



A Level

# Drama and theatre

## *The Arsonists* (The Fire Raisers) Max Frisch

### Introduction / background

- *Lehrstück ohne Lerne* – a teaching play without a lesson
- A parable exploring the responsibility of the individual
- Influenced by morality plays and tragedy
- Influenced by Brecht
- Includes metatheatrical features
- Elements of theatre of the absurd: comedy, farce, buffoonery
- Epic and absurdist comic style used to criticise and question
- Semi-allegorical characters – Biedermann as the 'good man' / 'everyman' / middleclass man
- Six scenes in chronological order
- Greek-style chorus: interact, comment, narrate

### Key characters

**Biedermann:** Capitalist, bourgeois, arrogant, materialistic, image-conscious, inconsistent, self-important, cowardly, defensive, anxious, easily flattered, manipulated, complicit, morally weak, stressed.

**Babette:** Nervous, anxious, paranoid, frail, subservient, confused, easily manipulated, socially conscious, apologetic, frustrated, loyal, easily shocked, obedient but occasionally assertive.

**Schmitz:** Powerful and intimidating appearance, former wrestler and circus worker, social outsider, homeless, working class, hard childhood, lack of education, can be polite but is tactless, direct, manipulative, violent.

**Eisenring:** Schmitz's accomplice, former waiter, convicted arsonist, has experienced a form of trauma, could have studied law, introduces himself as an insurance salesman, had a less hard upbringing than Schmitz, blatant assembly of detonators, truthful, polite, threatening, higher status than Schmitz, aggressive, self-assured.

**Anna:** Maid, single, obedient, perceptive, wears maid's uniform, except for a red jumper at the dinner, as instructed by Biedermann, can be outspoken, gives short responses, frustrated and confused, upset, intimidated, dislikes and mistrusts Schmitz and Eisenring.

**The Knechtlings:** Workers, oppressed, subservient, poor, victims, Mrs K is grief-stricken, desperate, hopeless.

**Doctor of Philosophy:** Academic, idealistic, the third arsonist, disassociates himself from the deed.

**The chorus of firefighters:** Observant, commentators, narrators, can see the truth, challenge Biedermann, try to redirect Biedermann's moral compass to no avail, servants of the townspeople.

### Context

- Radio play (1953), stage play (1958)
- First staged at Schauspielhaus Zurich
- Naturalistic setting and costumes
- Familiar visuals, but reflective performance style
- Post-war, Cold War, arms race context
- Rise of communism and pre-WW2 fascism
- Critique of Swiss neutrality

### Acting

- Underpin your work with research and off-text exploration to establish: status, social class, motivation, objective/ intent; superobjective, function, relationships, backstory and character arc.
- Use **live theatre performances** to inspire you and **influence** your acting ideas. Adapt these influences to work in your interpretation. Consider: **What happened? How? Why? What did I like? How could I adapt it for my version?**
- Experiment and **explore practically**. Make sure your performance choices communicate your intentions and match your chosen style. Make sure you can clearly explain: **What am I doing? How am I doing it, and why?**

### Vocal skills

- To communicate meaning through: tone, volume, tempo, pause, pitch, intonation, musicality and accent.
- Also consider vocal sounds: breath, sigh, cry, sing, hum, chant, whisper and hesitation.
- Adapt vocal skills for stylised approaches where appropriate.

### Physical skills

- To communicate meaning through: posture, gait, body language, facial expression and gesture.
- Also consider tempo, rhythm, pace, energy, dynamics, direction, weight, speed, flow, unison and canon.
- Adapt physical skills for stylised approaches such as dance sequences, physical theatre, stylised naturalism (for example, repetition, motif, slow motion, exaggeration).

### Interaction

- To communicate meaning through: character positioning, spatial relationships, proxemics, vocal choices and physical choices.
- Driven by motivation and reaction.
- Needs to effectively communicate the relationship between two or more characters, with the audience or even interaction with the space/set.

### Themes, motifs and symbols

- Private vs public morality
- Good and evil
- Individual responsibility
- Choice and conscience
- Truth and self-deception

### Motifs and symbols

- Matches, lighter, cigar / cigarettes, petrol, wind from the South, clothing, church clock / bell.

### Directing

- Will your interpretation of *The Arsonists* be a faithful one or a reinterpretation?
- What type of staging and style are you are working with?
- How will you use contemporary theatre approaches to communicate relationships and story?
- How are you interpreting the text? What do you want to say through your production?
- Which themes will your work emphasise?
- How do you imagine the characters and their relationships?
- How will you direct your actors to communicate relationships and motivation?
- How will you use character positioning and proxemics to communicate meaning?
- How can you link to **your** current, contemporary context to make the play relevant?
- What rehearsal techniques might you use with your actors, how and why?

### Design

- Are you creating a faithful interpretation or a reinterpretation?
- Use live theatre as inspiration for your design ideas.
- Consider: how will actors interact with the design elements?

### Set and props: Location, setting, period, themes, atmosphere, symbols.

Think about: Stage type, style, and layout. Size of space, entrances and exits. Colours, textures, materials, shapes and symbols. Levels and projection surfaces. Floor, backdrop/cyclorama and overhead design. Furniture and props: style, size, colour, material, condition, location, use. Items suspended above the stage.

### Costume, hair and make-up: Status, age, context, personality, circumstances, location, allegorical, archetypal.

Think about: Costumes: colours, sizes, condition, textures, materials and time period. Hair: styles, colours and condition. Accessories and masks. Make-up: face, hands, feet, body and special effects.

### Lighting: Mood, atmosphere, location, time of day, emphasis, emotion.

Think about: Naturalistic or stylised? Colour, intensity, angle, positioning. Lantern types: birdie, special, practical, wash. Effects: gel, gobo, moving head, strobe. Non-standard sources: torches, phones.

### Sound: Location, atmosphere, emotion, tension, pace, amplification.

Think about: Music: atmospheric / ambient. Special effects: diegetic / non-diegetic. Volume: fade, layering, soundscape. Microphones, reverb, echo, delay. Effects and treatment; speaker positioning. Speaker positioning and sound treatment.