desire to deny reality, which has always astonished me, is now very deep and widespread. We spent a great many decades escaping from the falsehoods of Victorian morality, only to have it sweep back over us in the last few years, in a movement of bewildering strength, which has resulted in what I might call a Congress full of firebugs, elected largely by well-to-do Biedermanns in a desperate state of confusion about reality and desperately afraid that some unnamed race of Knechtlings is plotting to deprive them of all they own. Out of their

fear, they have brought into their own House—of Representatives, I mean—a gang of terrorists who will, if things go on this way, very soon deprive them of everything that makes their life pleasant and valuable.

It isn't easy to explain this to the Biedermanns of our world, who cling so frantically to the illusion that social problems are best solved by sweeping them under the rug and hiring an expanded police force to stomp down the resulting bulges. That is no way to clean one's house; it leads inevitably to the concomitant notion, popular in the Southwest,

that the best way to clean one's house is by blowing it up. The Gingrich Republicans would very much like not to take responsibility for Timothy McVeigh and his ilk, just as the first commentators on the Oklahoma City explosion very much wanted it to have been caused by Arab terrorists. But the terrorists are not outsiders, they are Americans like ourselves, and the Republican assault on the idea of a government responsible for the people's welfare was followed by a terrorist assault on the whole idea of government as surely as night follows day.

When I began translating *The Firebugs*, I had trouble finding words for the two terrorists. The translator of a play, like its author, has to identify with the characters, to write the speeches from their various points of view and not his own. The news from Oklahoma City kept coming over the radio, day by day, as I worked, and I did not much want to find words to put in terrorists' mouths. But as I thought about events in this country on a larger scale, I became angrier and angrier. I began to think of houses—including that aforesaid House of Representatives—toward which I might like to back up Timothy McVeigh's truckful of fertilizer. I began to understand how people might become so infuriated, and so I was able to find words for the play's two firebugs to speak.

We are not a country of well-integrated souls, and we find it hard to accept the idea that what we fear most is often what we most desire; we are

not reconciled, as individuals, to what is within ourselves. This is probably why, as a society, we are not well integrated in other respects. We live among unseen sets of impassable barriers, finding on the other side people who refuse, like ourselves, to believe in the possibility of any truth but their own. When a group of people find themselves hemmed in by a barrier, like the cement highways that cordon off one group from another in Los Angeles, the natural result is the impulse to burn something down, as was duly demonstrated in the L.A. riots. But try convincing people to build bridges, not barriers. Try convincing them that art, for example, is a bridge between parts of a community. It seems not to work—the concern over ownership, like Biedermann's concern for his house, is too strong.

Every four years the pollster Louis Harris takes a survey of American attitudes toward the arts. Every four years he finds roughly the same data: that a vast majority of Americans, usually around three-fourths of his sample, favors federal support for the arts, at a much higher level than we currently have, and without any government control of content. They want greater public access, lower admission prices, more arts education for their children. On his last survey, in 1992, 69 per cent said they were willing to pay an additional \$5 in taxes per year specifically to support the arts. Consider that in the context of a Congress planning to wipe out the NEA, which receives a bare 64 cents per American in tax revenues.

And on every poll, there is one group to whom the statistics do not apply. Yes, that's right, among white men over 50 with incomes over \$75,000 a year, only 46 per cent support public funding for the arts. And

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their resistance goes up statistically with their age and income. They are also, by the way, those who say they donate most to the arts as individuals, and that most often attend publicly funded arts events. For them it is not a matter of civic pride, human pleasure, or generosity, but one of purchase and ownership, like the expensive crystal and silver which the Biedermanns try to hide when they invite the firebugs to dinner. But the firebugs know that the Biedermanns have these things, so the situation is very simple: There will be sharing, or there will be humiliation, terror, and burning. I don't like to think that the story will end for us as it does for the Biedermanns. I can only hope that, if the Twin Cities are rife with Biedermanns who view the Guthrie as their private crystal finger bowl, they will come to see *The Firebugs* and think about it. I've suggested to the president of your board, by the way, that if the NEA is destroyed by Congress, those of you who openly admit to being Republicans should be compelled to give twice as much to the theater each year as your Democratic neighbors, because it's your fault. And I hope you will think about your political views while you watch *The Firebugs*, as working on it has certainly made me think.



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