San Fernando Valley State College

The Design and Technical Directing

of

BIEDERMANN AND THE FIREBUGS

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Drama

by

Joseph Francesco Bonanno

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The abstract of Joseph Francesco Bonanno is approved.

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ABSTRACT

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(1) INTRODUCTION

Max Frisch's Firebugs belongs to a genre of plays that has not received much production in either the professional or educational theatre in this country. With its cosmic plan of action, episodic structure and fragmentary movement, and subtitled "A Learning play without a lesson," the work draws from the styles of Brecht's Lehrstücker, morality plays, and Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth. Frisch, though known to have compassion for the victims of injustices, seems to indicate that those left behind learn nothing from the lessons of the past. His use of the Brechtian techniques of parody and grotesque comedy afford little opportunity for compassion.

The major design challenge lay in the play's expressionistic style, however, its interesting literary qualities, such as a crisp, clipped dialogue and a subtle treatment of man's inability to face reality made the production of the
play a worthwhile experience for the director and myself. Coupled with these elements were the extensive capabilities for much theatricality in directing, acting and designing.

(2) ANALYSIS

*Firebugs* attempts to show us the "ostrich complex" of modern man, that is, the all too common practice of burying one's head in the sand at the sight of on-coming danger, only to receive a swift kick in the rear. Biedermann, the central character whose name in German is a parody on Jedermann (Everyman), is the symbol of "bourgeois man" blindly devoted to his business. In the situation presented, his actions parallel those of the Western nations watching Hitler's rise and of middle-class Germany itself not able to act in a time of crisis.

The essence of the piece is its non-realistic attitude. The grotesque manner of the firebugs, their purposefully transparent shield covering their motives and the distorted logic of Biedermann are combined to produce the author's ironic commentary on man's stupidity.

In the unfolding of his tragicomedy, Frisch uses the time-honored technique of the Greek chorus along with the unguarded dialogue of the firebugs themselves to give the audience a sense of impending doom. However, a comic element interlaced throughout this play keeps the audience somewhat off guard until the final crisis.
(3) PREPARATION

The design and technical directing of Firebugs was based on two concepts: (1) the distortion of reality and (2) the universal significance of the theme as indicated in the message of the play. The setting featured sharp angular and askewed walls covered with scrim (gauze-like material) to accent these concepts (see photos in appendix). The lighting design was an integral part of the set design because through lighting all other elements of production would take life. Therefore, the basic lighting design centered on several sharply delineated areas of light and some unusual effects. These included flash pots, theatrical smoke, fire effects, by means of both light reflection and film, and numerous sound effects. All of these elements were integrated during the technical rehearsal week.

(4) CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Although audience response was favorable, there were elements of the technical production that were not equal to the original ideas. The setting, special visual effects, sound effects and the final technical direction satisfied both the director and myself but the lighting was deficient at times in visibility and sharpness of delineation. This was the result of limitations inherent in the theatre such as the limited physical positions for lighting instruments and the lack of sufficient number of outlets. Also, there was a lack of thorough planning on my part. It is common theatre practice to postpone the lighting until all other
elements of production are near completion. In this instance however, I believe too much time was allocated to the other areas of design at the expense of the lighting.

In technical directing, a communications problem relating to terminology slowed the proceedings of "tech week" but this was finally corrected with a few conferences with the stage manager. In spite of these shortcomings, the final production was successful.

(5) CONCLUDING REMARKS

Perhaps the most rewarding factor of the whole experience was overcoming the problems described above and the final near-perfection attained in the actual performances of the play. The final production was both artistically and technically satisfying due to the extensive pre-planning in most areas and the harmony between cast and crews, something that is not always achieved in theatrical productions. This harmony allowed us to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. In spite of the errors mentioned, both audience and critics were pleased. One critic wrote: "...the only words left to say about Valley State's The Firebugs are these: 'see it'."