Study Guide: *The Arsonists*

**BY:** Max Frisch  
**IN A NEW TRANSLATION BY:** Alistair Beaton  
**DIRECTED BY:** Morris Panych  
**ORIGINAL MUSIC BY:** Justin Rutledge

November 11 – December 9, 2012

Overview and Classroom Activities
Study Guide: The Arsonists

A letter to teachers and students:

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives. Sharing art diversifies our conversations. Max Frisch’s The Arsonists is a dark comedy that prompts serious questions around how our greater society can have a negative impact over individuals.

Originally written in German by Swiss playwright Max Frisch and translated by Alistair Beaton, this post-WWII farce tells the story of Gottlieb Biedermann, a bourgeoisie businessman. When two strangers weasel their way into his home, he is pretty sure that they are the arsonists who have already torched much of his small town. Biedermann initially turns a blind eye to these men’s evil intentions and his self-imposed ignorance leads to him become an accomplice to his own downfall. This wildly funny play effectively displays the risk of shying away from political and social responsibility.

This is the Canadian debut of Frisch’s work and is being brought to life by director Morris Panych and set designer Ken MacDonald, the creative team behind Canadian Stage’s 2009 runaway hit Art. Their version of this “fantastical fable”, in Panych’s words, presents an idealized setting with no location or time specified. Although The Arsonists was evidently inspired by historical events its vagueness allows for conversations far beyond the incidents outlined in this guide. The result is a relatable and relevant theatrical experience for learners from all backgrounds. A fabulous cast including stage favourites Michael Ball, Sheila McCarthy and Fiona Reid, original live music from Justin Rutledge and an exquisite set ensure that students will surely be engaged in this production.

This “moral play without a moral” will prompt students to consider the state of their communities and how their own actions and reactions will affect their surroundings. In addition there are many lessons to be learned with connections to history, drama, English, philosophy, psychology, and economics curriculums. I am certain that this original production of the hilarious script will serve as a productive teaching tool in any classroom with themes that will inspire significant moral reflection among students.

See you at the theatre!

Cheers,

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This study guide is created to be a helpful resource for teachers by providing background and thematic information about this play as well as practical activities to use in your classroom. You are encouraged to draw information directly from it as well as to use it as a roadmap for further exploration. In it you will find:

- Synopsis and Character List
- Theatrical Context
- Historical Context
- Study Links
- Critical Exploration
- Classroom Activities

STUDY GUIDE: The Arsonists
A Student’s Guide to Live Theatre

Here are your responsibilities:

1. Thank you in advance for turning off your cell phone, iPod, iPhone and anything else that makes noise before entering the theatre. These items distract the actors, your classmates and you! They can also affect our in-house technical signals and spoil the show. This is a common courtesy. Vibrate/silent is not the same as off.

2. No texting! Because your phone is off you will need to wait until intermission to update your Facebook status (and when you login, link to Canadian Stage at www.facebook.com/cdnstage) or tweet to us @canadianstage to tell us your thoughts.

3. No headphones of any sort. Listening to your own media is not only rude, but distracting to those around you.

4. In order to respect our theatre and you, our patrons, we only allow water in the theatre and no other food or drinks.

5. Please refrain from talking during the performance - the actors and the audience will hear you! (Laugh when it’s funny, cry when it’s sad. Otherwise, zip it!)

6. Please sit in the seat assigned to you. If you sit elsewhere the seating for everyone is disrupted.

7. Represent your school and yourself well with good behavior. Theatre is awesome. You should be too!

8. Keep an open mind and think critically. Theatre is engaging and challenging. Be prepared to examine what you see rather than judge it. You’ll be surprised how much you learn, even about yourself, when you try to see things differently.

9. Enjoy the show and come again soon!
**The Arsonists**

**Synopsis**

The city has a problem. Arsonists are burning down houses all over town.

“It’s the same story every time: someone at the door trying to sell you something, ends up being invited in. Wangles his way into staying overnight. Gets offered a corner of the attic to sleep in. Incredible…” (Biedermann in The Arsonists)

Gottlieb Biedermann is sure it could never happen to him, but when a mysterious stranger (Schmitz) comes knocking on his door, Biedermann invites him in out of politeness and a sense of moral generosity. Schmitz is soon joined by a second stranger (Eisenring). The two set about filling the Biedermanns’ attic with petrol. Biedermann, unwilling to recognize the evil taking place in front of his eyes, helps the two measure the fuse, and even goes so far as to hand them the very match that will lead to his destruction. All the while, the ever-ready chorus of firefighters is standing by, watching and waiting.

Written in the years following World War II, this dark comedy brings to light the human tendency towards complacency in the face of evil.

**Character List**

**Gottlieb Biedermann** – A successful businessman and generally moral citizen, Biedermann is convinced he could never be taken in by the arsonists. Yet, as the play goes on, he continues to turn a blind eye to the evil going on around him. “Biedermann” literally translates to “every man.”

**Babette Biedermann** – Biedermann’s wife.

**Eisenring** – One of the arsonists staying in Biedermann’s attic. A slick former waiter with a mysterious history of arson, he wastes no time preparing to burn down the Biedermann home.

**Schmitz** – A former wrestler, jailbird, and Eisenring’s accomplice, Schmitz also makes himself at home in the Biedermanns’ attic and assists in the fiery plot.

**Anna** – The Biedermanns’ maid.

**The Doctor of Philosophy** - The Doctor of Philosophy represents academia. He attempts to take a removed, unbiased stance to the arsonists’ activity and consequently becomes an accomplice to the destruction.
The Chorus of Firefighters – Watchkeepers of the city, the firefighters are constantly on guard, observing the action of the play and preparing for the worst.

Theatrical Context

*The Arsonists* (German: *Biedermann und die Brandstifter*) was originally written in German as a radio play by Max Frisch in 1953. It was subsequently adapted for the stage in 1958 and its many translations have found success throughout international theatres. The play did not drastically change in its transition from radio to stage - the most notable adjustment Frisch made was the introduction of a chorus.

Greek Chorus

The chorus is a fascinating theatrical convention typically associated with ancient Greek theatre. Historically, the chorus was a group of 12-50 actors who shared a collective voice. Usually through song, their main function was to mediate between the audience and the action on-stage by providing background information and dramatic reactions to the play’s events. Their role was considered passive though since they never directly impacted the storyline.

In *The Arsonists*, Frisch introduces a group of firemen reminiscent of a Greek chorus. Frisch’s chorus, however, is fundamentally different than those used by Sophocles and his peers. Whereas a traditional Greek chorus reported on the action on stage from a distance, this fire squad often engages in the play’s action. By playing with the conventions of a chorus, Frisch effectively emphasizes the fact that the play is a farce.

In some ways the chorus does serve a traditional function: most notably, a Greek chorus was responsible for communicating a play’s moral to the audience. *The Arsonists* concludes with the chorus presenting lessons that may be learned from the play’s action. Another parallel may be noted in the choice to cast musicians as the firemen for Canadian Stage’s production. How appropriate then that Justin Rutledge, the show’s composer, plays the Chorus Leader in this production.

Brecht Effect

German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht and Max Frisch are known to have met in 1947 according to the detailed journals that Frisch kept. Although similarities in their styles of storytelling pre-date this encounter, Brecht’s influence on Frisch’s writing is undeniable.

Brecht is best known for pioneering a theatrical technique called “epic theatre.” The primary concern of this style of writing was to create a distance between the spectator and the action on
stage. In other words, Brecht wanted his audience to always be aware of the fact that they were witnessing a play. This was extraordinarily different than the naturalistic plays of the time that aimed to touch audiences authentically and make the action feel real and relatable. Brecht believed that by removing the spectator from a play’s events, audience members would be able to more objectively reflect on what they witnessed. This concept was dubbed “verfremdungseffekt” which translates to “the alienation effect.”

While Frisch adopted many of Brecht’s devices to morally influence his audiences, their political views remained distinct. Furthermore, whereas Brecht presented political views in his learning-plays, called “lehrestucke,” Frisch’s works were not politically didactic. Frisch did not believe, as Brecht did, that the theatre could be a tool for political education; instead, he preferred to write work that posed critical moral questions which forced his audience to look inwards and evaluate themselves.

**Frisch and Ideology**

from the [Royal Court Theatre Background Package on The Arsonists](#)

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

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.” His plays...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.”

Historical Context

It is an accepted fact that as a playwright, Max 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” (Royal Court background pack, “Frisch and Politics”). This is emphasized by his choice not to set The Arsonists in a specific time or place. His exclusion of these details in the script ensures that the play remains timeless and relevant to diverse audiences.

The Arsonists first existed as an entry in Frisch’s diary in 1946, became a radio play called Mr Biedermann and the Arsonists in 1953 and finally evolved into a play for the stage in 1958. There are several historical events that occurred throughout the span of the play’s development that are known to have impacted Frisch.

The rise of Communism in Czechoslovakia
Adapted from the Royal Court Theatre Background Pack on The Arsonists

In 1948, Communist forces seized power in Czechoslovakia. This socialist regime lasted until the Velvet Rovolution in 1989. For 41 years there was a steady economic deterioration and suppression of human rights.

In some places the threat posed by the Communists was ignored, despite the brutality and violence that this new regime was clearly capable of. Governments in Western Europe ignored the danger posed by Communism and often refused to engage with the politics of the Iron Curtain. The continent was split politically. The seeming indifference to the fate of the Czech people may have easily been the basis of Frisch’s earliest diary prose.

The Rise of the Nazi Party
From the Royal Court Theatre Background Pack on The Arsonists

The Arsonists 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 Biedermann house, several countries in Western Europe refused to acknowledge the threat posed by Adolf Hitler until it was too late, effectively 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.

**Switzerland’s neutrality during WWII**

From the Royal Court Theatre Background Pack on *The Arsonists*

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.

**About the Playwright: Max Frisch**

Adapted from *Encyclopedia of World Biography*

Swiss novelist and playwright Max Frisch was born May 15, 1911, in Zurich and was raised in a conventional middle-class setting. Following his father’s sudden death in 1933, Frisch was forced to abandon his studies in Germanic philology and literature at the University of Zurich and become a journalist to support himself and his mother. When WWII broke out in 1939, Frisch was drafted into the army. Due to the neutral status of Switzerland he managed to maintain an observer status during WWII. The diary Frisch kept during the war years was published in 1940 as *Blätter aus dem Brotsack* (*Pages from a Knapsack*). He earned a university diploma in architecture, a field he pursued successfully after his army service through 1954. One of his commissions was from the city of Zurich to create the Zurich Recreational Park. Frisch wrote his first play, the symbolic German *Bin, or the Voyage to Peking*, in 1944, and began writing again, in earnest, shortly after WWII. His two most famous plays, *Andorra*, and *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*The Arsonists*), were written during this period.

Frisch’s works explore the nature of human identity, individuality, and responsibility, and are characterized by the recurring theme of responsibility and guilt. The inability of intellectuals to expose evil and take a stand against it appears to Frisch to be a major factor in the rise and supremacy of Nazism. Influenced by playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, the playwright
believed that the stage should not allow the audience to escape into an illusion of reality. Characters alternately enact their roles and step out of them, thus confronting the audience directly with the issues at hand. The actors in his plays portrayed allegorical figures, frequently wearing masks to conceal their real identities and thus achieving loss of individuality.

He received many honors and awards for his plays and fiction from foundations and universities around the world. Among the later ones were: the German Book Trade Freedom Prize, 1976; commander, Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, 1985; Commonwealth Award, Modern Language Association, 1985; and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, 1986. In 1986 Frisch stopped writing because of failing health. He died in Zurich at the age of 80 on April 4, 1991.

About the Translator: Alistair Beaton
www.answers.com

Alistair Beaton (born 1947) is a Scottish left wing political satirist, journalist, radio presenter, novelist and television writer. At one point in his career he was also a speechwriter for Gordon Brown.

Born in Glasgow, Beaton was educated at the Universities of Edinburgh, Moscow and Bochum and graduated from the University of Edinburgh with First Class Honours in Russian and German. He lives in Holloway, London.

Study Links
Curriculum connection points and sample discussion questions. These questions may be used to prompt conversations in your classroom.

Drama
Frisch dubbed The Arsonists “a moral play without a moral.” What is a moral play? What does this subtitle mean?

Within The Arsonists, Frisch utilizes a chorus of firemen that is based on the choruses seen in ancient Greek plays. What are the similarities and differences in the structure of these choruses? What are the similarities and differences in their functions?

How is The Arsonists influenced by the work and techniques developed by Bertolt Brecht? Specifically, Brecht was concerned with “lehrstruck” or “teaching piece.” Does Frisch’s subtitle “moral play without a moral” reject or support this presumed influence?

What are the characteristics of The Arsonists that categorize it as a farce?
English
What is the definition of a tragic hero? In what ways is Biedermann a tragic hero? Can you think of similar characters in other literary works?

Frisch uses distinct rhythms in writing his characters’ versus and the chorus’ verses. What patterns does he utilize and how do they vary? What impact does this have on how the characters are perceived?

In one of Frisch’s versions of the play, he included an afterpiece in which Beidermann and Babette are at the gates of Hell, greeted by Eisenring and Schmitz who are revealed to be the Devil and Beelzebub respectfully. The Biedermanns are confused as to why they are there, as they believe they were good people who never did anything wrong – Alistair Beaton’s translation of the play leaves out the afterpiece, ending with the Biedermann’s house burning down. What is the dramatic effect achieved by ending the story with the afterpiece? Without the afterpiece?

Philosophy
Throughout the play it becomes evident that Biedermann feels invincible to evil since he believes that he is a kind, upstanding citizen. According to the philosopher Edmund Burke, “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” How does this quote directly relate to the play? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Are there examples of current issues that could be related to this idea?

History
Identify what events Frisch was commenting on when he wrote The Arsonists.

How did Hitler rise to power? What support was there for Nazism? What other responses were there in society at the time?

Consider Switzerland during the rise of fascism and neutrality during WWII. What does it mean to be a neutral country? How did Switzerland’s neutrality affect the warring nations in Europe?

Experts suggest that Frisch was concerned with the situation in Czechoslovakia and the phasing out of democracy during the beginning of Russian domination. What was President Benes’ role in this transition? Which character may he best be compared to?

Can you identify more modern examples of worldly events that this story can be related to?
Psychology
Sigmund Freud presents denial as a strategy for self-preservation in dealing with difficult situations. What are examples of denial for preservation in *The Arsonists*? What is the psychology at work behind the human tendency to turn a blind eye to horrific events as long as one is not personally involved?

Leadership
In what ways do communication styles affect the characters in the play?

The show is a commentary on the downfalls of being passive when action is required. What prevented Biedermann from standing up to the arsonists? In what ways do we justify our decisions to remain passive?

Why is it sometimes hard to do the right thing? Is it important to do so?

Economics
Discuss Biedermann’s attitude towards his fired employee. Describe the economic stabilizers used in Canada that help mitigate financial crises caused by unemployment. What are the economic rights of employees, and how are they balanced by the economic reality facing small businesses?

Critical Exploration

1. A moral play without a moral
Frisch subtitled *The Arsonists* “ein Lehrstuck ohne Lehre” which translates to “a moral play without a moral.” Ironically, Frisch’s subtitle references Brecht’s idea of “lehrstruck” or “teaching piece.” Frisch was influenced by, but ultimately rejected most of, Brecht’s ideas. Furthermore, Frisch claims that this “teaching piece” is “without a lesson.” Frisch’s choice of subtitle may be better understood with a close look at morality plays and further inspection of his work’s intentions.

What is a Morality Play?
Moral or morality plays originated in Medieval Europe. An evolution from mystery plays, this new genre allowed playwrights to stray from existing storylines found in the Bible and to teach lessons through original tales. Details were kept vague in order to increase accessibility. For example, moral plays utilized archetypes: representations of vices and challenges personified by allegorical, unnamed characters. A popular example of this genre is *Everyman* written in the late 15th century.
What makes *The Arsonists* a Morality Play?

There are many ways one may justify categorizing *The Arsonists* as a morality play. For one, the play is written as a parable, a simple story with an underlying subtext designed to teach a lesson (see: *The Arsonists* as a Metaphor). Although the lesson is left ambiguous, its structure is clearly reflective of traditional morality plays. A specific example is Frisch’s choice to not dictate a specific setting. This ambiguity ensures that the universal message of the play remains accessible for all audiences. In addition, Frisch utilizes stock character types who are representative of greater societal groups.

- **Biedermann** – The German word “Biedermann” literally translates to “everyman.” In literature and drama, the term “everyman” has come to mean an ordinary individual with whom the audience or reader is supposed to be able to identify easily, and who is often placed in extraordinary circumstances. The name derives from the 15th century English morality play called *Everyman*. Other examples of the everyman character include Ted Mosby in the comedy series *How I Met Your Mother*, Jack in the film *Fight Club*, Winston Smith in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the popular character Harry Potter in the *Harry Potter* series.

- **Eisenring** – The Trickster – A clever, cunning and mischievous character who deceives others for his own gains. Other examples: Puss-in-Boots, Road Runner, The Fox from *Pinocchio*, The Riddler from *Batman*.

- **Schmitz** – The Sidekick - A “sidekick” is defined as a close companion who is generally regarded as subordinate to the one he accompanies. Examples include Joker’s Harley Quinn, Jigsaw’s Amanda, Magneto’s Mystique

- **The Doctor of Philosophy** – The Intellectual/Scholar

*The Arsonists* as a Metaphor

*The Arsonists* is intended as an allegory. There are endless theories about which specific historical event Frisch was inspired by though one may speculate that he was affected by events related to WWII given when he wrote the work. The fact that the inspiration for this piece is vague makes it relevant for audiences despite their familiarity with historical events. Furthermore, Frisch’s lack of a stated political position allows viewers to critically consider his characters’ actions and choices in a personal and relatable manner. In fact, Frisch was generally against theatre being didactic and was more concerned with presenting questions that the audience must answer individually. *The Arsonists* explores morals that are transitional and universal. Translator Alistair Beaton discusses the show’s contemporary relevance in an article in the *UK Guardian*, found at the end of this Study Guide.

From The Royal Court Background Pack:

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.

2. The question of social responsibility – passively accepting evil

Social responsibility is a recently conceived awareness that the behaviours of an individual or collective affect society’s sustainable development. “This responsibility can be passive, by avoiding engaging in socially harmful acts, or active, by performing activities that directly advance social goals.” (wikipedia social responsibility) In The Arsonists, Biedermann, a business owning bourgeoisie, acts in a manner that may be criticized for being socially irresponsible. He seems ignorant to the fact that the threat of arson in the town around him may affect him personally and as a result he comes across as unconcerned. For this reason, he continues to actively assist Schmitz and Eisenring’s evil cause.

The Bystander

Edmund Burke, an Irish political philosopher who is often regarded as the father of modern conservatism, once wrote, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

Throughout history, individuals and groups have engaged in evil to the detriment of society around them and sometimes even served, like Biedermann, as an accomplice to their own downfall. There also exists countless examples of people turning a blind eye to the evils around them. Is watching passively the same as engaging? According to Frisch’s 1946 diaries: “a person who does not concern himself with politics has already made the political choice he was so anxious to spare himself: he is serving the ruling party.”

The dangers of serving as a bystander due to a lack of personal threat may be best summated in the famous prose of Martin Niemöller, written after WWII:

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First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.
    Then they came for the socialists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.
    Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.
        Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.
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Text according to Martin-Niemoller-Foundation
http://www.martin-niemoeller-stiftung.de/4/daszitat/a31
According to Martin Luther King Jr.: “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.”

**The Chorus as a Metaphor**

The chorus was considered a character in the play. Though traditionally they were passive, in unique situations the chorus has dialogue with the other characters and be able to affect the action on stage.

In *The Arsonists*, the chorus of firefighters is reminiscent of a typical chorus from Greek theatre, acting as observers, sitting in judgement of the action on stage. However, Frisch’s use of such a convention is deliberately ironic and he emphasizes this by breaking the convention. Throughout the play, the chorus remarks on the action of the play, emphasizing the role of fate and reinforcing the idea that citizens are powerless to stop the fires of the arsonists, when it is clear to the viewer that Biedermann’s own actions are leading to his demise. Despite occasional questioning of Biedermann’s decisions, including a comical scene where they interact directly with him, the chorus ultimately stands on the decision that fate is to blame, thus supporting Biedermann’s denial and justification of his complacency. The chorus is also constantly reaffirming its position: “We are ready.” Rather than engaging themselves in the prevention of fires, they are standing in wait, ready to step in and clean up the mess afterwards. In this way they can be seen as a representation of the society at large, and a critique of the bystander who comments on the inaction of others and yet does nothing to help them.

3. **The Tragic Hero**

In Aristotle’s definition of tragedy he identifies the tragic hero as an essential element. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must possess five qualities:

1. He is usually of noble birth, or in a position of power. (If he starts at the bottom, he has nowhere to fall.)
2. He must possess “hamartia” - a.k.a. a tragic flaw that eventually leads to his downfall. This flaw is a natural human weakness. He bears no responsibility for possessing this flaw, but instead for the actions that come of it.
3. He must experience an incident of “peripeteia” - a reversal of fortune brought about by the hero's tragic flaw.
4. His fate is brought about by his own actions and as such results in an increase of self-awareness and self-knowledge. His downfall is usually due in some way to excessive pride (“hubris”).
5. The audience must feel pity and fear for this character (catharsis).
Biedermann as a Tragic Hero

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

Although this production is a modern interpretation, Biedermann fulfills many of the requirements of the classical tragic hero.

1. He is usually of noble birth...: Biedermann is not a king or nobleman, but he is a well established businessman. Evidence of his wealth, or bourgeois status, is apparent in the fine things around the home and the fact that he employs a maid, Anna.

2. He must possess “hamartia”...: Biedermann’s tragic flaw is his ability to turn a blind eye to the evil going on around him because he does not want to be personally implicated. His denial, complacency, and eventual appeasement to the guilty parties are tactics grown out of his pride. He is convinced that he is a good person and therefore cannot be taken in by evil. He fails to take responsibility for his own fate, instead blaming society.

3. The plot must contain a moment of peripeteia...: Biedermann has undeniably affected his fate through his own actions. He shelters and feeds the arsonists, helps them measure the fuse, and even hands them a pack of matches – all of which directly result in his destruction. Frisch plays with the idea of fate through the lines of the chorus. Strong irony is used when referring to the hand of fate, as it is clear to the audience that Biedermann’s actions are responsible for his downfall.

4. ... His downfall is usually due in some way to excessive pride (hubris): Frisch describes Biedermann as “a heavy and fine bourgeois boss with a very normal self confidence, sure that he will arrange it” (A letter from Frisch, Royal Court). This assurance is precisely what leads to his demise.

5. The audience must feel pity and fear for this character (catharsis): Witnessing Biedermann’s actions with a anticipation of their inevitable consequences inspires fear and pity in the audience. As a character who represents the everyman, audience members are meant to see themselves in Biedermann and recognize their own tragic flaws.
Classroom Activities

Shared from the Royal Court Theatre Background Pack

Writing Activities

1. 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 chorus is 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 an objective 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, which informs the audience of what is going on and comments 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 socialize 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
2. The Everyman
In German, the name of the main character in The Arsonists means “Mr Average” or “Everyman.” Ask students to use the internet to research facts and figures about the average [Canadian] person, including:

- Height
- Weight
- Car he drives
- Number of children they has
- Most popular names
- Favourite food
- Favourite holiday destination

Then ask students to write a monologue from the perspective of the ‘Canadian 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 their life
- Keen to convince other people to be more like him or her

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

3. 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 that 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 anticapitalist 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.

**Acting Exercises**

1. **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

**Sample extract:**

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.
Additional Resources

About Bertolt Brecht: http://www.teachit.co.uk/armoore/drama/brecht.htm

*The Arsonists* Background Pack by The Royal Court Theatre:
http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/education/educational-resources/

References


The theme of Max Frisch's classic play - that private and public morality cannot be separated - rings true today

by Alistair Beaton [translator]
The Guardian www.guardian.co.uk
1 November 2007

The Arsonists is my title for a play previously known in this country as The Fire Raisers, first staged in Britain at the Royal Court in 1961. When Dominic Cooke and Ramin Gray asked me to come up with a new translation as part of the Court's international season, I went back to the original German text to see how much the play still had to say to a modern audience. In other words, I wondered whether I ought to be doing a straightforward translation or a new version. I was pleased to find that Max Frisch's famous play required little in the way of updating. In fact, apart from removing a few archaisms, I only took one major liberty with the text, replacing a traditional nursery rhyme with something more apposite to modern London.

The central character in The Arsonists is Biedermann, a man of contradictions. In his business life, he is brutal and unforgiving. In the domestic arena, he tries to live a life of blameless middle-class decency. This evokes echoes of all the monsters of history who spent their days torturing and murdering before going home to behave with impeccable correctness towards wife and children. It is this sense of bourgeois propriety that renders Biedermann defenceless when two arsonists turn up at his house.

The play itself is an extended metaphor about the weakness of personal ethics in the face of evil. Exactly what that evil is, Frisch never says, though as a Swiss citizen he felt keenly the stifling and hypocritical nature of middle-class morality. In the Royal Court production of 1961, director Lindsay Anderson cut to the chase and suggested that the evil in question was the atomic bomb.

We immediately have to ask: what is the great evil we are failing to face up to today? Is it still nuclear weapons? Is it the destruction of our environment through personal greed and corporate plunder? Is it the misery we inflict upon the Third World? Is it the erosion of our liberties in the name of the War on Terror? Is it the violence perpetrated on the people of Iraq? Is it Israel’s cruel and illegal occupation of Palestine? Or could it be the threat to liberal values posed by radical Islam? With a Greek chorus composed of firefighters (as in the original), the play inevitably awakes memories of the London bombings of 2005, and if audiences want to engage with the issue of Islamism, this production certainly allows them to do that. But in the end, the power of The Arsonists lies in the undefined nature of the evil it portrays.

Where the play is precise is in identifying what happens when there is a private-public split in a person's moral code. When Biedermann finally realises that the men in his house really are arsonists, he is quite happy for them to go off and burn down someone else's house, not realising that he too will become one of the victims. What the play tells us is not that the liberal conscience is weak, but that the hypocritical liberal conscience is weak. We can't be decent people at home while ignoring the evils of the world. It just doesn't work.
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Please feel free to contact me or an Advisor from your own board to discuss productions and further education opportunities at Canadian Stage.

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