



(Clockwise) Jeff Schwartz, Kay Kostopoulos and Rush Rehm star in Stanford Summer Theatre's production of "Biedermann and the Firebugs."

A hot production

'Biedermann and the Firebugs' a solid yet searing political comedy

by Laura Reiley

When Swiss playwright Max Frisch wrote "Biedermann and the Firebugs" in 1951, he was a little disingenuous. He subtitled it, "a lesson play without a lesson."

On the heels of World War II, there was a lesson alright, and it was spread thick as marmalade and just as sticky. It was a play about the dangers of complacency, about how generally good people with generally good intentions could allow the world to run amok in the name of being polite, fastidious and law-abiding. It asked, loud and clear, how the world could have turned a blind eye to the extermination of 6 million people.

More than 50 years later, the answer to such a question is less clear.

The story goes like this: Gottlieb Biedermann is a wealthy businessman living in a city where arsonists have been burning down the houses of wealthy businessmen.

A beggar, Sepp Schmitz, arrives at the Biedermann home seeking food and shelter. Schmitz flatters him, alluding to Biedermann's deep reservoirs of decency and charity in this cold, unfeeling town. Bingo — Sepp is in, as is his buddy, Willie Eisenring. The problem is, they are arsonists, intent on burning down Biedermann's house and neighborhood. And Biedermann, so blinded by his own high-mindedness, doesn't get it until things start to sizzle.

Now in its fifth season, Stanford Summer Theater has a history of choosing difficult, thought-provoking plays without a lot of easy answers: Ionesco's "The Chairs," Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," a play based on Brecht and Weill's "When the Shark Bites" and Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." But

Theater Review

"Biedermann and the Firebugs" may be the group's most brilliant selection yet. It reveals all the unanswered questions and ambiguities that have plagued us as a nation since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. And it does so solidly, with simple staging, lively pacing and wonderful interplay between the characters.

What resonates especially in this production is the motif of fire, or, more specifically, the use of spectral firefighters vainly attempting to extinguish a raging inferno. Played by James Shelby, Mandy Khoshnevisan and Scott Lowe, these silent figures appear and reappear — hauntingly attired by costume designer Latifah Medjdoub — the clear victims in this otherwise unclear conflict. In slow motion and without a sound, they meet untimely ends, pawns in some murky drama.

And what of the drama? What should Biedermann (played with ineffectual upper crust aplomb by Rush Rehm) and his wife, Babette (Kay Kostopoulos), have done? He, so taken with his own largesse, aided, abetted and fed (on white linens, no less) a couple of arsonists, even while he swindled and then fired his own best employee, Mr. Knechtling (Jeff Schwartz).

The question in this play is not who is innocent, but who is least guilty. Sepp and his pal, Willie

(Jarek Truszczyński, who so embodied the Old Man in "The Chairs" last summer) roll in barrel after barrel of gasoline. They talk about fuses. They go to purchase sawdust to make the whole thing more combustible.

We don't know Sepp and Willie's specific beefs. Maybe it's more pathology than ideology. Suffice it to say, these arsonists are the "haves-nots," itching to light a match to all that the "haves" have and embody. (As Sepp explains, "Above a certain income, everyone is guilty one way or another.")

And when the smoke clears, Biedermann and his wife find themselves where no one wants to be for their final accounting. The writing is such that that it doesn't allow for a lot of virtuoso performances by any particular actor, save for Biedermann's maid, Anna, who has the show's only singing role (beautifully rendered by Annie Abrams). Reborn as a parrot, strutting and squawking out the play's most incendiary lines, Abrams delivers the show's most witty performance.

To this indictment, Biedermann can only respond plaintively, "We had no idea what was happening at home. I acted in good faith."

Clearly, this is not enough. □

WHAT: "Biedermann and the Firebugs," presented by Stanford Summer Theater

WHERE: Pigott Theater (formerly Little Theater), adjacent to Memorial Auditorium, Memorial Way, Stanford University

WHEN: Through Aug. 11. Show times are Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 7 p.m., with a Sunday matinee on Aug. 11 at 2 p.m.

COST: Tickets are \$22 adults; \$15 seniors/students, and are available at the Stanford Ticket Office in Treadder Student Union (650/725-ARTS), at the Pigott Theater box office (650/725-5838), or online at www.stanfordtheater.org

INFO: Call (650) 725-ARTS or visit www.stanfordtheater.org

Theater on Fire: Politics and Pyrotechnics in Performance, a complement to the Stanford Summer Theater production of "Biedermann and the Firebugs," will be presented on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Memorial Auditorium's Pigott Theater. The symposium will explore why theater is drawn to topics containing incendiary social and political content.

Participants will include Anna Deavere Smith, a professor of performance studies at New York University and former Stanford drama professor, and cast members Rush Rehm, founder of the Stanford Summer Theater and Stanford associate professor of drama and classics, and Polish National Theater Veteran Jarek Truszczyński. The play's director, Alexandra Wolaska, will also attend. Registration is \$125 and will include a catered Cajun lunch and admission to the evening's performance of "Biedermann." To register, call (650) 725-2650 or visit <http://continuingstudies.stanford.edu>