

2/27: The Reichstag Fire, 1933

by Don Monaco

The political manipulation of a national
tragedy, Berlin, 2/27/33

a play in one act

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Cast of Characters

KARL GEMP, 37

MARINUS VAN DER LUBBE, 28

MAN, who will play Hitler, workers, aides.

HELMUT HEISIG, 25

Author's Note: Dialogue is set within parentheses when the next speaker may overlap, but the line should be read.

Author's Note: For additional information concerning historic events the reader is directed to the website twinfires.net, and additional links listed.

Briefly: On February 27th 1933, a fire broke out in the Reichstag, Berlin, the seat of German democracy. Nazi leaders declared the fire a conspiracy. Marinus van der Lubbe was caught in the burning building and Police Inspector Helmut Heisig was assigned to interrogate him to prove a national uprising was immanent. German national elections were to be held in five days. Heisig was convinced there was no conspiracy, but on the following morning Chancellor Hitler obtained a decree from President Hindenberg to suspend basic civil rights.

The play follows this 14-hour period.

Set: The ongoing set may be bare except for a chair. The rear wall is a scrim behind which figures may be seen, or lights of a fire may flare up.

If wanted, a chandelier hanging from center stage and the columns of an older legal building may be present, but are not necessary.

Time: The night of the Reichstag fire,
February 27, 1933.

Place: Berlin, Germany

AT RISE: The wail and scream of fire engines, ambulances and police sirens. Behind a scrim there is a burst of flame in one corner, then in another corner, as the fire breaks out in various parts of the building. Smoke and shouting. Two men rush about from corner to corner, shouting orders, and warnings, calling for more men and more hoses. One of the men, KARL GEMP, is the superior, in a dark police uniform, shouting to his assistant to call for more firefighters.

GEMP

(to assistant)

Go. Go now. Call up the 10th Brigade and the 23rd.
Go, go now.

(assistant runs off)

(Gemp runs from one corner of the stage. A flare breaks out in another corner. He shouts into that corner.)

That wall will go off in a half minute. Shoot the hoses there. Quickly, there.

(Running behind the scrim, Kemp can be seen directing as flares of fire break out in different sections.)

It's everywhere. There, go there. My god, the President's chambers. The consultation rooms. There must be people trapped in those offices.

(As the shouting and flashing lights and siren continue, youthful, uniformed HELMUT HEISIG, 25, enters running.)

HELMUT

My God, our beautiful Reichstag.

(He pulls a note book from his pocket and begins to write, quickly, as he examines everything. He touches the walls and smells his fingers. He makes a note. Karl Gemp returns from behind the scrim and sees Helmut.)

GEMP

Helmut.

(running to Helmut)

So glad.

(hugging him)

At last. You will be my first assistant in this. I see you're at work already. We must do this--working together.

HELMUT

Yes, It's an honor to work with you.

GEMP

Find the places it started, the pattern of burn, the flow of the fire, find the chemicals used.

(At that moment a commanding figure (Hitler) enters. He wears a long black trench coat and a black fedora and a small mustache. Helmut and Gemp freeze. Gemp runs to the man.)

GEMP

Herr Chancellor.

(almost bowing)

Of course you would want to see this terrible event yourself. I have sent word to Minister Von Papen and Herr Goebbels.

(HELMUT goes behind the scrim and is making notes, then re-enters.)

GEMP

(to Hitler)

Minister Goering was here earlier, but he ran to alert the police stations, and set up guards at the Palace of Justice and the Museum.

(Gemp and Hitler move together toward the end of the scrim. HELMUT runs to stop them.)

HELMUT

I wouldn't, Herr Chancellor, the fire is climbing up into the cupola. The whole structure could crash down. That giant candelabra could come down at any minute.

GEMP

This is Helmut Heisig, Herr Chancellor. My new aide. He will be my right hand in this investigation. I will use every power I have to uncover the cause of the fire and the monsters who have done this to our beautiful Reichstag.

HITLER

(pausing dramatically)

Herr Gemp. Do your work carefully.

(to them both)

This fire is a God-given signal--the beginning of a great new epoch in German history. Come with me.

(Hitler turns and walks off grandly, and Gemp follows. Heisig turns to his work. He picks up charred wood, and makes a note. He goes into corners, goes behind the scrim, he comes back with a piece of cloth, apparently burned shirt. He touches, smells, feels, and makes notes. Gemp returns, alive with energy.)

GEMP

Helmut, what luck! What amazing luck. Just seeing him is such an honor, but to be noticed--to be talking, telling of our duties.

HELMUT

He spoke so quietly, firmly. He's a fine man. But he will have more on his mind than two police officers.

GEMP

No. He remembers early friends; many have been with him since Munich.

HELMUT

I prefer my job be noticed, and remembered.

GEMP

Someday he may be the leader of this country--bigger than Hindenberg.

HELMUT

You think he might be President?

GEMP

If the elections, next week go the way we hope, he could be. What a moment. We have a glorious opportunity.

HELMUT

This fire--our opportunity, Herr Gemp.

GEMP

Herr Gemp? Please, Helmut only when others are around. Karl, Please. Your father was too close.

HELMUT

Karl, thank you. I would like ask about him when you have a moment.

GEMP

I told your mother you'd find more here than in Strasbourg--and your chance is here, now.

HELMUT

I'd give up that chance to have our beautiful Reichstag back. It is ruined.

GEMP

He said to me as we walked out--as the reporters met us on the steps--he whispered to me, "Herr Gemp, this is a gift, a God given opportunity."

HELMUT

Did he mean your career, (at a time like this?)

GEMP

No, Karl. Not career. This fire, the fools have done just what we need.

HELMUT

Who?

GEMP

The Communists that set these fires. We will pick them up before they bring down the whole government.

HELMUT

But I have never done a large fire. This is complex. It is everywhere at once.

GEMP

It's your chance. You can erase some of that confusion you went through.

HELMUT

I think—I'm sure I'm doing the right thing, now.

GEMP

This is what your father would have chosen for you. I must get back to the Chancellor. Report to me only. You'll justify my faith, I know it.

HELMUT

I will. Thank you. My family thanks you. You'll be pleased.

GEMP

(warmly)

Of course. You are smarter for your mistakes--only the errors of the young.

(Suddenly there is a figure running, and being chased behind the scrim. More shouts. Shadows on the scrim of as a figure is struck several times and beaten to the floor.)

VOICES

We have him. Tie him. Let me at him. Beat the dirty animal.

(Gemp runs behind the scrim and Helmut follows. Gemp strikes, and then pulls the figure from the floor, and Helmut and Gemp drag the figure along the floor to the front of the scrim.)

GEMP

This is one of them.

(MARINUS VAN DE LUBBE is dragged forward and thrown onto the floor. He is shirtless, and clothes and skin blackened from the fire. His face is cut from the blows. He shields himself from further blows.)

GEMP

Helmut, take him.

(shouting off stage)

Go on, search. Find the others—the delegates, ministers, bring them, bring anyone. Go.

(Gemp approaches threateningly to van de Lubbe, circling, examining his wounds, his burned clothing.)

GEMP

Where are the others? Where next? And the names?

(no response)

Tell us now, before--

(Gemp twists van der Lubbe's head by the hair.)

Give us the names.

(no response)

HELMUT

Let me take him to the station.

GEMP

No. No there is no time for that.

HELMUT

I know a way, I think.

GEMP

No. You will never get through that crowd, and the trucks and fire equipment.

HELMUT

I can—

GEMP

They'll tear him to pieces before you have gone one street. They're shouting for blood. Begin here--right here in the antechamber. Take my notes, the sign out sheets. The names are here.

(handing over papers)

I must tell this to the Chancellor. More fires will break out everywhere. They want to burn down the whole city--the whole country. Do it quickly, quickly. I'll join you in a minute. We must find the others.

HELMUT

Yes. I'll make (him to tell us.)

GEMP

I'll be right back. Get something, anything.

(grabbing Helmut's arm affectionately)

Show me that you have really joined us.

I'll be back in a minute.

(Gemp runs off and is seen running behind the scrim. The fires appearing on the scrim slowly fade and go out. The sirens fade as Helmut approaches van der Lubbe.)

HELMUT

(picking up the burned shirt)

Your shirt, I think.

(Van der Lubbe takes the shirt, weakly, tired and hurt. He examines it. It is too ripped and dirty to wear. He rubs his skin with it, then uses it to clean blood from his face and lips.)

HELMUT

Did you run out of cloths for the petrol?

(no response)

Did you get separated from the others?

(no response)

I don't recognize the chemicals. No odor.

It is not motor fuel or paraffin.

Something new?

(no response)

You're burned.

VAN DER LUBBE

No. It's just soot.

HELMUT

The others, did any of them get burned? They left you to take the blame.

VAN DER LUBBE

No, no.

HELMUT

We haven't picked them up yet. But the Nazi's probably have them.

VAN DER LUBBE

They have nothing.

HELMUT

They'll get all we need. They're not gentle, the SA men.

VAN DER LUBBE

Who're you?

HELMUT

Helmut Heisig, Duty officer, Twelfth District, Incendiary Group. And you?

VAN DER LUBBE

Marinus van der Lubbe.

HELMUT

(making notes)

Yes, I saw from your shirt, the marking, you're Dutch. So, you must be a part of a Dutch group operating in Berlin. You must be important.

VAN DER LUBBE

There is no group. I am not part of a group, anymore.
I am looking for work. I'm a tanner.

HELMUT

Yes, I see your hands are cracked. They use heavy
salts in tanning.

VAN DER LUBBE

--and leatherworker. Dyes too.

HELMUT

So you know chemicals. That's why they chose you for
this work.

VAN DER LUBBE

There is no "they."

HELMUT

You used some chemicals tonight.

(as van der Lubbe shrugs)

Of course you did. For the fire to catch so quickly in
so many rooms at once.

VAN DER LUBBE

There is no one but me.

HELMUT

According to the sign out sheets--

(consulting his pad of notes)

--three of the ministers--Tausig, Blum, and Neuberg--
They left their offices, then joined you, did they?

VAN DER LUBBE

I was alone.

HELMUT

Two of the left and one Socialist leader. They let you
and the others in. Which entrance?

VAN DER LUBBE

I don't know them. I didn't see anyone.

HELMUT

OK, let's just talk about the group you were in here in Berlin. The Young Communist Workers, The Rail Union. Which of these groups?

VAN DER LUBBE

I am not in any group here.

HELMUT

Where then?

VAN DER LUBBE

I was in a group at home. Several. I quit them. I hated the way they love the Soviets, and treat the workers like fodder.

HELMUT

Then what group—most recently?

VAN DER LUBBE

The Farm Workers, then The Tanner and Leather Union International, but the Soviets had them all under their thumb

HELMUT

But you followed their orders anyway.

VAN DER LUBBE

No. They destroyed all our good programs. We wanted more protection from the salt fumes, but the Communists just wanted to send money to Moscow, and create fights within the unions. I fought in the streets for my union.

HELMUT

And they helped you tonight.

VAN DER LUBBE

I was alone. I broke a window to get in.

HELMUT

Then carried all those rags and petrol cans and paraffin's by yourself through the broken window?

VAN DER LUBBE

No, no. I broke in through the window in the employees building. Then I went around to pick it up through the commissary door.

HELMUT

You had friends who worked in the commissary--they carried all of those cans of fuel to all the different parts of this building--and then lit the fires. That's the only way the building was totally aflame-- everywhere--in just 15 to 20 minutes.

VAN DER LUBBE

No. No.

HELMUT

You say you did this yourself?

VAN DER LUBBE

No. No.

HELMUT

It was not just you. Who were they? What is their next target?

VAN DER LUBBE

No. I did it alone.

HELMUT

I don't believe you. This fire could never be spread by one man. You want to be some lone hero--some savior who'll be remembered. You'll get no glory out of this, van der Lubbe. This is simply a dirty criminal act. Give me the names.

VAN DER LUBBE

I didn't do it all in just fifteen--twenty minutes. You know nothing.

HELMUT

You were seen in the window--
(consulting his notes)
--at nine o five. The fire was all over the building at nine twenty five.

VAN DER LUBBE

Nonsense.

HELMUT

You couldn't spread it so quickly (to all those rooms by yourself.)

VAN DER LUBBE

You are not an investigator—you are a green kid. Your uniform doesn't fit.

HELMUT

I am in charge (of this fire.)

VAN DER LUBBE

Who are you? I won't speak until I am dealing with someone in authority who knows about this work. You are ignorant.

HELMUT

If I turn you over to the SA they will not use words on you.

VAN DER LUBBE

I have no more words for you, Herr underofficer. You know nothing of fires.

HELMUT

I'll turn you over (to them.)

VAN DER LUBBE

Did the Nazi's promote you from the provinces? Did they bring you to investigate fires because you pissed on a hay fire in your barnyard?

HELMUT

When they return—

VAN DER LUBBE

Who are you? The real police are rounding up the big names and accusing them of what I've done. And I'm being questioned by some farmyard kid.

(HELMUT steps forward about to strike van der Lubbe.)

Oh, now you're acting like a real Nazi. A proper coward. You'll earn your promotion. Strike me. Kill me. Kill the only one who can tell you how this thing got started.

HELMUT

I am not a Nazi.

VAN DER LUBBE

Just their boot licker.

HELMUT

I am an officer in the Incendiary unit, a police investigator.

VAN DER LUBBE

A new appointment. Yes. You have an accent too. You are not a Berliner.

HELMUT

I am new to Berlin.

VAN DER LUBBE

Like Hitler with his Austrian German

HELMUT

We are all drawn to Berlin.

VAN DER LUBBE

You are new to fire investigation.

HELMUT

This is a new assignment--(but I've trained.)

VAN DER LUBBE

He got you your job--your Nazi buddy?

HELMUT

No. Yes. Yes, he did. I can see I am not dealing with an ordinary man. You must be a true leader of this group.

VAN DER LUBBE

Brought you from the provinces. Yes, Strasbourg. I think I hear Strasbourg in your voice.

HELMUT

You must have designed this plan--a clever, elaborate plan to pull down the government. You must have many followers.

VAN DER LUBBE

Strasbourg. Technical school only.

HELMUT

We don't expect you to detail all the plans of your group.

VAN DER LUBBE

You don't know what you are doing, do you? You are completely guessing.

HELMUT

Who carried your supplies? Who let you into the private chambers?

VAN DER LUBBE

And not even a Nazi. Not an SA man either—with their brown shirts and boots They won't go anywhere alone.

HELMUT

If I turn you over to them, they'll have you talking soon enough. Within minutes they'll have you accusing your mother and sister. You'll beg them to kill you to stop the pain. You think you're a hero, but you are a fool. You'll be thrown in an alley for the dogs.

(Gemp enters in a rush. Van der Lubbe cowers, and turns away.)

GEMP

Any names yet?

HELMUT

No, But I think I understand how to get to him.

GEMP

Helmut, Goering says they'll burn the churches--all monuments. They'll poison the water. All services are at risk. Goering has the police picking up other conspirators already.

HELMUT

But conspirators--(I don't know.)

GEMP

I would get at this foreign filth myself. But you must do this for me. Helmut, wonderful good things are happening. The Chancellor could become the leader of this country.

HELMUT

Not while Hindenberg is alive.

(Gemp motions Helmut away as van der Lubbe pretends to sleep.)

GEMP

Someday he may be bigger than Hindenberg. He is asking me to help. Asking me—. But quick, how is it going?

HELMUT

Good. He is talking. He'll help without knowing he is relaxing and revealing himself.

GEMP

Relaxing? Helmut what are you about? Is that what they taught in the academy?

HELMUT

I know he was helped.

GEMP

What about the socialist delegates?

HELMUT

No names yet.

GEMP

We need names, the places they plan to attack. I need to report—I have been asked to join them immediately across in Goering's residence.

HELMUT

In a night you have moved into the inner circle. That's wonderful.

GEMP

Wonderful for you—and your mother. Helmut, I have asked her to visit me here—to look at the life we have—we might have here.

(as Helmut nods)

This is no surprise to you, I think.

HELMUT

I hear of your letters and see your gifts.

GEMP

Perhaps I write too often.

HELMUT

When you write of father, she reads them to me. She mentions you often, and your help.

GEMP

Your father, mother and I were always close. I insisted—no, I advised her to stop you meeting with those—certain groups. Just what your father would have said.

HELMUT

I want to hear (what happened.)

GEMP

Soon. But you see how it is all coming together. Berlin, a city of opportunity. Yes. Listen, the chancellor has asked me, because of my police experience to tell him what tools I would want in investigations—to smoke out left groups from controlling elections.

HELMUT

An advisor, wonderful. He's a foresighted man.

GEMP

He wants me to suggest police procedures for a new emergency decree.

HELMUT

Surely we have all the laws we need.

GEMP

He said "our laws are too liberal for a policemen to deal as swiftly as necessary with such attacks." Those were his words, minutes ago.

HELMUT

We've been too loose.

GEMP

But things change overnight. Tonight delegates, who despised him openly, and never voted with him, are calling. I must join them now. So quickly, quickly.

HELMUT

Yes, yes, of course. I'll get the others.

(Gemp leaves. Heisig turns and lights come up on the prisoner.)

VAN DER LUBBE

So that is how it goes in the new order. He promotes you from the provinces, hides your little left leaning ways--because he wants your mother.

HELMUT

You are a burnt pig. We will serve you up.

VAN DER LUBBE

I wondered how a young man--with only barnyard experience--could be put in charge of such an investigation.

HELMUT

I have been trained (to handle many things.)

VAN DER LUBBE

You are a child. I envy your innocence.

HELMUT

I saw the strikes--

VAN DER LUBBE

You know nothing--

HELMUT

--People beaten--

VAN DER LUBBE
--of the war--a million men--fathers, boys.

HELMUT
I joined marches--

VAN DER LUBBE
--and that horror after.

HELMUT
But the riots. They broke into our group. I had no
idea who they were--there were killings on both sides--

VAN DER LUBBE
But you were saved from the war.

HELMUT
My father was decorated--

VAN DER LUBBE
--a hero--

HELMUT
--gassed and killed saving others.

VAN DER LUBBE
--and so the million fatherless children should all be
made police investigators?

HELMUT
My mother begged in the streets, carried boxes of paper
money for a sausage.

VAN DER LUBBE
Oh, we feel sorry for ourselves.

HELMUT
Shut up. Shut up!

VAN DER LUBBE
Is this "Shut up, Shut up" something they taught you in
the police academy?

HELMUT
I learned the proper procedure.

VAN DER LUBBE

And then on the streets you learned a different procedure—in Strasbourg—in the worker slums.

HELMUT

No. No.

VAN DER LUBBE

You saw them beat people into lying confessions, to accuse anyone. So now Daddy's friend promotes you—to help you—and--Mommy.

HELMUT

Shut up, you animal, you Communist.

VAN DER LUBBE

More good training. Wake me up when the real police get here.

(Van der Lubbe turns over, as though to sleep.)

HELMUT

Yes, all right. I am just beginning. Yes, I am almost an amateur. I'm sure you have been questioned—

VAN DER LUBBE

And beaten.

HELMUT

Yes, and beaten. You've more experience at this than I have. But if I turn you over, pray that I am not the last amateur you see on this earth.

(HELMUT turns away, consults his notebook, considers a charred wall. Makes a note in his notebook.)

VAN DER LUBBE

Why should I help you?

HELMUT

Don't help me. Help yourself.

VAN DER LUBBE

What do you mean?

HELMUT

I'm sure you want it known—you want the newspapers to know what really happened here-- what you did, how you, and your gang did it. People will learn—through my report.

VAN DER LUBBE

There was no one else.

HELMUT

Nonsense. But all right—just you. What you did. Who you are, your reasons. I listened in those damned meetings—the shouting and ranting.

VAN DER LUBBE

He covered for you—destroyed some record, heh?

HELMUT

You want them to know--your anger--

VAN DER LUBBE

Under the gun, heh. One little mistake and you could be the prisoner.

HELMUT

--Your reasons.

VAN DER LUBBE

Perhaps I am just a madman.

HELMUT

Mad or not, you had a purpose.

VAN DER LUBBE

You know, you know it, as I know it.

HELMUT

I'm an amateur. Tell me.

(Van der Lubbe is silent. Helmut goes closer. Van der Lubbe cowers. Helmut goes behind him to his bonds.)

These are too tight, cutting the circulation.

Let me redo this.

(retying the ropes)

Better?

(Van der Lubbe nods, and is puzzled.)

HELMUT

That'll hold you. But there is no escape anyway. You may run, but those crowds. You heard. They have your name now. They're screaming for you. Anyone that comes out of this building not in uniform is dead. They will tear you apart. You're safer here. So you were saying--

VAN DER LUBBE

I wanted—I did--turn this building--
(giving a speech)
into a torch to light the way of the workers to the evil of the Nazi's.

HELMUT

The same garbage I heard in the meetings and on the streets till I was sick.

VAN DER LUBBE

--to light the way for the workers to do something about Hitler before it is too late.

(HELMUT politely, quietly, applauds the speech.)

HELMUT

You are as gifted a speaker as the Chancellor. Thank you. Fine words--

VAN DER LUBBE

Fine words--cloudy promises.

HELMUT

Yes, they make us feel good. But as with our leader, I must think about these phases--a new and greater Germany--and Lebensraum, and what that means.

VAN DER LUBBE

Big, terrible words. He uses national pride, as though it is a club. Yes, he gets us all thinking, and wondering.

HELMUT

He has a mission.

VAN DER LUBBE

But the elections--next week, he'll be thrown out. This was my doing. Me alone. This conspiracy they want. It's a lie.

HELMUT

But tell me--how will the burning of this house of delegates, the heart of democracy--

VAN DER LUBBE

Now you are giving speeches.

HELMUT

--how will it help to "light the way for the workers." What do you expect the others to do next?

(As he takes out his notebook, Gemp rushes in.)

GEMP

What do you have so far? Tell me. The Chancellor wants me to report directly.

HELMUT

He's Dutch. Been in Berlin several months--

GEMP

Yes, I could hear that accent. Good.

HELMUT

--from a radical group in Holland.

GEMP

And radical--of course. Good.

HELMUT

But a splinter group.

GEMP

And the others. The names. Who do we have? Singer, Kornfeld?

HELMUT

He refuses to give me the names yet. I'm just started.

GEMP

This is nothing, Helmut. I'd better take him to the station cellar and put him in Kroger's hands.

HELMUT

No. I can do it. It's going to take some patience.

GEMP

Helmut this is urgent. Other buildings are in danger.

HELMUT

It doesn't sound like that.

GEMP

What?

(Helmut motions Gemp aside. Lights go to black on van der Lubbe as they move away into another area.)

HELMUT

He's a hero type. A martyr. He wants to be the great savior. Alone on the cross.

GEMP

That's nonsense.

HELMUT

But I can use that. If I can convince him he is the most important one, or the designer of some grand plan, then we might get the names, plus their next step, and people he thinks of as the small fry.

GEMP

While he thinks he is the leader.

HELMUT

The head of a group of conspirators.

GEMP

Yes, work him, but carefully Helmut. This is an enormous opportunity for the party, for Hitler--to unify the country behind him.

HELMUT

He is already Chancellor.

GEMP

One third of the delegates is not enough. The opposition blocks him. The last elections showed the country is divided, uncertain. If he can convince President Hindenberg to sign this new decree we will have it all.

HELMUT

I will get him to talk.

GEMP

We can win all the voters, and reunite Germans split away from us.

HELMUT

But that would take another war.

GEMP

They will leap to join us. And Lebensraum. You have read his book. Room for colonies, like Britain, like Italy in Africa, France in the Far East.

HELMUT

We would have to fight (again.)

GEMP

Who am I to guess at the Chancellor's plans? You, Helmut, have a serious mind.

HELMUT

But you believe he has plans outside of Germany?

GEMP

They cut us off from other Germans. We are boxed in, Helmut-caged in by the League of Do Nothings.

HELMUT

Yes, I have heard and read enough. I don't want to do anything but focus on this man.

GEMP

Of course. Every step in the process must fit perfectly.

HELMUT

I must do my job here.

GEMP

He is just one of thousands. Goering says he is already rounding them up—even left delegates.

HELMUT

I will do a clear, perfect report.

GEMP

And we will take your report to convince Hindenberg. But quickly, quickly, Helmut.

(pause)

It was in front of Verdun that I promised your father. He was in my arms. In my heart you are my son.

HELMUT

You were there when (he died.)

GEMP

He pulled me and others, one by one out of the shelling. And ran back to operate our gun--when he was hit. I owe him--

HELMUT

You are (always helpful to us.)

GEMP

No. None of that. Your mother said you once spoke of going to America.

HELMUT

Father had a brother in Chicago. It always seemed that was a place one might make a mark. It is all so new there. But she would not go. I think you made her life better.

GEMP

Thank you. This is our land of opportunity. Here in Berlin.

HELMUT

When you called--Mother insisted I listen to you. You were at their wedding.

GEMP

But do this. Here, now. This day. Twenty four hours will turn all our lives upside down. Not just you and me, but our party.

HELMUT

I know that he would not just seize power?

GEMP

No need for that. Your work will make the emergency clear. It will be legal. We will have a law to investigate foreigners--like this Dutchman--one powerful decree from Field Marshall Hindenberg. Hitler will go to the President tomorrow to ask for his support--your conspiracy report as his weapon. And you and I will be recognized.

HELMUT

Yes. I'll make this man talk.

(A man enters and waves to Gemp.)

GEMP

So much is in your hands.

(Gemp exits and lights come up on van der Lubbe's chair--empty. His bonds on the seat. Helmut shouts.)

HELMUT

Van der Lubbe.

(searching)

What have I done?

(shouting)

Van der Lubbe.

(Helmut runs behind the scrim and in front, searching, all the while shouting "Van der Lubbe." He stops on the far side of the scrim and shouts.)

HELMUT

They will kill you out there. I am your only hope. They will kill you.

(He waits. No response. He turns to re-enter the near side of the scrim when van der Lubbe suddenly appears with a club and strikes Helmut to the floor. Van der Lubbe drags Helmut to the front of the scrim and shoves him toward the chair, waving a burnt piece of timber as a club.)

VAN DER LUBBE

Sit. Sit!

(Helmut, hugging his arm, struggles into the chair and sits.)

HELMUT

I think it's broken.

VAN DER LUBBE

Now I will be the policeman—the people's policeman.

HELMUT

(trying to rise)

You are not a murderer.

VAN DER LUBBE

(threatening with club)

Sit! It would take nothing to make me kill a policeman? Nothing.

HELMUT

(sitting)

You won't get out of here.

VAN DER LUBBE

I want to kill you. Maybe that would show them.

HELMUT

If you kill me—that will be the end.

VAN DER LUBBE

Of you.

HELMUT

Of you too.

VAN DER LUBBE

But at least I (would have killed--)

HELMUT

You are not a murderer. You had a purpose. You wanted to -what? "Light a torch."

VAN DER LUBBE

But that's all done now.

HELMUT

Tell me. Say everything--

VAN DER LUBBE

I don't trust you. Who are you? His slave--reaching for a little power--fire investigator! Ha. I could destroy you by giving you nothing. He would throw you to the wolves--mother or not.

HELMUT

So you have finished us both. It is over. We are dead. I have failed.

(long pause, as van der Lubbe circles)

But I'm thirsty, so I can't be too dead.

VAN DER LUBBE

You are such a child. You are never dead, if you can say it.

HELMUT

(trying to stand)

Water. Maybe the commissary--

VAN DER LUBBE

Sit!

HELMUT

(sitting)

Get some water. It's one o'clock. You must be hungry.

VAN DER LUBBE

I am hungry.

HELMUT

You can break a lock. I give you permission.

VAN DER LUBBE
(waving the club)

Permission?

HELMUT
We could have bread and sausage. It's in the commissary. Just down those stairs.

VAN DER LUBBE
Sit. I'll get it. I'll tie you.

(Helmut puts his hands behind him painfully and is tied.)

HELMUT
See if you can find an apple, a pear. But lots of sausage for me, thanks.

VAN DER LUBBE
Shut up.

(Van der Lubbe finishes the tying and goes off, and is seen behind the scrim filling his pockets with what he finds.)

HELMUT
Look in the big bin. I saw it before. You could break the lock. I won't report it. I want two apples.

VAN DER LUBBE
(shouted very loud)
Shut up!

(Van der Lubbe returns with a makeshift cloth, folded to hold the food. He lays out the cloth.)

HELMUT
Do you plan to feed me?

(Van der Lubbe gets up from the floor, unties Helmut's hands, but ties his leg to the chair.)

VAN DER LUBBE
You try anything and I'll break your head.

(They both sit on the floor as at a picnic.)

HELMUT

Too bad the fire isn't still burning, we could heat up the sausage.

VAN DER LUBBE

Shut up.

(They eat.)

HELMUT

Tell me, Marinus—Oh, I wish I had some water. Don't you want some water?

VAN DER LUBBE

Damn.

(Van der Lubbe gets up, remembers his club, then goes behind the scrim and comes back with a jug of water, which they pass back and forth as they eat.)

HELMUT

I can't get used to this Berlin sausage. The spices. I think all Berliners are foreigners, eating trash from other countries. The deserts from Vienna. Much too sweet. I saw a restaurant—it was Chinese or Italian. There was something stringy. Spaghetti, I think.

VAN DER LUBBE

I hate the food here. You think they would know how to cook a potato.

HELMUT

But Polish sausage—

VAN DER LUBBE

Shut up!

(They eat in silence.)

VAN DER LUBBE

You really are a child.

(laughing)

You have been in Berlin a few months?

HELMUT

Three weeks.

VAN DER LUBBE

Six months for me.

HELMUT

And no work. Your hands—

VAN DER LUBBE

It's the hands and nose. The salts and dyes get under your skin. They see that and they won't hire you.

HELMUT

So that's why you must—"light a torch." This group, The International Communists—back home—you say they were opposed to Moscow--so you left them. But you wanted to work for Moscow, for the revolution.

VAN DER LUBBE

For the revolution, not with Moscow. The Soviet Communists are dirty nationalists at heart. Mother Russia.

(spitting)

HELMUT

So why did you leave them?

VAN DER LUBBE

They were all fighting one another. I wanted to get the attention of all workers everywhere.

HELMUT

So you met regularly to plan. Who were your friends, where did you meet?

VAN DER LUBBE

We met everywhere. Oh, I see what you are up to. You will go to these--my friends--accuse them--say I have named them as conspirators. Threaten them. I tell you I worked alone.

HELMUT

You wrote to your friends in Holland since you came here.

VAN DER LUBBE

Yes, but I won't give you their names.

HELMUT

It will be easy for us to check with the postal services.

VAN DER LUBBE

They won't remember.

HELMUT

They will remember--given time--and special attention.

VAN DER LUBBE

This is nonsense.

HELMUT

Given time, held in cells, they will remember everything.

VAN DER LUBBE

My friends will help me.

HELMUT

Your friends will never find you.

VAN DER LUBBE

The papers--the reporters.

HELMUT

The papers will never learn you are being held. Under a national emergency fear will let us do whatever we want.

VAN DER LUBBE

You can't. You don't have the power.

HELMUT

Tomorrow. By tomorrow we will--They will, and they will drag you and your friends off to one of those places. Within hours you will beg them to kill you--your baby sister, your dog--whoever they want just to stop the pain.

VAN DER LUBBE

This is all trash—stupid. And what will that mean--
accusing anyone—anyone?

HELMUT

It doesn't matter. Fear will drive them. They are
guilty because they know you, sent you a letter, loaned
you a book, met you in a bar or a church. You will
become the excuse for anything they want to imagine.
You are the excuse--and Hindenberg will sign.

VAN DER LUBBE

He won't. He was a great soldier. He doesn't listen
to little corporals.

HELMUT

He appointed Hitler. He's eighty-six. He can barely
remember the strong man he once was.

VAN DER LUBBE

He'll refuse to sign.

HELMUT

When he sees my report--he will give the Chancellor all
he needs to sway the voters next week.

VAN DER LUBBE

It will be all lies.

HELMUT

You give me no choice. I have just what I see, and my
guesses.

VAN DER LUBBE

Only I know.

HELMUT

And you will take it to your grave.

VAN DER LUBBE

I think you would rather lie—like your hero.

HELMUT

I will write what I believe to be true.

(laughing)

My report will become History.

VAN DER LUBBE

History is all lies.

HELMUT

Maybe history is written by the best liars.

VAN DER LUBBE

If they lie, what does it matter what I say?

HELMUT

Tell it all. Every detail.

VAN DER LUBBE

It will be so little--so small, and they will twist it.

HELMUT

But we will not have twisted it.

VAN DER LUBBE

We!--We?

HELMUT

What we did--what we saw. What else do we have?

VAN DER LUBBE

What about a statement of the worker's rights, the oppression.

HELMUT

More slogans?

VAN DER LUBBE

You'll have only a weak version of the truth.

HELMUT

Oh, it's not grand. But it's the truth.

(pause)

Tell me what happened.

VAN DER LUBBE

And you--

HELMUT

I will write your statement, word for word. No slogans. But I will test what you say against everything I have observed and will learn. That's all I will promise.

VAN DER LUBBE

(pausing, beginning slowly)

I had a backpack--rags. I carried two canvas bags--jugs of fluid.

HELMUT

The time--I need the times.

(making notes)

VAN DER LUBBE

This was about eight.

HELMUT

I thought nine. You were heard--

VAN DER LUBBE

Listen! A little after Eight. The night guard at the employee's entrance goes for his meal then. I had to put the sacks down many times as I walked, my pockets stuffed with starter bricks, walking halfway across Berlin. I was tired--

(Lights fade to black as van der Lubbe talks. Lights come back up on van der Lubbe asleep. Helmut reads his notes, again and again. He struggles and frees himself from the ropes. But he continues going back over pages of his notes, pacing.)

HELMUT

The time. I must-- I know there are others, and it is in these details they'll be found.

(Helmut leaves and returns with two large sacks and a backpack. Painfully he loads the backpack and sacks with debris--bricks and sticks, cloths.)

He started in the debating chamber.

(Helmut, still in pain, mounts the pack on his back, checks his timepiece, grabs the sacks and rushes out. We see him cross behind the scrim, turn and stoop. He pulls debris from the bag. He makes a motion to pour from the jugs.)

HELMET

Next, the commissary.

(He repacks, and runs off. We see him again and again behind the scrim in different simulations of van der Lubbe's actions in setting the fires in many places. He consults his watch each time and runs off. He reappears, now walking slowly, to where van der Lubbe sleeps.)

HELMUT

He could have done it alone.

(He sits in the chair, pulls out a large clean pad, and begins to write.
Blackout.
Lights up on Helmut sleeping in the chair, his arm in a makeshift sling, his report in his hand as Karl Gemp enters.)

GEMP

Helmut. Wake up.

(As Gemp shakes him, the report falls to floor. Gemp seizes it.)

GEMP

Is this it?
(starting to read)

HELMUT

It's just a start. There's no analysis.

GEMP

What--what is this? This is (nonsense.)

HELMUT

He used chemicals. He started fires at the employment office and the Imperial Palace the same way.

GEMP

This is nonsense, Helmut. Where are the names?

HELMUT

He knows his chemistry. It's interesting. Certain chemicals when mixed will spontaneously combust, after time. So you can mix them in such a way to speed or delay the combustion. The fires could be made to start at approximately the same time in different rooms.

GEMP

What are you talking about?

HELMUT

The problem was, how could one man be everywhere to set the fire. How could it seem to break out everywhere all within a very short time, from 9:05 to 9:40?

GEMP

Time? What do I care about time?

HELMUT

The chemical mixture becomes a timing device, a little more of this, or that

GEMP

This is nonsense. You have ruined us.

HELMUT

He planned it to break out all at once so the firefighters would have no chance. The point is he could have done it alone. No one else was needed, and no one caught. He used fire starter bricks and these chemicals. I found the tin containers he used. He gave me the details, the measurement of the (mixtures and I could see how.)

GEMP

This--this is your report? This is useless.

HELMUT

I did the timing--testing his statement, again and again, and it works. I spent most of the night.

GEMP

You wasted your time.

HELMUT

I tested everything. The chancellor will want the proof in the details.

GEMP

These details hide the truth. This was a conspiracy. There were many.

HELMUT

Yes, I'm sure, but I can only report what I can prove. Perhaps tomorrow we can begin again. I could go (to Holland to question others.)

GEMP

There is no tomorrow. The chancellor has been granted an appointment with the President at 10 AM, in four hours.

(checking his time piece)

Goering has already arrested 4,000 leftist leaders. If there is no conspiracy, there will be an uproar.

HELMUT

Perhaps there is a conspiracy--Karl, but I don't believe this man--this prisoner--is involved. I can only report what I have learned.

GEMP

What of his groups--anyone?

HELMUT

He was thrown out of his groups because he was considered wild and unreliable.

GEMP

He is a conspirator.

HELMUT

He is a pyromaniac. He thinks the Reichstag was a torch that would make the workers rise. Hardly a sound plan for revolution. He may be demented from inhaling the chemicals in the tanning- unemployed and a foreigner.

GEMP

He has tricked you. You have allowed yourself to fall into sympathy with him.

HELMUT

I think I know him.

GEMP

You know him too well.

HELMUT

Sir?

GEMP

You have slipped back, Helmut. You have slipped back-- those discussion groups. I made your mother stop that nonsense--the workers, their needs, their health.

HELMUT

They were our neighbors--talking about their lives.

GEMP

You have destroyed yourself. You will not destroy me. I will separate myself from you--and your father. He too did not know when to act for himself.

HELMUT

I didn't think the Chancellor would want the report to lie.

GEMP

There is a conspiracy. We know it.

HELMUT

I can only give a true report.

GEMP

The truth is what we say. This fire is an opportunity you have failed to use, but he won't.

HELMUT

I don't want to believe that.

GEMP

You will see.

HELMUT

He will use--misuse this horror--this insult to our country--to get the votes?

GEMP

He would do anything--anything he needs to gain the majority.

HELMUT

I can't make up a story?

GEMP

It's a greater purpose.

HELMUT

I want to believe him.

GEMP

It will bring a better world.

HELMUT

How will we look to the world?

GEMP

We must recover our pride. This insulting peace. We will burst. We must stop our dependency on foreigners. We will go after Bulgarian oil, Alsace coal, Soviet farmlands.

HELMUT

I don't believe it. He suffered in the war. His book pleads for us to grow in national character.

GEMP

But a cleansing must take place too. But never mind all that now. You will not destroy me.

(ripping and throwing the report)

You've destroyed yourself. You could have given him the proof. Now he must beg and cajole and twist the old man. He could have walked into the President's office a savior. Report back to your office. Speak to no one. Do nothing--nothing till you hear from me. I will reassign you. Perhaps to one of the new camps opening up. And turn this beast over to the SA. Dismissed!

(Gemp exits. Lights up on van der Lubbe, sleeping on the floor. Helmut shakes him. He doesn't wake. Helmut sits and watches the prisoner, who slowly wakes, and sees Helmut watching.)

HELMUT

You were smiling, as you slept.
Were you dreaming of a lovely fire--the flames
licking your enemies?

VAN DER LUBBE

I have that dream often. But this time it was more--an
apocalypse--yes, huge explosions all over the world,
spontaneous outbreaks of burning gasses and decaying
bodies--but yes, the world as a burning ball. Not
armies--no--just people burning.

HELMUT

You poor, tortured deluded man.
(pause)
I have given my report.

VAN DER LUBBE

(seeing papers on the floor)
And it was ripped to shreds.

HELMUT

How did you know I didn't lie?

VAN DER LUBBE

I knew you wouldn't--but I heard what he said.

HELMUT

Now I am unemployed too.

VAN DER LUBBE

Tell me, when he said you would report to one of those
new camps, did he mean on the outside or the inside of
the wire?

HELMUT

Enjoy your laugh. You have your wish. You've made the
workers pay attention. You've made the Nazi's pay
attention. They'll use this fire in the elections next
week. You have awakened us all with your apocalypse.

VAN DER LUBBE

I haven't awakened you. You look around and you see
only what you want to see. You think Gemp and Hitler
and Hindenberg are your noble father?

HELMUT

You know nothing of my father.

VAN DER LUBBE

I know him. I see him through your eyes.

HELMUT

I try to do what he would want.

VAN DER LUBBE

You think those leaders are good men--even as they lie every moment--about Weimar democracy--about national integrity, honesty. They will create fear.

HELMUT

I will stay apart.

VAN DER LUBBE

They will take my little fire here, and light torches that will turn nations to charcoal. And you will watch.

HELMUT

I will do my job.

VAN DER LUBBE

They won't let you, Helmut.
(holding up his hand)
Like me you are marked by the salt.

(Blackout)

THE END OF THE PLAY