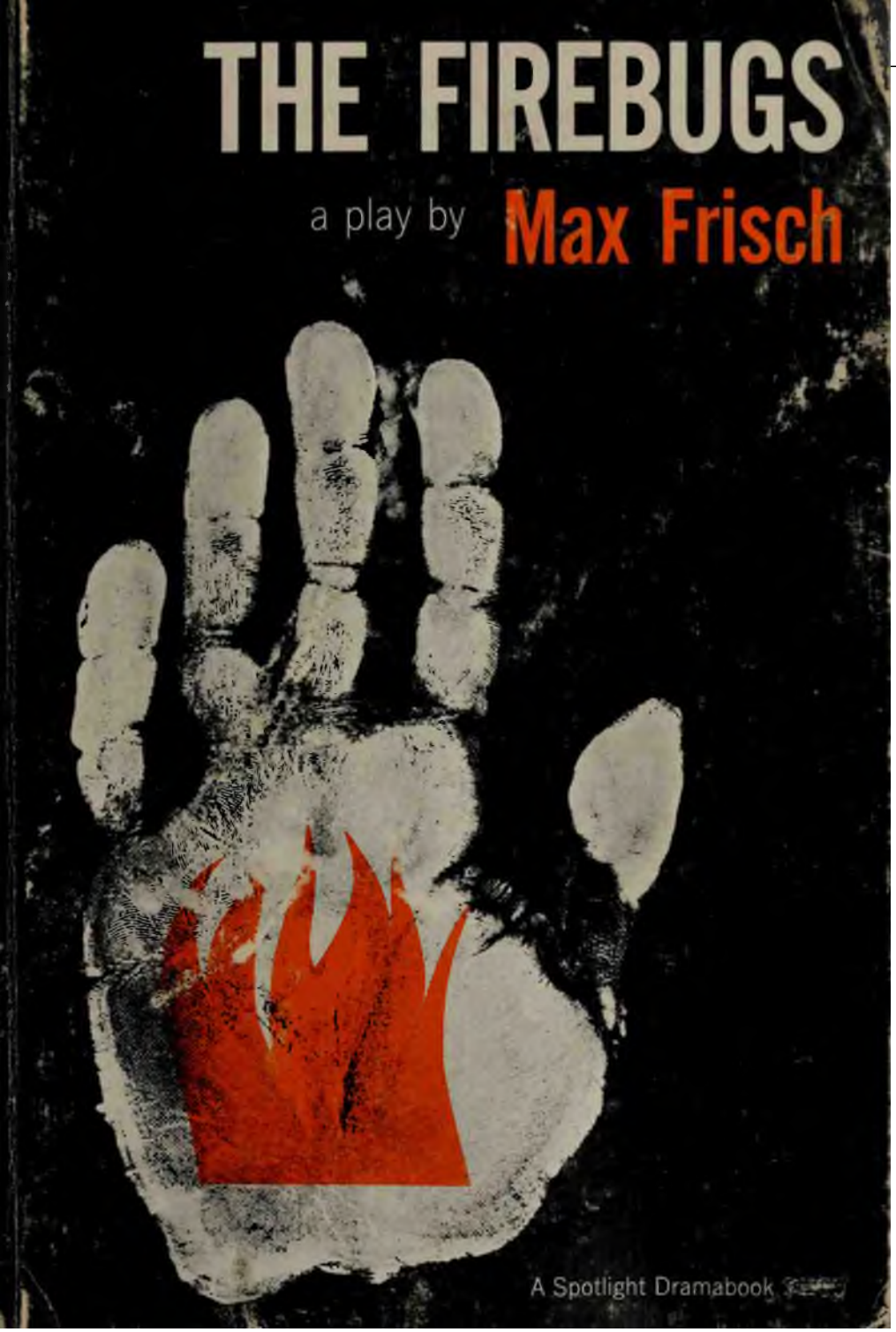
THE FIREBUGS

a play by **Max Frisch**



A Spotlight Dramabook

THE FIREBUGS

PLAYS BY MAX FRISCH
(Published by Hill and Wang)

THE CHINESE WALL

THE FIREBUGS

ANDORRA

MAX FRISCH: THREE PLAYS
Don Juan, or The Love of Geometry
The Great Rage of Philip Hotz
When the War Was Over

BIOGRAPHY: A GAME

MAX FRISCH

THE FIREBUGS

(Herr Biedermann und die Brandstifter)

A Learning-Play Without a Lesson

Translated by

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MAX FRISCH

Born in 1911 in Zurich (and thus old enough to have lived through two world wars), Max Frisch has been for some fifteen years one of the outstanding literary figures in Europe. That he has remained until recently almost totally unknown in America is partly a result of his own lack of interest in a world-wide reputation, but is probably more particularly a commentary on the present state of the theatre in America.

Frisch is—and has been throughout his adult life—an architect by profession, a writer by avocation, which may account for his persistent experimentalism and his indifference to commercial considerations.

Although Frisch had written several plays, novels, and stories before he wrote *The Chinese Wall*, it was this play that first brought him fame outside of Switzerland. It was followed by several other works exhibiting that peculiar bitter-sweet blend of ironic wit and profound despair that is the trademark of Frisch as a writer—*Graf Oederland* in 1951, *Don Juan, oder die Liebe zur Geometrie* in 1951, and *Herr Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*The Firebugs*) in 1959. *Andorra*, a sensational success in Europe, was first produced in 1962.

The Firebugs is a good example of Frisch's indefatigable passion for revision. Originally written in 1951 as a radio play, it was reworked in 1953 into a stage play, and then in 1960 was re-revised and produced as *Biedermann und die Hölle*. The "Don Juan" of the play bearing his name first appeared as a minor character in *The Chinese Wall*. *Graf*

Oederland was originally an extended prose sketch in one of Frisch's published diaries.

In addition to his plays, Frisch has published several novels (two of which, *Stiller* and *Homo Faber*, have been translated into English), diaries, and various literary and political essays. He has in recent years received a number of literary prizes. He travels frequently; shortly after World War II, he spent a year in America on a Rockefeller grant.

Max Frisch is presently living near Zurich.

THE FIREBUGS

SCENE 1

CHARACTERS

Gottlieb Biedermann
Babette, *his wife*
Anna, *a maidservant*
Sepp Schmitz, *a wrestler*
Willi Eisenring, *a waiter*
A Policeman
A Ph.D.
Mrs. Knechtling
The Chorus of Firemen

Scene—A simultaneous setting, showing the living room and the attic of Biedermann's house.
Time—Now.

The stage is dark; then a match flares, illuminating the face of GOTTLIEB BIEDERMANN. *He is lighting a cigar, and as the stage grows more visible he looks about him. He is surrounded by firemen wearing their helmets.*

BIEDERMANN. You can't even light a cigar any more without thinking of houses on fire. . . . It's disgusting! [*He throws away the burning cigar and exits.*]

The firemen come forward in the manner of an antique CHORUS. *The town clock booms the quarter-hour.*

Chorus. Fellow citizens, we,
Guardians of the city.
Watchers, listeners,
Friends of the friendly town.

Leader. Which pays our salaries.

Chorus. Uniformed, equipped,
We guard your homes,
Patrol your streets,
Vigilant, tranquil.

Leader. Resting from time to time,
But alert, unsleeping.

Chorus. Watching, listening,
Lest hidden danger
Come to light
Too late.

The clock strikes half-hour.

Leader. Much goes up in flames,
But not always
Because of fate.

Chorus. Call it fate, they tell you,
And ask no questions.
But mischief alone
Can destroy whole cities.

Leader. Stupidity alone——

Chorus. Stupidity, all-too-human——

Leader. Can undo our citizens,
Our all-too-mortal citizens.

The clock strikes three-quarters.

Chorus. Use your head;
A stitch in time saves nine.

Leader. Exactly.

Chorus. Just because it happened,
Don't put the blame on God,
Nor on our human nature,
Nor on our fruitful earth,
Nor on our radiant sun . . .
Just because it happened,
Must you call the damned thing Fate?

The clock strikes four-quarters.

Leader. Our watch begins.

The Chorus *sits. The clock strikes nine o'clock.*

SCENE 2

The Living Room. BIEDERMANN *is reading the paper and smoking a cigar.* ANNA, *the maidservant, in a white apron, brings him a bottle of wine.*

ANNA. Mr. Biedermann? [*No answer.*] Mr. Biedermann——

BIEDERMANN *puts down his paper.*

Biedermann. They ought to hang them! I've said so all along! Another fire! And always the same story: another peddler shoe-horning his way into somebody's attic—another "harmless" peddler—— [*He picks up the bottle.*] They ought to hang every one of them! [*He picks up the corkscrew.*]

Anna. He's still here, Mr. Biedermann. The peddler. He wants to talk to you.

Biedermann. I'm not in!

Anna. Yes, sir, I told him—an hour ago. He says he knows you. I can't throw him out, Mr. Biedermann.

Biedermann. Why not?

Anna. He's too strong.

Biedermann. Let him come to the office tomorrow.

Anna. Yes sir. I told him three times. He says he's not interested. He doesn't want any hair tonic.

Biedermann. What *does* he want?

Anna. Kindness, he says. Humanity.

Biedermann [*sniffs at the cork*]. Tell him I'll throw him out myself if he doesn't get going at once. [*He fills his glass*

carefully.] Humanity! [*He tastes the wine.*] Let him wait in the hall for me. If he's selling suspenders or razor blades . . . I'm not inhuman, you know, Anna. But they mustn't come into the house—I've told you that a hundred times! Even if we have three vacant beds, it's out of the question! Anybody knows what this sort of thing can lead to, these days——

ANNA *is about to go, when* SCHMITZ *enters. He is athletic, in a costume reminiscent partly of the prison, partly of the circus; his arms are tattooed and there are leather straps on his wrists.* ANNA *edges out.* BIEDERMANN *sips his wine, unaware of* SCHMITZ, *who waits until he turns around.*

Schmitz. Good evening. [BIEDERMANN *drops his cigar in surprise.*] Your cigar, Mr. Biedermann. [*He picks up the cigar and hands it to* BIEDERMANN.]

Biedermann. Look here——

Schmitz. Good evening.

Biedermann. What is this? I told the girl distinctly to have you wait in the hall.

Schmitz. My name is Schmitz.

Biedermann. Without even knocking!

Schmitz. Sepp Schmitz. [*Silence.*] Good evening.

Biedermann. What do you want?

Schmitz. You needn't worry, Mr. Biedermann. I'm not a peddler.

Biedermann. No?

Schmitz. I'm a wrestler. I mean I *used* to be.

Biedermann. And now?

Schmitz. Unemployed. [*Pause.*] Don't worry, sir, I'm not looking for a job—I'm fed up with wrestling. I came in here because it's raining hard outside. [*Pause.*] It's warm in here. [*Pause.*] I hope I'm not intruding . . . [*Pause.*]

Biedermann. Cigar? [*He offers one.*]

Schmitz. You know, it's awful, Mr. Biedermann—with a build like mine, everybody gets scared. . . . Thank you. [BIEDERMANN *gives him a light.*] Thank you. [*They stand there, smoking.*]

Biedermann. Get to the point.

Schmitz. My name is Schmitz.

Biedermann. You've said that . . . Delighted.

Schmitz. I have no place to sleep. [*He holds the cigar to his nose, enjoying the aroma.*] No place to sleep.

Biedermann. Would you like—some bread?

Schmitz. If that's all there is.

Biedermann. A glass of wine?

Schmitz. Bread and wine . . . If it's no trouble, sir; if it's no trouble. [BIEDERMANN *goes to the door.*]

Biedermann. Anna! [*He comes back.*]

Schmitz. The girl said you were going to throw me out personally, Mr. Biedermann, but I knew you didn't mean it. [ANNA *has entered.*]

Biedermann. Anna, bring another glass.

Anna. Yes sir.

Biedermann. And some bread.

Schmitz. And if you don't mind, miss, a little butter. Some cheese or cold cuts. Only don't go to any trouble. Some pickles, a tomato or something, some mustard—whatever you have, miss.

Anna. Yes sir.

Schmitz. If it's no trouble.

ANNA *exits.*

Biedermann. You told the girl you know me.

Schmitz. That's right, sir.

Biedermann. How do you know me?

Schmitz. I know you at your best, sir. Last night at the pub—you didn't see me; I was sitting in the corner. The whole place liked the way you kept banging the table.

Biedermann. What did I say?

Schmitz. Exactly the right thing, Mr. Biedermann! [*He takes a puff at his cigar.*] "They ought to hang them all! The sooner the better—the whole bunch! All those firebugs!"

BIEDERMANN *offers him a chair.*

Biedermann. Sit down. [SCHMITZ *sits.*]

Schmitz. This country needs men like you, sir.

Biedermann. I know, but——

Schmitz. No buts, Mr. Biedermann, no buts. You're the old-time type of solid citizen. That's why your slant on things——

Biedermann. Certainly, but——

Schmitz. That's why.

Biedermann. Why what?

Schmitz. You have a conscience. Everybody in the pub could see that. A solid conscience.

Biedermann. Naturally, but——

Schmitz. Mr. Biedermann, it's not natural at all. Not these days. In the circus, where I did my wrestling, for instance—before it burned down, the whole damned circus—our manager, for instance; you know what he told me? "Sepp," he says, "You know me. They can shove it. What do I need a conscience for?" Just like that! "What my animals need is a whip," he says. That's the sort of guy he is! "A conscience!" [*He sneers.*] "If anybody has a conscience, you can bet it's a

bad one." [*Enjoying his cigar.*] God rest him!

Biedermann. Is he dead?

Schmitz. Burned to a cinder, with everything he owned. [*A pendulum clock strikes nine.*]

Biedermann. I don't know what's keeping that girl so long.

Schmitz. I've got time. [*Their eyes meet.*] You haven't an empty bed in the house, Mr. Biedermann. The girl told me.

Biedermann. Why do you laugh?

Schmitz. "Sorry, no empty bed." That's what they all say. . . . What's the result? Somebody like me, with no place to sleep—— Anyway I don't want a bed.

Biedermann. No?

Schmitz. Oh, I'm used to sleeping on the floor. My father was a miner. I'm used to it. [*He puffs at his cigar.*] No apologies necessary, sir. You're not one of those birds who sounds off in public—when *you* say something I believe it. What are things coming to if people can't believe each other any more? Nothing but suspicion all over! Am I right? But *you* still believe in yourself and others. Right? You're about the only man left in this town who doesn't say right off that people like us are firebugs.

Biedermann. Here's an ash tray.

Schmitz. Or am I wrong? [*He taps the ash off his cigar carefully.*] People don't believe in God any more—they believe in the Fire Department.

Biedermann. What do you mean by that?

Schmitz. Nothing but the truth.

ANNA *comes in with a tray.*

Anna. We have no cold cuts.

Schmitz. This will do, miss, this will do fine. Only you forgot the mustard.

Anna. Excuse me. [*Exits.*

Biedermann. Eat. [*He fills the glasses.*]

Schmitz. You don't get a reception like this every place you go, Mr. Biedermann, let me tell you! I've had some experiences! Somebody like me comes to the door—no necktie, no place to stay, hungry; "Sit down," they say, "have a seat"—and meanwhile they call the police. How do you like that? All I ask for is a place to sleep, that's all. A good wrestler who's wrestled all his life—and some bird who never wrestled at all grabs me by the collar! "What's this?" I ask myself. I turn around just to look, and first thing you know he's broken his shoulder! [*Picks up his glass.*] *Prosit!* [*They drink, and* SCHMITZ *starts eating.*]

Biedermann. That's how it goes, these days. You can't open a newspaper without reading about another arson case. The same old story: another peddler asking for a place to sleep, and next morning the house is in flames. I mean to say . . . well, frankly, I can understand a certain amount of distrust . . . [*Reaches for his newspaper.*] Look at this! [*He lays the paper next to* SCHMITZ'S *plate.*]

Schmitz. I saw it.

Biedermann. A whole district in flames. [*He gets up to show it to* SCHMITZ.] Just read that! [SCHMITZ *eats, reads, and drinks.*]

Schmitz. Is this wine Beaujolais?

Biedermann. Yes.

Schmitz. Could be a little warmer. [*He reads, over his plate.*] "Apparently the fire was planned and executed in the same way as the previous one." [*They exchange a glance.*]

Biedermann. Isn't that the limit?

Schmitz. That's why I don't care to read newspapers. Always the same thing.

Biedermann. Yes, yes, naturally . . . But that's no answer to the problem, to stop reading the papers. After all, you have to know what you're up against.

Schmitz. What for?

Biedermann. Why, because.

Schmitz. It'll happen anyway, Mr. Biedermann, it'll happen anyway. [*He sniffs the sausage.*] God's will. [*He slices the sausage.*]

Biedermann. You think so?

ANNA *brings the mustard.*

Schmitz. Thank you, miss, thank you.

Anna. Anything else you'd like?

Schmitz. Not today. [ANNA *stops at the door.*] Mustard is my favorite dish. [*He squeezes mustard out of the tube.*]

Biedermann. How do you mean, God's will?

Schmitz. God knows . . . [*He continues to eat with his eye on the paper.*] "Expert opinion is that apparently the fire was planned and executed in the same way as the previous one." [*He laughs shortly, and fills his glass.*]

Anna. Mr. Biedermann?

Biedermann. What is it now?

Anna. Mr. Knechtling would like to speak to you.

Biedermann. Knechtling? Now? Knechtling?

Anna. He says——

Biedermann. Out of the question.

Anna. He says he simply can't understand you.

Biedermann. Why must he understand me?

Anna. He has a sick wife and three children, he says——

Biedermann. Out of the question! [*He gets up impatiently.*] Mr. Knechtling! Mr. Knechtling! Let Mr. Knechtling leave me alone, dammit! Or let him get a lawyer! Please—let him! I'm through for the day. . . . Mr. Knechtling! All this to-do because I gave him his notice! Let him get a lawyer, by all means! I'll get one, too. . . . Royalties on his invention! Let him stick his head in the gas stove or get a lawyer! If Mr. Knechtling can afford indulging in lawyers! Please—let him! [*Controlling himself, with a glance at* SCHMITZ.] Tell Mr. Knechtling I have a visitor. [ANNA *exits.*] Excuse me.

Schmitz. This is your house, Mr. Biedermann.

Biedermann. How is the food? [*He sits, observing* SCHMITZ, *who attacks his food with enthusiasm.*]

Schmitz. Who'd have thought you could still find it, these days?

Biedermann. Mustard?

Schmitz. Humanity! [*He screws the top of the mustard tube back on.*] Here's what I mean: you don't grab me by the collar and throw me out in the rain, Mr. Biedermann. *That's* what we need, Mr. Biedermann! Humanity! [*He pours himself a drink.*] God will reward you! [*He drinks with gusto.*]

Biedermann. You mustn't think I'm inhuman, Mr. Schmitz.

Schmitz. Mr. Biedermann!

Biedermann. That's what Mrs. Knechtling thinks.

Schmitz. Would you be giving me a place to sleep tonight if you were inhuman?—Ridiculous!

Biedermann. Of course!