

from the FOOTLIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 2017

"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays."

<http://www.footlightsdc.org>

Footlights to Discuss Max Frisch's *The Arsonists* on Monday, September 18

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.

Max Frisch (1911-1991) was a Swiss dramatist and novelist, noted for his depictions of the moral dilemmas of 20th-century life. In 1933 Frisch withdrew from the University of Zürich, where he had studied German literature, and became a newspaper correspondent. After touring southern and eastern Europe from 1934 to 1936, he returned to Zürich, where he studied architecture. Frisch worked as an architect after service in the Swiss army during World War II. He abandoned architecture in 1955 to devote himself full-time to writing. In his play *Santa Cruz* (1947) Frisch established the central theme found throughout his subsequent works: the predicament of the complicated, skeptical individual in modern society.

Alastair Beaton, translator of the 2007 edition, described *The Arsonists* (1958) as "a dark comedy" set in a town that is regularly attacked by arsonists. Disguised as a door-to-door salesman (hawkers), they talk their way into people's homes and settle down in the attic where they set about planning the destruction of the house. The play shows how complacent "normal" citizens can be taken in by evil. The first sketch, written in 1948 and performed first as a radio play, was in response to the Communist takeover in Prague. This

play is often seen as a metaphor for Nazism and fascism (The Guardian's Theatre Blog, 2007). How very relevant Woolly Mammoth's play selection is to begin its 2017-18 season!

Please join Footlights at Alfio's on Monday, September 18 for dinner and a discussion of **Max Frisch's *The Arsonists***. We are delighted to welcome **Kirsten Bowen**, Woolly Mammoth's Dramaturg, to share her thoughts on this play. She visited us most recently to speak about Woolly's production of *The Octaroon*, so successful that it returned to DC for a second run. Stephanie Olshan will moderate our discussion.

Alfio's is located at 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD, on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments – a short walk from the north entrance of the Friendship Heights metro stop on the red line. Street parking is limited, but valet parking is available at Alfio's. Dinner is at 6:30, the discussion at 7:30 and ends no later than 9.

Please note: The all-inclusive cost for dinner and the discussion is now \$25.* Dinner is a green salad, choice among six entrées, and spaghetti, green beans, bread and butter, ice cream, and tea or coffee. Alfio's salad bar may be substituted for the entrée if you wish. Cash or check, please – no credit cards. Wine, beer, cocktails are available from the bar. You may come at 7:20 for the discussion only for just \$5.

Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin, at phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768. Reservations and/or cancellations will be accepted until noon on the day of the dinner-discussion. If you must cancel, please let Phyllis know as soon as possible since the restaurant needs a complete count. This is a seated, table-service dinner, not a buffet. We may be charged for no-shows and expect you to cover our cost.

Readings. *The Arsonists*, previously also known in English as *The Firebugs* or *The Fire Raisers*, is available from Amazon.com. Excellent additional reading about *The Arsonists* can be found in the dramaturgical guide at <https://thewoollyarsonists.wordpress.com>. Also see <https://dctheatrescene.com/2017/08/30/howard-shalwiz-time-right-woolly-produce-arsonists/> for an insightful conversation between Susan Galbraith and Howard Shalwitz on why the time is right to produce *The Arsonists*. (Shalwitz plays Biedermann in *The Arsonists*.)

See. *The Arsonists* burns brightly at Woolly Mammoth Theatre from September 5 to October 8. Goldstar is offering discounts for some dates. Also note that Woolly is participating in TheatreWeek 2017. TodayTix has \$35 tickets available for performances from September 19 through October 1. Talkbacks are scheduled after each performance of the play.

Don't forget to douse your fires and join us on Monday, September 18 at Alfio's for dinner and a lively, informative discussion of *The Arsonists*. See you then!

October 12: Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

Join us on Thursday, October 12, when we meet at Alfio's to discuss **Caryl Churchill's Top Girls**.

If you were hosting a dinner at a fancy restaurant and could invite anyone in the world – living or dead – to come as your guests, whom would you choose? The

very ambitious Marlene is celebrating her promotion to managing director of the employment agency Top Girls, and (because this is fiction) invites several famous women from the past, including one who may or may not have actually been a female Pope, hoping for insight into that age-old dilemma: can females 'have it all' – both a career and a family life – something which seems to come so easily for men – or is this really an illusion?

About Footlights

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To learn more about Footlights, see www.footlightsdc.org. Copies of the monthly newsletter are sent to the Footlights elist and are also available at www.footlightsdc.org.

Calendar:

- **Monday, September 18**, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of **Max Frisch's The Arsonists** with Woolly Mammoth Theatre Co. Dramaturg **Kirsten Bowen** and moderator Stephanie Olshan. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.
- **Thursday, October 12**, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of **Caryl Churchill's Top Girls** with Keegan Theatre's **Susan Marie Rhea** and director **Amber Paige McGinnis**. Our moderator is Mary Ann Wren. At Alfio's. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
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