

THEATRE

The Fire Raisers

Riverside Studios

Michael Billington

YOU can see why Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* (1958) is being revived by Moving Theatre as part of their Riverside Studios season: it is clearly viewed as a prophetic play about the dangers of appeasing neo-fascism. But while Frisch's message is horrendously timely its means of conveying it looks somewhat dated.

Frisch's satiric fable is about a wealthy businessman who, as his town is being consumed by fire, welcomes a pair of palpable arsonists into his home. The more they pile up petrol drums in his attic and lay out the

detonating fuse, the more ingratiatingly polite he becomes. Plagued by a mixture of guilt and fear, he literally cooks his goose by inviting the intruders to dinner and when, with sirens wailing, they ask him for matches he pliantly obliges.

Each society finds in the play the message it wants: at different times it has been seen as an attack on communism and fascism though few people have noticed its parallels with *Tartuffe* in its savage portrayal of high-bourgeois credulity. But while its theme remains eternally true — in that we constantly appease the agents of our own destruction — Frisch's treatment of it now seems stubbornly undramatic. By making Biedermann someone who connives so readily with his destroyers, Frisch plugs his point at the expense of opposing action.

Lenka Udovicki's production cer-

tainly leaves you in no doubt as to the play's contemporary relevance: the final conflagration, with its sulphurous sky and floating debris, suggests a war-ravaged city under siege. Malcolm Tierney's Biedermann also has the right rattled smugness, Frances de la Tour as his wife is nicely torn between private conscience and the bourgeois rules of hospitality and Cliff Parisi and Jonathan Barlow make a plausibly diabolical pair of fire-raisers. But if you're going to play the ironic afterpiece, in which the senior devils close down Hell because Heaven refuses to let them have any major sinners, you need to make the action continuous. And, by the end, I found myself wishing that Frisch's highly important theme was accompanied by a matching dramatic complexity.

⌚ | Until June 17.

Billington on Fire Raisers

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