



CHAD BONAHER

In a dog-eat-dog world, Rush Rehm plays the well-fed title character, Biedermann.

It's better to set fire than to be fired in play's cruel world

By Karen D'Souza
Mercury News

Flames threaten to engulf the Pigott Theater at Stanford. Only this fire is coming straight from the stage, from the play known as "Biedermann and the Firebugs."

If Aleksandra Wolska's cerebral production takes a few beats to find its heat, there's no denying the incendiary impact of Max Frisch's 1958 play. This is an allegorical playground where firefighters charge through the void, the moon looms overhead and the homeless are accused of setting the city ablaze.

The Swiss playwright paints a smoldering portrait of a time when the few, those with money and privilege, lord their possessions over the many, masses of destitute people who wander the streets in search of shelter, solace, hope.

Gottlieb Biedermann (a solid turn by Rush Rehm) has little patience for the common man. He sits in his parlor, sipping Beaujolais and chomping on cigars while society crumbles. He's a corporate fat cat, a businessman whose wealth has been built on corruption parading as a pillar of the community. He doesn't blink when he steals an invention from one of his employees and then promptly fires him. And so what if the poor soul sticks his head in an oven over it? What fault is that of Biedermann?

On the heels of the Enron scandal, the Arthur Andersen debacle and the WorldCom fiasco (did I miss anybody?), the social echoes in this piece come through loud and clear. To what extent are we, as members of society, responsible for one another? And who will be held accountable when the institutions we trust betray us? If that all sounds a bit didactic, rest assured that it is.

This play is all about ideology. Character development definitely takes a back seat to the message at hand. Many of the characters,

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BIEDERMANN AND THE FIREBUGS

By Max Frisch

The upshot: A potent parable about crime (and other forms of class warfare) and punishment.

Producer: Stanford Summer Theater

Where: Pigott Theater, corner of Galvez Street and Memorial Way, Stanford University, Stanford

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays

Through: Aug. 11

Tickets: \$22, \$15 students and seniors; (650) 725-5838, www.stanfordtheater.org

Running time: Just under 90 minutes, no intermission

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from Biedermann's wife, Babette (Kay Kostopoulos), to the unemployed wrestler Sepp (Kevin Karrick), remain mere outlines of people.

Jarek Truszczyński, however, stands out as Willi, the mysterious homeless man who talks his way into the Biedermann household and sets about filling the foyer with barrels of gasoline. A crooked smile on his face and a devilish glint in his eye, the deft actor nails the pitch-black sense of humor that gives this play its explosive moments of comedy. He mines a mother lode of ominous wit from the line: "Everyone above a certain level of wealth is guilty of something."

Though few of the other actors have Truszczyński's flawless comic timing, Wolska's stage pictures still fill the mind with dark images and disturbing symbols. At one point, an empty oil barrel rolls ever so slowly from one end of the stage to the other.

Sound abstract? That's because this is a parable, and Frisch was not one to dwell on subtlety. But he knew something haunting about man's inhumanity to man, and that's precisely what Wolska captures onstage.

Contact Karen D'Souza at kdsouza@sjmercury.com or (408) 271-3772. Fax (408) 271-3786.