

Skin in Flames Reviews
From the U.S. Premiere Production
HotCity Theatre's GreenHouse in St. Louis, MO
March 2-12, 2006
(*Complete and unedited*)

From **KDHX Radio** [Accessed at http://www.kd hx.org/reviews/skin_in_flames.html on March 4, 2006]

KDHX Theatre Review - *Skin In Flames*
[HotCity Theatre](#)
Reviewed by Daniel Higgins

If all that the GreenHouse series at HotCity Theatre were offering this month was the U.S. premiere of a new play, the first work by an award-winning foreign playwright to be translated into English, that would be interesting and intriguing, perhaps, but not necessarily exciting. In fact, what they are offering in their production of Catalan playwright Guillem Clua's *Skin In Flames* is much more important than that. This is a rare opportunity to see a thoughtful and refreshingly different perspective on the relationship between the First World and the Third World in the context of war. Although there are revelations in this play that will undoubtedly make even some of the most well-intentioned liberal theatergoers feel uncomfortable, any such discomfort can only be a sign of a functioning conscience, and is an essentially healthy, if not entirely pleasant, response to the play's content.

The setting is an unspecified Third-World country torn by internecine violence, with a so-called democratic government installed and maintained in power by the First World through the connivance of the United Nations, and it could be set in almost any time in the history of the U.N. The play is nontraditional in form: two different but interrelated scenes are played simultaneously in one hotel-room set. In one scene, a Western photojournalist renowned for having taken the most famous and compelling war photograph in a generation is being interviewed by a reporter from the country's last remaining government-sanctioned newspaper. In the other scene, a local woman barter sexual favors with a U.N. doctor in exchange for a sliver of hope for her child's future. Among artfully-constructed parallels between the two scenes and intriguing ambiguities concerning identity, time, space, and karmic debt, the content that emerges is not for the complacent; indeed, some of this is hard to watch even on the most superficial level. The questions raised concern the sale of Western values to the Third World; the personal impact of war upon innocent noncombatants; the marketing of images so far removed from their proper context as to ignore, to distort, and ultimately to intentionally subvert their meanings; the false promise of Western-style "Democracy" in places where it can't have any meaning; and the sale of empty hope in First-World prosperity, power, and technology.

It would be easy to imagine from this litany of issues that Mr. Clua is roundly and unforgivingly condemning the First World's actions and attitudes. But the tone of the play

in general is not particularly didactic or hectoring; the device of two interactions being played simultaneously allows these matters to be explored in complex and sometimes poetic ways. The political substance is forcefully stated and entirely unapologetic in its worldview, but the characters are individuals and the emotional truth of the play resides in their tragedies and their (ultimately illusory) victories as individuals; it would be a pointless diatribe otherwise. There is at least one allegorical element of the storytelling that could be seen as heavyhanded where the rest of the piece is more subtly constructed, but none of what Mr. Clua has to offer can be rejected out of hand as being merely the agenda of a hostile extremist. Therein lies the challenge, and ultimately, the value of this piece: what we cannot reject, we must somehow confront.

The GreenHouse series, “the experimental and developmental arm of HotCity Theatre,” has no lavish budget, but it's hard to see where spending more money on this production would have made it better. The piece calls for only a simple, inexpensive set, general lighting, minimal practical sound cues, and five costumes including a terrycloth bathrobe. The only opportunity to spend a more generous budget would have been to hire an all-Equity cast, and given the talent that Director Jason Cannon did cast, it's hard to imagine that that would have been any improvement. The one Equity actor, Peter Mayer as Frederick Salomon, the famous photojournalist, is certainly creditable in his best moments, and in any other cast I would probably mark his performance as being memorable, but his non-Equity colleagues all give such accomplished performances that it's impossible to name a standout. Sarah Cannon as Hana, the local reporter, gives a refined and detailed interpretation of a complex character with a sophisticated hidden agenda. Julie Layton as Ida conveys differing shades of unhappiness, one recurrent note of the joy of hope, and a climactic moment of excruciating grief, all the while maintaining the personal dignity of her character against overwhelming forces. Terry Meddows as Dr. Brown is convincing, frightening, and infuriating in portraying hypocrisy and sadism, showing an area of his acting range I haven't seen before. By way of disclaimer, I'll note that Mr. Meddows and I are friends, and some might fairly question my impartiality in commenting on his performance, but I don't believe that any other would be at odds with my remarks about his performance. If Mr. Cannon had done no more than to ensure that this potentially confusing construct would be readily comprehensible throughout, that alone would be a noteworthy accomplishment. In fact, a respectful approach to the serious intent and vision of the text is evident throughout, and only in the most technically difficult sections do the rhythms falter. I am not qualified to comment on the accuracy of local playwright D.J. Sanders' translation, but Mr. Clua, who was on hand for the March 2nd preview, seems to be more than satisfied with it, and I can say that it completely avoids the kind of stilted formality often found in works in translation.

The play includes sexual content, nudity, and explicit descriptions of sadism, and is not for children or others who are easily shocked. But for more adventurous theatergoers, for any who oppose the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq or who question the morality of U.S. foreign policy, and for those who need their complacency challenged, this piece is essential viewing.

Skin in Flames continues through March 12 [2006] at The Theater at St. John's, 5000 Washington Place. For information, call 314-289-4063.

From a **Personal Blog** [Accessed at <http://kimcstl.blogspot.com/2006/03/skin-in-flames.html> on March 4, 2006]

Friday, March 03, 2006

Skin In Flames

I went to see [HotCity Theatre's](#) production of *Skin In Flames* last night, not knowing any more than what I had read in the press release (below). I didn't even know who was in the cast. I had signed up to work as an usher for the show which, in the St. Louis theatre community at least, is a great way to see plays for free.

The play is set in the 20th century but there is no specific time or place where the events occur, beyond the fact that it is a hotel room in a third world country. A man and a woman enter the hotel room to find that it is a total wreck. Dirty sheets are rumpled on the bed, used glasses are on the side table. Outside the window, trash can be seen blown against the chain link fence. The man is an American photojournalist who has come back to this war-torn country after 20 years to receive an award from the government for a photo he took there of a young girl on fire after a bombing. The woman is a journalist for the state-owned newspaper who wants to interview the man about that one photo for which he has gained world-wide fame.

During the questions and answers between them, another woman enters the room and walks to the window to look out. Neither the photographer or the journalist see her. Soon another man enters the room and walks to the woman at the window. They know each other. They may even be intimate acquaintances, but it soon becomes apparent that she is desperately in need of something that only he can provide. We soon find out that he has no sense of shame in abusing the power he has over her.

These two separate (but are they?) stories are going on in the same hotel room but neither set of characters interacts with the other. The photographer and journalist continue their interview at the center table, while the other couple act out their abusive relationship on the bed.

That's all of the story I am going to tell you, except that there are plenty of twists, turns, and humiliations ahead for (almost) all concerned. As the press release states, this production is for mature audiences only. Not just because of the full frontal male and female nudity, but because of sadistic sexual practices, and powerful emotional situations.

The cast includes Terry Meddows, Peter Mayer, Sarah Cannon, and Julie Layton. All four actors were superb. They were totally believable. They were "in the moment". Never once did I not believe in the utter sincerity of their performances.

I do want to mention that while I have seen three of these actors in other plays, I personally know one of them and consider her a friend. I have worked with Julie Layton on several plays and have seen her perform in many others that I wasn't involved with. I know that she's a good actress, but each time I see her perform it's almost as if I'm rediscovering just how fantastic she is. Really.

I've never been so emotionally disturbed by a play as I was by this one. After leaving the theatre, I hadn't even realized that I had made the 20 minute drive home until I pulled into my

driveway. I'm sure it's not safe to be on auto-pilot that long, but I couldn't get this play out of my head. When Hub-Man and The Boy asked me how I liked the play, I couldn't answer. I tried to open my mouth to speak, but I knew if I started talking, I would start crying. Sobbing, probably. I was that affected by it.

If you like powerful theatre, put *Skin In Flames* on your list of things to see soon.

From the Press Release:

HOTCITY GREENHOUSE TO PRESENT U.S. PREMIERE OF AWARD-WINNING, SKIN IN FLAMES
The GreenHouse, the developmental and educational arm of HotCityTheatre, opens its second season with the U.S. and English language premiere of SKIN IN FLAMES, by award-winning Catalan playwright Guillem Clua, in a translation by St. Louis playwright DJ Sanders. The show previews at 8 p.m. on March 2, and runs March 3-12 at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 7 p.m. on Sundays. Performances will be at the Theatre at St. John's at 5000 Washington Place, St. Louis, MO 63108. Tickets are \$12 general admission, \$10 for students and seniors. For reservations, call 314-289-4063 or visit www.hotcitytheatre.org.

LA PELL EN FLAMES premiered in its original language, Catalan, in Barcelona last summer after winning the City of Alcoi Theatre Prize in 2004 (Clua's second win for this award). SKIN IN FLAMES is the first translation of Clua's play and the GreenHouse production will be the second production in the world. Directed by Jason Cannon, SKIN IN FLAMES is a blistering meditation on the mass marketing of war, the insidious consequences of Westernization, and the darker sides of forgiveness. This story of a world-famous photojournalist held hostage promises audiences a heartbreaking mystery with gut-wrenching twists. Please note: This play contains extremely mature subject matter, strong language, sexual situations, and nudity and is NOT for young audiences.

 Performance by KC @ [Friday, March 03, 2006](#)

From **KWMU Radio** (an NPR station) [Accessed at <http://www.kwmu.org/Programs/Reviews/review.php?reviewid=347> on March 6, 2006]

Reviews – Joe Pollack: KWMU Theatre & Film Critic

There is great value in learning what others think of us, and that's what makes "Skin in Flames" a success, and maybe an important play. The Greenhouse Production of Hot City Theatre opened over the weekend at the theater of St. Johns, and runs through this weekend. It certainly has problems, and yet, Guillem Clua's play, receiving its first production outside its native Barcelona, where it had a premiere last summer, is a worthy endeavor.

Set in an unnamed third-world country, the drama deals with an American photographer who once took a famous picture. He's visiting to speak at a conference because of the efforts of an old friend, a doctor involved with the UN. Peter Mayer is the photographer, Terry Meddows the doctor. Both are excellent, the latter especially so because it is a role far different than he usually plays.

Mayer is being interviewed by Sarah Cannon of the local newspaper, Meddows is having his sexual pleasure with the lovely but passive Julie Layton. Clua's writing, and Jason Cannon's direction, keep the two pairs separate, even while they inhabit the same stage. It's clever, and it works, but Cannon allows the two women to use accents as if they are from different planets, and it's a jarring weakness.

Clua then turns the two Americans into crude, crass, almost disgusting villains, Mayer for money and fame, Meddows for sexual pleasure and power.

Strong stuff, showing why Europeans may not like us very much, with nudity and raw language, but "Skin in Flames" is rewarding, by Hot City through Sunday.

From the **Riverfront Times** [Accessed at http://www.riverfronttimes.com/Issues/2006-03-08/culture/stage_print.html on March 9, 2006]

From riverfronttimes.com
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Napalm Pilot

Skin in Flames gets you all hot and bothered about the war in Iraq
By Dennis Brown

Anyone attending *Skin in Flames* is advised to wear asbestos clothes. This intense Spanish drama by Guillem Clua, which is receiving its American premiere at the hands of HotCity Theatre's GreenHouse, ignites a theatrical wildfire of suspense and surprise that sears the imagination.

Written two years ago in response to America's invasion of Iraq, the play is set in the capital city of an unnamed war-torn Third World nation upon which democracy has been forcibly imposed. The intricately structured plot chronicles two stories that appear to be playing out simultaneously (how can this be?) in "the best suite in the best hotel in the city." The first concerns the world's most celebrated photographer, who is about to receive an extravagant United Nations-sponsored prize in recognition of a now-iconic war photo he snapped in this same ravaged town decades earlier.

The immortal shot depicts a girl on fire, hurling through space after a bomb blast. (Clearly the playwright intends to call to mind Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1972 photo of a naked Vietnamese girl running through her village after having been burned by napalm.) In *Skin in Flames*, although the victim of the bomb blast has "disappeared without a trace," her image has become a lofty symbol of peace throughout the world. But Frederick Salomon, who took the photo, is not so lofty. In a contentious interview with a local reporter (Sarah Cannon), Salomon reveals himself as a metaphor for all smug, well-intentioned but ineffectual Westerners, too dependent on their creature comforts, who aimlessly drift through life.

Peter Mayer's Salomon is a crafty accumulation of calculated details: the weary, war-inflicted limp; the white gloves that seem even paler when palpable tension turns his forehead various shades of scarlet. This is Mayer's most compelling and commanding work since his deft turn in another electrifying American premiere, *In a Little World of Our Own*, which HotHouse Theatre Company staged in 2003.

The second story involves Ida, a timid factory worker who, in order to acquire medicine for her ailing child, is sadistically exploited by a sexual predator of a doctor (Terry Meddows, chillingly benign). Those who find these goings-on too graphic might prefer to stay home in front of their television sets and watch reports of suicide bombers blowing people to smithereens. *Skin in Flames* isn't that easy; the play presents violence as voyeurism.

Perhaps Ida too is a metaphor: the innocent foreigner raped by the salacious Westerner. But no one's going to be thinking about metaphors when Julie Layton is onstage. Layton has always been noted for her porcelain beauty and onstage charm, but never before has she been asked to excavate the dark shafts of her soul. She rises to the challenge with a

Jill Ritter



See here: Julie Layton and Terry Meddows in *Skin in Flames*.

Details

Who / What:

Skin in Flames

Details:

Through March 12.

Tickets are \$12 (\$10 for students and seniors). Call 314-289-4063 or visit www.hotcitytheatre.org

Where:

St. John's United Methodist Church, 5000 Washington Place (at Kingshighway).

performance that shames the viewer, just as Ida has been shamed. As she then transforms Ida into a heroine worthy of Greek tragedy, Layton's shattering work leaves a raw scar on the memory.

St. Louis is only the second city in the world to see *Skin in Flames* and the first to see it in English, for which we can all thank Washington University graduate student D.J. Sanders. Because, via e-mail, he was able to consult (at times even collaborate) with the playwright, this translation from the Catalan language (original title: *La pell en flames*) is unexpectedly fluid. The production, directed by Jason Cannon, is in many ways significantly revised from the version that debuted in Barcelona last year.

One can only hope that the revisions won't stop here. Structurally the 80-minute, intermissionless play already is so far superior to most new American scripts that it demands seeing. But in its current condition there are still too many words. The final third gets bogged down in the underbrush of verbiage and requires thinning. Clua needs to say less and show more. If he will return to his own premise — the scorching impact of imagery — he might be able to tighten and elevate *Skin in Flames* into a drama of enduring import.

From the **West End Word** [Accessed at http://www.westendword.com/cgi-local/moxiebin/bm_tools.cgi?print=604;s=4_5;site=1 on March 9, 2006]

Newly translated Catalan play deserves broad audience

By [Bob Wilcox](#)

Posted Wednesday, March 8, 2006

Skin in Flames violates one of the legendary rules of the theater. And it's a better play for it.

HotCity Theatre is currently producing *Skin in Flames* in its Greenhouse Series of new and experimental works. New the play certainly is. It was first produced just last summer in the playwright's native Barcelona. The HotHouse production is only the second staging of the play and the first in English.

But *Skin in Flames* is not the work of a novice. Guillem Clua has already won a couple of prizes for his plays, including one for this work. *Skin in Flames* shows that Clua knows how to construct a plot, build a scene, develop character, even play around with the timeline of the story he unfolds.

And he can write dialogue. At least, that's what I gather from the translation HotHouse is using. And, as the playwright speaks English well, was present at both the preview and the opening last week, and didn't rise to protest at either performance, I assume that he found the translation reasonably accurate.

Certainly the translation plays well. Translator DJ Sanders has given the actors dialogue that sounds natural in their mouths. He even varies the style appropriately from character to character and from situation to situation within the play.

Skin in Flames takes place in a hotel room in the capital city of a Third World country that is emerging from years of civil war. The country isn't named. It could be a Balkan

country — Bosnia, perhaps. Or a Middle Eastern city — Beirut or Baghdad. Or Central American. Or African or Asian, though all the actors in this production are white. The situation exists all over the world.

The set, as would be expected for this low-budget series, simply gives the actors the minimal essentials for performing the text. The actors, on the other hand, give all that a playwright could ask.

Two encounters alternate in the hotel room. Both involve a man from the U.S. and a young woman from the Third World country. Both explore the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

In one pair, the exploitation is blatant. The woman has a child who is hospitalized with AIDS. A doctor, a member of a U.N. mission to the country, supplies her with scarce medicines in exchange for sex. The sex is brutal and sadistic.

In the other pair, considerable ambiguity complicates the question of exploitation. The man, a famous American photojournalist, has returned to this capital to receive an award for a photo he took 20 years earlier during a rebel attack on the city. The photo caught a schoolgirl at the moment a bomb exploded behind her, hurling her through the air with her skin in flames. The photo has been reproduced all over the world and has become a symbol, on posters, banners and T-shirts, of the horrors of war and of the longing for peace. And it has made the photographer rich and famous.

The young woman is a local journalist, come to interview the famous man. Gradually her questions begin to probe his guilt for having profited from the suffering of another. Or has he? Was he in any way responsible for what happened, or was he just lucky to be in the right place at the right time? Should he have done more than he did, then or since then?

The playwright forces the issue by having the young woman threaten to kill the American. This certainly raises the play's level of suspense and accelerates the man's confessions. But I can't figure out why she would want to kill him. Her motivation isn't clear to me, and the threat sensationalizes their encounter.

Clua also indulges in a couple of ironic twists at the end of the play that strike me as a little too self-consciously clever. But these are the indulgences of a young playwright. They're easily forgiven in exchange for the taut and probing drama he's given us.

The set, as would be expected for this low-budget series, simply gives the actors the minimal essentials for performing the text. The actors, on the other hand, give all that a playwright could ask. Peter Mayer strips the photojournalist to his soul without ever quite losing touch with the man's sense of entitlement as a master of his art. Sarah Cannon maintains a core of sly mystery about the interviewer, even as she seems to fall apart

emotionally. Terry Meddows makes the doctor's cruelty even more repulsive as it alternates between moments of tenderness and flat, business-like orders. And Julie Layton's forced submissiveness as his victim becomes terrifying.

Jason Cannon has directed a production and a script that have already moved beyond the need for the nurturing protection of a Greenhouse. I don't know quite how this Catalan play wound up in St. Louis, but we can be grateful that it did.

Bob Wilcox also reviews theater for KDHX-FM, 88.1, and for cable's Two on the Aisle.

From **PLAYBACK:stl** [Accessed at http://www.playbackstl.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1745&Itemid=31# on March 11, 2006]

Skin in Flames | Hot City Theatre

Written by Anne Earney

Friday, 10 March 2006

The drama was complex, inviting parallels not only between the couples onstage, but between the play and the world, and oneself and the characters.

Skin in Flames

by Guillem Clua

Translated by DJ Sanders

HotCity Theatre

Directed by Jason Cannon

Through March 12, 2006

Skin in Flames, which premiered March 2 at the Greenhouse—HotCity Theatre's experimental and developmental arm—is St. Louis playwright DJ Sander's translation of the Catalan playwright, Guillem Clua's *La Pell en Flames*, which had its world premiered in Barcelona last year.

The play centers around a famous photograph, taken twenty years earlier by Frederick Salomon (Peter Mayer), depicting a girl with her back in flames in a war-torn country. Years later, Salomon returns to the country, which is still beset by violence. On the bequest of the United Nations, he is to accept an award in the name of peace. Hanna (Sarah Cannon), a journalist, accompanies Salomon to his hotel room for an interview. Salomon notices the body of a woman in the courtyard, and Hanna, apparently callused to the violence, tosses off the observation. During the interview, she asks personal, driving questions, which Salomon does not want to answer. Finally, Hanna reveals that she was the girl in the photo he took so long ago—or was she?

Before Salomon and Hanna came to the room, it was occupied by another couple: Dr. Brown, a UN representative, and Ida, a woman driven to prostitution in order to gain access to medical care for her gravely ill daughter. For a few pain pills, Ida gives Dr. Brown sexual favors. Dr. Brown promises better care for her daughter, but asks for more and more in return. They leave the room disheveled, and that is how Salomon and Hanna find it.

Both narratives take place onstage at the same time, with the couple occupying different areas of the set, which consisted of a hotel bed, nightstand and phone on one side of a window with billowing white curtains, and a small dresser, coffee pot, table and two chairs on the other. Lighting effectively indicated the late morning setting, without overtly spotlighting the characters throughout. Through clever staging and delivery of overlapping dialogue, a gradual piecing together of the evidence was made possible. The dramatic action between each couple heightened and clarified what went on between the other. The drama was complex, inviting parallels not only between the couples onstage, but between the play and the world, and oneself and the characters.

Peter Mayer, as Salomon, gave an impassioned performance, coming across as a man torn by his own doubts, yet at the same time, refusing to acknowledge them. Always keeping remorse at arm's length, he stepped back from the chasm of grief just often enough to cause himself the maximum amount of pain. Sarah Cannon created an enigmatic Hannah, a reporter playing games, a victim and a victor, laying traps for Mayer, but never making it fully clear who's in control. Julie Layton was especially convincing as Ida, the mother willing to go to all ends for her child, yet is still childlike herself. Cold to the affections of Dr. Brown, lovable and sweet as she read her daughter's favorite children's book, angered and upset by Dr. Brown's games, Layton was changeable and dynamic. Terry Meadows, as Dr. Brown, descended in the eyes of the audience from a man who took advantage of his power, to a truly sadistic character. Brown's rendition of a man on the receiving end of oral sex was quite realistic.

While the play was complex and presented a puzzle to the audience, Jason Cannon's direction made the action possible to follow. What could have been a jumbled mess worked. Letting the message of the play, which is relatively simple, come out of a fascinating mixture of elements.

Guillem Clua was able to be part of the audience at the preview. Dressed in cuffed jeans and a "DIE HIPSTER SCUM" t-shirt, the young playwright joined DJ Sanders after the production to take questions from the audience.

About the conception of *La Pelle en Flames*, which took place in 2003 shortly after the invasion of Iraq, Clua said, "I wanted to show that all wars are the same war." Motivated by a "primal need" to write the play, Clua finished the first draft in five days. It was, he said, an effort to use his "weapons" of words to denounce the horror of war. He clarified that the play is not intended to be about the universality of war, but rather, "the universality of horror." He pointed out that a single girl dying on stage moves an audience more than the news that thousands died that day in another country.

Because the play is not set in any particular time or country, Sanders believes it will play just as strongly ten or twenty years from now. Clua, who wrote the play as a criticism of the “western world,” said he sees it as self-criticism as well, and not specifically a criticism of the United States.

Sanders and Clua met “randomly” through the internet. Clua sent Sanders his play, and Sanders decided he wanted to translate it for American audiences. Sanders noted that the translation was easier than others because he did not have to translate another culture, as the two male characters are Americans.

Because Clua is fluent in English, he was able to assist with the translation, giving Sanders the opportunity to discuss choices he wasn't sure of. Clua offered feedback throughout the translation process, and said that he was happy with the results.

Clua became especially animated in response to a question about the typical high level of education, economic prosperity, and liberal politics of theater-going audiences, and how this results in the message of a play such as *Skin in Flames* going out to those who already feel the same way. Waving his hands emphatically, he pointed out that attending a theater performance requires planning, leaving the house, buying tickets, and so on, as opposed to television, which doesn't require getting off the couch. “Republicans will go to see *Cats*,” he said, “and they will stick with that.”

Skin in Flames may not be pleasant; it doesn't simply tread on the sore spots of liability, guilt and crime—it dives right in. As to why the play portrays so much horror, Clua said, “Why should I make it more pleasant for the audience?” *Skin in Flames*, which is nothing like cats, is a complex play for mature, thinking, audiences.

*HotCity Theatre presents **Skin in Flames** by Guillem Clua and translated by DJ Sanders, March 2 through March 12 at the Theatre at St. John's (5000 Washington Place). Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, and 7 p.m. Sunday. Thursday tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for students and seniors. Friday and Saturday tickets are \$18 for adults and \$15 for children, students and seniors. Seating is general admission, not reserved. Reservations can be made online or by calling 314-289-4163.*

www.hotcitytheatre.org