

WEEKEND PREVIEW

Post-Nazi-era dark comedy has grim parallels to Sept. 11

By Heather Knight
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

For five years, Stanford Summer Theater has injected the school's long, languishing summer months with a jolt of artistry and meaning. Its casts have taken on such weighty subjects as the Red Scare in "When the Shark Bites" and environmental devastation in "Uncle Vanya."

Not surprisingly, deciding on this summer's production proved even more difficult than usual, as the group wanted to select a play that would shed illumination on the events of Sept. 11.

"We went through the grinder on this one," said Rush Rehm, the program's director and an associate drama professor at Stanford.

After much head scratching and stomach churning, Rehm and his cohorts settled on "Biedermann and the Firebugs" by the Swiss playwright Max Frisch. The dark comedy follows Gottlieb Biedermann, the owner of a hair tonic manufacturing company who allows two suspected arsonists to stay in his home, hands them matches and then is surprised when his house burns to ashes.

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Written in 1951 as a radio play, the production originally satirized Germans who allowed Hitler and the Nazis to come to power. The play asked whether victims must at some point take responsibility for the tragedies that befall them.

Similarly, Rehm, who plays Gottlieb Biedermann, and other cast and crew believe that the United States should take a closer look at its role in Sept. 11 and the aftermath.

"We were horrified at what happened but even more horrified at the American response — the whole militarism and the right-wing agenda that came up," said Rehm, 52, of Redwood City.

Rehm, who had acted in the play during its height of popularity in the 1960s, said the character of Gottlieb Biedermann reminded him of the complacency of many Americans before the terrorist attacks.

"He seemed very much like the society that I know — comfortable, upper-middle class people who feel somehow that terror and disaster can't really touch them," he said. "They can buy their way out of it or deal with it or ignore it, whereas so much of the world can't ignore it because it touches them every day."

Onstage

"Biedermann and the Firebugs" starts at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday; 2 p.m. Aug. 11. Ends Aug. 11. \$15-\$22. Piggott Theater, Galvez and Memorial Way, Stanford. (650) 725-2787.

The play, directed by Aleksandra Wojska, required some tweaking in light of the terrorist attacks. In the original, a group of firefighters make up a satiric chorus, guarding Biedermann from his inevitable fate. But with firefighters playing such a sad, strong role in the World Trade Center rescue and cleanup, the chorus had to be refashioned into a tragic group.

Rehm describes the newly fashioned firefighters as "ghosts haunting the scenes of Biedermann's failure to stand up to things."

Much of the haunting quality comes from the spooky lighting used in the production. Chad Bonaker, who designed the lighting scheme, said he has many hopes for the show.

"I hope people are stunned by the visualness of it," said Bonaker, 26, of Sunnyvale. "I hope people are fascinated by the images we create."