The Arsonists
Background Pack

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About the production

Anna          ZAWE ASHTON
Chorus        MICHAEL BEGLEY
Biedermann    WILL KEEN
Schmitz       PAUL CHAHIDI
Eisenring     BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH
Babette       JACQUELINE DEFFERARY
Chorus        DAVID HINTON
Chorus / Doctor of Philosophy MUNIR KHAIRDIN
Chorus        CLAIRE PREMPEH
Chorus / Widow Knechtling    ALWYNE TAYLOR
Chorus Leader GRAHAM TURNER

Director      RAMI GRAY
Designer       ANTHONY WARD
Lighting Designer JOHANNA TOWN
Sound Designer  CHRISTOPHER SHUTT
Choreographer  HOFESH SHECHTER
Assistant Director KATHARINA WIENECKE
Casting Director AMY BALL
Production Manager PAUL HANDLEY
Stage Manager    TARIQ SAYYID RIFAAT
Deputy Stage Manager SARAH TRYFAN
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Stage Management Work Placement RUTH MURFITT
Costume Supervisor  IONA KENRICK
Set Built by      MIRACULOUS ENGINEERING

First performance at Royal Court Theatre on 1 November 2007
Synopsis of the play

Gottlieb Biedermann has made millions from selling hair restoring lotion (although the lotion itself doesn’t work). Biedermann lives in a town which has recently become the focus for a series of arson attacks. One day, while Biedermann is reading an account of the latest case of arson in a local newspaper, a homeless ex-wrestler called Schmitz knocks on his door, demanding to be let in. Schmitz forces his way into the house, although he is cordial, gentle and unobtrusive in his manner. Schmitz asks Biedermann if he can sleep in his attic and Biedermann agrees.

Soon, one of Shmitz’s friends, an ex-waiter by the name of Eisenring, arrives and begins to live in the attic. Throughout the night, the two visitors transport barrels of petrol into the attic. Biedermann tells Schmitz and Eisenring that he won’t allow them to use his attic for the storage of petrol and threatens to call the police. At the same moment, a policeman arrives and notifies Biedermann of the death of Knechtling, one of his employees and the inventor of the hair restoring lotion.

Gradually, the two visitors begin to settle into the house and Biedermann tries to make the best of a bad situation by becoming friends with them, hoping that by doing so they will leave him be. Schmitz and Eisenring openly announce the fact that they intend to burn down Biedermann’s house, but their host assumes that they are joking. At dinner, the characters hear a fire engine roaring past. Biedermann expresses his relief that his house is safe and hasn’t been burned down. The two visitors tell Biedermann that they always plant a false alarm on the outskirts of town to throw the fire brigade off the scent when they are planning an arson attack. They inform their host that they are planning a series of attacks in the area, with the local gasworks as their ultimate goal.

Before returning to the attic, they ask Biedermann for a box of matches which he gives them, now utterly defeated by the inevitability of what will happen.

In the play’s original epilogue, we meet Biedermann and his wife in hell, now burned to a crisp. Yes with their monumental experience behind them, they have still failed to learn anything. They refuse to believe that they are in hell, claiming that they must be in heaven. Biedermann, to the last, is naively ignorant of his own part in his destruction.
Max Frisch

1911 Max Frisch is born in Zurich, the son of an architect

1930 Frisch studies German literature at the University of Zurich, he is particularly interested in the work of Henrik Ibsen. It is here that he begins writing his first plays

1932 Frisch abandons his studies due to financial problems he suffered after the death of his father

1940 During World War II, Frisch serves periodically in the Swiss army, recording his experiences in a diary

1942 Frisch marries Gertrud Constanze von Meyenburg, they go on to have two daughters and a son

1946 Frisch keeps a diary, or Tagebuch, detailing his experience of post war Europe and composing drafts of plays and novels

1947 Frisch meets Bertold Brecht in Zurich, Brecht’s concept of the epic theatre begins to influence Frisch’s own dramatic works

1953 Frisch writes The Arsonists

1954 Frisch begins writing novels which explore alienation and identity in modern society, including I’m Not Stiller and Homo Faber

1961 The Arsonists, then known as The Fire Raisers, is given its British premiere at the Royal Court Theatre

1961 Frisch writes Andorra

1982 Frisch is awarded an honorary degree by the University of Marburg in Germany

1991 Max Frisch dies of cancer in Zurich

1933 Frisch begins working as a journalist for a major Swiss newspaper – the opinions expressed in his column are in stark contrast to the conservative views of the newspaper for which he is writing

1936 Frisch studies architecture in Zurich
Franch and Politics

Max Frisch was born and educated in Switzerland. The neutrality of his nation throughout the Second World War was a cause of concern for the writer, even though his Swiss citizenship effectively positioned him as a spectator of world events. Both he and his fellow playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt (author of The Physicists and The Visit) remained professionally unaffected by the encroachment of Nazism upon Western Europe. But Frisch chose to take an interest in the troubling events that shook the 20th century: his novels, poems and diaries reflect a deep concern with man’s capacity for violence and dogmatism.

“A man with convictions finds an answer for everything. Convictions are the best form of protection against the living truth.”

The recurring themes of his work (identity, guilt and innocence) are political in nature. Frisch often writes about his homeland, interrogating Switzerland’s conception of itself as a respected consensus democracy, a cradle of human rights and a model of liberalism. It is possible to read The Arsonists as a comment on the neutrality of Switzerland during World War II, in particular its “don’t ask, don’t tell” response to the rise of Nazism. But Frisch’s work isn’t politically didactic in the same way that Brecht’s is. Frisch is more of a moralist, preferring to invite the audience to explore the choices made by his characters, and to imagine themselves in their place.

“Strictly speaking, every citizen above a certain level of income is guilty of some offense.”

Frisch refuses to present the audience with an objective reality, claiming that reality exists only in the mind and imagination of the individual. His plays are often steeped in metaphor, often allowing for a highly poetic approach to contemporary issues. He wasn’t afraid to embrace descriptions of himself as a moralist, suggesting that the written word is powerful enough to set the tone of national debate. In his plays and novels, he remained consistently opposed to those forces who seek to stifle individuality and impose the will of the state onto the lives of citizens:

“There are all sorts of ways of murdering a person or at least his soul, and that’s something no police in the world can spot.”

In his 1946 diaries, which examined life in post war Europe, Frisch wrote that “a person who does not concern himself with politics has already made the political choice we was so anxious to spare himself: he is serving the ruling party”. It is Frisch’s insistence on an interrogation of the status quo along with his deft dramatisation of the bourgeois liberal that define his relationship with politics.
Frisch and Ideology

Unlike Brecht, Frisch subordinates abstract concepts to the claims of concrete reality. Frisch is a realist in the broadest sense of the word. “Most writing that is considered poetry”, he notes, “becomes crass irony when I confront it only for a single day with my own life”. This devotion to encountered reality and to truth make it impossible for Frisch to reconcile all that he knows within a neat system of questions and answers. Life is far too complicated to be solved by an easy formula. “I am here to ask questions, not to answer them”. Frisch continues: “As a playwright, I would consider my task completely fulfilled if I should ever succeed, in a play, in posing a question in such a way that the audience, from that moment on, could not live without an answer - without their answer, their own, which they can give themselves only with life itself”.

He offered much the same justification to a friend who reproached him for holding open the wounds of the war in his writings: “In my opinion the real misfortune is: to bandage wounds that are still festering - and they are festering - to forget things that have not been penetrated, understood, overcome, and that are not yet gone”. For this reason his plays are problematic; they ask questions that reach into the hearts of our existence, but make no attempt to give simple answers.

Frisch felt compelled to reject all ideology. To be sure, he exploits drama for its didactic effect, but instead of using drama for the presentation of an ideology, Frisch is explicitly anti-ideological in all his writing. In his acceptance speech for the Georg Buchner prize in 1958, he proclaimed his belief in an art that that is “not national and not international, but even more: namely a constantly exercised ban against abstraction, against ideology and against its pernicious fronts”. In his plays Frisch has attacked what might be called both the humanistic and the totalitarian fallacies.

In his diary, Frisch notes “A person can set out to bring about and expedite what is good - or one can attempt to become a good man - these are two different things and they are mutually exclusive. Most people want to be good people. No one is more delighted than the evil person if we want to become good men. As long as people who desire good do not, for their part, become evil, the evil man has a splendid time of it”.

Adapted from ‘Max Frisch: Moralist Without A Moral’ by Theodore Ziolkowski
A letter from Frisch

Here are some extracts from a letter which Frisch sent to Lindsay Anderson, the director of the play's British premiere at the Royal Court in 1961

What cast do you have? It is a comedy where the laughter gets frozen, and this can only happen if the part of Biedermann is acted in a way that we, the audience, are forced to recognize ourselves in this fellow, that's important. Of 75 German productions I saw only three, Zurich, Munich and Frankfurt: two of them were running wrong because Biedermann was too dull or, in one case, too small, a little coward instead of a heavy and fine bourgeois boss with a very very normal self confidence, sure that he will arrange it.

After Biedermann’s meeting with the chorus, there is the point where he is no longer a harmless liar, now he sees the situation, making the invitation to the [arsonists] he is full of fear (this has to be shown otherwise he is just an idiot) and a dangerous fellow, somebody who wants to make a contract with evil, the recognized evil.

Another point: please start the play very slowly, for instance if Biedermann offers the first cigar, because of embarrassment, because there stands a man who doesn’t talk, because there is a large pause. The same when he offers bread and wine; he is only embarrassed and polite, of course, a gentleman. Then, after the story with the employee, he has to go on because of his bad conscience, that is the second step.

Did you see the Paris production? There it was wrong, you could not see the steps, he was a blind idiot from beginning to end. And the end: when Biedermann says his last sentence (about matches and [arsonists]) of course, he does no longer believe that, it is not stupidity, he only tries to keep his mask, trembling himself.
Original reviews

The Illustrated London News
“A simple satirical parable of the modern world in which to temporize is fatal. Once begin to treat with a thug, and you are finished. He must be hit, and immediately. That, at any rate, is the ideal solution: Frisch knows how hopelessly a petty business dictator, a kind of Everyman - though one would hate to think of him as in any way typical - falters and fails when he has to meet the fire raisers in his own home.”

The Tatler
“Its theme is that big catastrophes have small beginnings and perhaps need not happen but for man’s incurably optimistic belief that he at least may gain some personal advantage by appeasing the maniacs who threaten (quite incredibly, of course) to bring them about.”

New Statesman
“It’s almost impossible to withstand the theatrical pull of the narrative … The surface messages are clearly enunciated in Brechtian fashion by both chorus and principals. Fate should not be blamed for the mistakes of men. Each day man has the arson of the world explained in headlines on his breakfast table, but he is blind to the fire raisers under his own roof … There are claims in Lindsay Anderson’s production that we should identify the fire-raisers with the Nazis, at least with the military robots who serve the commercial machine. But the text seems clearly to blazon them as the out of control agents of left wing radicalism, as the runaway thugs of an idealism gone mad.”

The Times
“The weakness of [the play] is that it makes everything too simple … As propaganda this is two-edged, double faced and useless. It is all very well to say, come to no compromise with the fire raisers. But who are they? If this piece is played in Moscow the answer is Kennedy; if in New York, Khrushchev. The message changes with the geography.”

The Observer
“It is one of the rare works that are sustained from first too last by a central and ravenously urgent idea. It is a beautiful formal mechanism, a wound spring whose nature is simply to uncoil … It says much of one’s own bourgeois reactions that the destruction of Mr Biedermann’s bit of property is more appalling than his death would have been. But, of course, the house is more than a materialist symbol; it also represents the rational fortifications of the ego that await demolition from the mindless id, that dreaded intruder of modern drama. The play is as close to Pinter as it is to Brecht.”

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Background to the play

The Arsonists began its life as a prose sketch in Frisch’s 1946 diary, a response to the coup in Czechoslovakia and the creation of a socialist republic (although, of course, Frisch’s initial idea was also influenced by the rise of Nazism). In 1953, Frisch reworked the sketch into a radio play entitled Mr Biedermann and the Arsonists. It wasn’t until 1958 that Frisch completed the stage version of the play (to which he gave the subtitle ‘an instructive play without a lesson’, and which Alistair Beaton has translated as ‘a moral play without a moral’).

In 1948, Communist forces seized power in Czechoslovakia. In some countries, the threat posed by the Communists was not even noted, despite the brutality and violence of which the new regime was clearly capable. The governments of Western Europe turned a blind eye to the danger posed by Communism, often refusing to engage with the politics of the Iron Curtain. Perhaps the seeming indifference to the fate of the Czech people formed the basis of Frisch’s early sketch.

The play can also be read as a parable of the rise of Nazism under Adolf Hitler. Just as Biedermann helps Eisenring to construct a fuse and hands Schmitz a box of matches with which he will ultimately set fire to the house, several countries in Western Europe refused to acknowledge the threat posed by Adolf Hitler until it was too late, actively contributing to their own misfortune. It was not until the Reichstag fire in 1933 that governments around the world started to engage with the ambitions of the Nazis. In this sense, Biedermann can be read as a representation of the cowardice or lack of vision both of Western Europe and of the many Germans who supported the Nazis, either actively or passively.

The Arsonists is in many respects a typical work of post war literature: like his fellow countryman, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Max Frisch writes about alienation and the struggle for personal identity. Frisch’s work is often characterised by his masterful use of irony and his preoccupation with issues of morality and responsibility. Some critics have been tempted to read the play as a piece about what happens when the economically and socially marginalised “start lashing out at their supposed betters, one nicely appointed apartment block at a time”. In any case, Frisch’s decision not to set the action in a particular time or place affords each new generation a chance to reinvent the play for their age.
A writer’s view

Simon Vinnicombe, a playwright whose work has been performed in London and around the UK, observed the rehearsals for The Arsonists. Here he describes what he saw.

This play is a bit nuts. It’s got a chorus in it, which talks to the audience. Biedermann talks to the chorus, his wife talks to the audience, Biedermann talks to the audience. At one point someone in the play even takes a seat in the auditorium.

When I first read it I thought it was a very atmospheric play, sinister even. Then I had another read and thought it was funny. I read it again, and this time all of the political meaning of the play leapt out at me. The confusion wasn’t just mine. It’s really interesting to watch this sort of play being attacked in rehearsals. Actors look for character motivation, something to hang their hat on when they start working. Maybe they look for the emotional journey of their character through the play or even just try and piece together a bit of the characters history and where they come from. This all becomes confused when a play is as overtly theatrical as this one.

When you start to think that everything in the play is for the audience and to the audience, the play begins to make an awful lot of sense. It makes a real event out of a play and being in a theatre. A night at the theatre is someone’s night out. It’s really easy to forget this when you start being all serious and earnest with your writing. You spend so much time and energy trying to disguise the fact that your play will take place in a theatre. It’s interesting to see what can be done when you do the opposite.

What’s clever about the piece is that it isn’t holding the audience hand through the piece, like panto, (or something equally scary) the audience are never given the comfort of knowing the rules. There are plenty of surprises and shifts throughout the piece. I always think that there are a load of tools available to a playwright and it’s important to use them to the full potential when making your play. Max Frisch was tooled up like Rambo in Rambo 3 when he wrote this play.

It’s been very liberating to watch it through rehearsal and to have your thinking about writing changed by it. I’m off to write a play with a great big chorus.
Writing activities

Creating a chorus

In *The Arsonists*, Max Frisch makes use of a chorus – an ancient theatrical convention which allows the playwright to comment on the action of the play.

“In classical Greek drama, the group of actors who jointly comment on the main action or advise the main characters. The action in Greek plays took place offstage; the chorus kept the audience informed about the plot when the principals were offstage. The chorus did not always speak in unison; it was common for members of the chorus to show some individuality.”

Rather than creating a chorus whose job it is to watch and comment on the action from a disinterested perspective, Frisch creates a chorus of firefighters. By choosing to populate the chorus with firefighters, he gives the audience an insight into the themes of the play, and gives to chorus a clearly defined role: protecting the population of the town.

Ask students to imagine a scenario in which something dramatic is occurring offstage. Challenge the students to create their own chorus, who inform the audience of what is going on and comment on the action. The chorus could, like that in *The Arsonists*, be made up of professionals. Alternatively, it could be composed of a group of people who might live or socialise together.

Encourage students to find a relationship between the members of the chorus and the nature of what is happening offstage:

e.g. a chorus of firefighters who have witnessed two arsonists preparing to set fire to a house

Possible ideas for choruses might include:

- A chorus of football supporters
- A chorus of office workers
- A chorus of circus performers
- A chorus of traffic wardens
The Everyman

In German, the name of the main character in *The Arsonists* translates as ‘Mr Average’ or ‘Everyman’. Ask students to use the internet to research facts and figures about the average British male, including:

- Height
- Weight
- Car he drives
- Number of children he has
- Most popular name for men
- Favourite food
- Favourite holiday destination

Then ask students to write a monologue from the perspective of the ‘British Everyman’ in which they talk about their life. They could be:

- Boasting about their life
- Angry at how ‘normal’ their life is
- Desperate to break free of the normality of his life
- Keen to convince other people to be more like him

Make sure that each of these monologues has a central ‘gesture’ or idea. Then ask the students to read out or perform their ‘British Everyman’ monologues to the rest of the class. What do the students think characterises the temperament of the everyman they have created.
The Uninvited Guest

The plot of The Arsonists revolves around two men who arrive unexpectedly at the home of Biedermann and proceed to move in. One of the key scenes in the play takes place at a dinner party which Biedermann throws for the two guests – he hopes that by showing them some hospitality, he will be able to befriend them, meaning that they’ll be less likely to burn his house down.

One of the themes of the play is ‘politeness’ – because Biedermann doesn’t want to be rude to the two strangers, he ends up harbouring arsonists in his house.

Ask students to imagine that two guests have arrived unexpectedly at a dinner party – challenge them to make the guests as different as possible from the hosts:

e.g. the hosts are committed Christians, the guests are Satanists
   e.g. the hosts are obsessed with hygiene, the guests are cave people
   e.g. the hosts are high flying business people, the guests are anti-capitalist protesters

Encourage students to write a scene set at a dinner party in which the hosts try and be as polite as possible to the uninvited guests, while the guests do everything in their power to disrupt the dinner and annoy their hosts.
Design challenge

Building the Biedermann house

Designing a set for The Arsonists presents many challenges—not least of which is the fact that the house Biedermann lives in is blown up at the end of the play. In Ramin Gray’s production of the play at the Royal Court, the designer Anthony Ward has decided not to build a ‘literal’ version of the house on stage. Instead, he has tried to find a way of bringing the play to life in a more abstracted space.

Much of the play’s action relies on the fact that Biedermann’s guests are occupying the attic, while he and his family attempt to get on with their lives downstairs. This upstairs / downstairs dynamic is crucial to both the plot and the atmosphere of the play.

Challenge students to design an attic and a lounge or dining room. Ask students to experiment with different ways of arranging the two rooms to increase the tension between the Biedermanns and their guests. Should these two spaces be arranged:

- Side by side
- One directly on top of the other
- On a diagonal

Should the attic be smaller or larger than the room it sits on top of? How should the two guests transport the petrol drums up to the attic?

Choosing the materials to build the house from is important: ask students to list as many flammable substances and materials as possible before encouraging them to design a house made up entirely of flammable, hazardous and dangerous substances.

Ask students to reflect on the dramatic effect of building Biedermann’s house out of materials which are likely to catch fire easily.
Acting exercises

Making a chorus

Give students an extract from one of the choric sections of The Arsonists. Ask groups of students to experiment with different ways of staging this speech, including:

- Speaking in unison
- Dividing the lines up among the group
- Speaking the speech as if it were a chant
- Observing the rhythm of the line endings
- Speaking the speech as if it were a normal conversation
- Facing the audience
- Setting the speech in the fire fighters’ common room

Citizens of this town
Observe us, the guardians of this town
Watching
Listening
Always well-disposed
Towards the well disposed citizen.
Who in the end pays our wages.
Our equipment all gleaming
We circle your home
Watchful
Yet never thinking the worst.
Sometimes we stop,
Take the weight off our feet,
But never in order to sleep.
We are untiring.
Watching
Listening
So the combustible threat
Hidden from sight
Is revealed
Before it’s too late
To put out the flames.
Useful links

Wikipedia
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Frisch
Read about the life and work of Max Frisch. Find out about his early life as a writer, his experiences in the army and the critical acclaim which greeted his work.

Fire Service
www.fireservice.co.uk/
Get an insight into the work of the Fire Service, tips on fire safety and information about the most common causes of fire in the UK.

Arson Prevention Bureau
www.arsonpreventionbureau.org.uk/
Get facts and statistics on arson attacks in the UK. Read advice on preventing arson attacks and investigate the impact of arson on homes and businesses.

Newsround
news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4940000/newsid_4944200/4944242.stm
A student’s guide to the recent spate of arson attacks in schools around the country. Find out about how arsonists are sentenced and investigate safety procedures.

CIA World Factbook
Explore the history and geography of Switzerland, the country Frisch called home. Research population information and discover the country’s significant landmarks.

Brainy Quote
www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/max_frisch.html
A site giving students access to several key quotations from Frisch’s novels, plays and diaries.