

Skin in Flames

Written by Guillem Clua

Translated from the Catalan by DJ Sanders

Winner of the City of Alcoi Theatre Prize, 2004

Winner of the Barcelona Critics Award for Best Script, 2005

CHARACTERS

FREDERICK SALOMON – Male, about 50 years old

HANNAH – Female, late 20s

DR BROWN – Male, 40s

IDA – Female, late 20s

SETTING & RUNNING TIME

A hotel suite in a post-war country. The Present. Approx. 90 minutes without an intermission.

SYNOPSIS

Frederick Salomon, a photojournalist famed for capturing an image of a girl sent flying through the air from a bomb explosion, returns to the country where twenty years earlier he captured that infamous photograph. Arriving to receive an award, many credit his photograph for the country's recent peace efforts; however, a local journalist, Hannah, interprets his image differently. As Hannah interviews Frederick Salomon, they debate and question the United Nations' role in assisting third-world nations, the mass marketing of images of violence, but most importantly what really happened on that fateful day.

Meanwhile, in the same theatrical space, another couple's story unfolds; however, each couple remains unaware of the other's presence. Dr. Brown is making a routine visit with a local woman, Ida, whose daughter is in a coma at a local hospital. Ida trades sexual favors for the medical treatment that may save her daughter and provide the chance to see her little Sara transferred to a hospital in America.

Two contrasting scenes of deceit and desperation slowly shape the plot as the audience pieces together the fragments left behind by the war. Who was the girl in the photo? How did that image change her life, her country, and the world? And what is the eventual fallout from each character's choices?

Skin in Flames takes the audience on an emotional and intellectual journey challenging them to consider and question the fine line dividing those in power and those in need of assistance. With the expertly crafted dramatic structure and story elements found in every country's newspaper headlines, Guillem Clua's award-winning script melds the best of content and form into a hauntingly unforgettable theatrical experience.

REPRESENTATION

Requests for the full script and production rights may be addressed to Susan Gurman at:

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Quotes about the Script and Premiere Production of *Skin in Flames*

“As a journalist, I am speaking to everyday themes, to the stories that appear in the morning paper and affect us all.”

-- Guillem Clua, author of *Skin in Flames*, speaking to why he wrote this play

“In the ambitious structure of the dramatic storyline, in the ambiguity of certain facts, and in the intriguing crescendo of the plot, there are hours of reflection packed into the short theatrical experience.”

-- Joan-Anton Benach, *La Vanguardia*

“In the category of ‘war dramas’, Vietnam has served as the backdrop for many. Various artists (especially film directors) have taken Vietnam as their referent. From this lineage, although slightly altered, we find the dramatic text from young Catalan writer Guillem Clua. Diverging slightly from the canon of ‘war dramas’, there is not one single explicit reference to the country in which this story takes place. Of importance is not the place of the military conflict, but its very existence, and also because during the time of action decades have already passed since the bombs were being dropped. But the inspiration for *Skin in Flames* is easily recognized through the plot in which the protagonists discuss a photograph, which clearly alludes to the famous image captured by Vietnamese photographer, Nick Ut, during an explosion of napalm, with a little girl, her skin burned, running naked.”

-- Belén Ginart, *El País*

“*Skin in Flames* has a balanced structure confined to two interrelated couples representing dominance and vulnerability, both scenes synchronized to play in two rooms of a hotel, with a revolving exposition that draws focus to one space or the other. The dialogue is understated and at times cruel yet dramatically sound.”

-- Maria-José Rague-Arias, *El Mundo*

“Without specifying concrete nations or wars, Clua, who plays with the coordination of time and space, has used this situation in an enriching theatrical game, placing four characters in one hotel room, allowing two couples to converse amongst themselves without any acknowledgement of the presence of the other couple because—and the audience will grasp this immediately—presumably these conversations are taking place at distinct times.”

-- Elena Hevia, *El Periódico*

Sample Scene from

SKIN IN FLAMES
(La Pell en Flames)

by Guillem Clua

translated from the Catalan by DJ Sanders

(Midday.

The window is wide open. A gust of wind blows the curtains. Bright sunlight shines in on the unmade bed. Periodically, the sound of a car is heard from the sparse city traffic.

Suddenly, a woman screams from outside at the street level ten floors below. A cloud softens the invading sunlight. Silence. The door opens. FREDERICK SALOMON, a man of about fifty, enters with a suitcase. He wears a beige linen suit and white gloves. He moves about with confidence and purpose despite his being overweight and walking with a limp.

Behind him enters HANNA, a woman in her late twenties, petite, and petulant, but with an inexplicable allure. She has done her best to dress elegantly with a blouse and skirt, but the cheap knockoff outfit fails to impress. She remains a suspicious woman watching her every step as if she feared the floor would fall out from under her feet. She carries a large handbag)

SALOMON

(indignant)

The best hotel in the city. Isn't that what they said? The best hotel in the city and they make you carry your own luggage to your room.

(to HANNA)

Come in, come in. Don't stay out there. They'll still think that... Just, come in.

(HANNA enters and closes the door, but does not sit. SALOMON notices the disheveled sheets with a white bathrobe on top. He leaves his suitcase on the floor and sets a stack of papers on the table)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

And on top of that. Who the hell is running this place?

(to HANNA)

Did you hear what they said about this room? You were right there with me. The best suite in the best hotel of the city. Now I've seen it all.

HANNA

Things are different here than in your country, Mr. Salomon.

SALOMON

Unfortunately, things here are different than in any other country in the world.

(SALOMON looks about the room with disgust. He turns toward the window suddenly as if something were calling his attention. For a moment, he is taken with fear)

HANNA

Are you all right, Mr. Salomon?

SALOMON

No-- For a moment it seemed like...

(SALOMON takes a deep breath and shakes his head to calm his anxiety. He grabs the bathrobe taking it into the bathroom where he lets out a groan of displeasure. He returns holding some blue panties at arm's length. He goes to the telephone)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

(to HANNA)

Please, make yourself comfortable, if that's possible.

(HANNA does not sit and stays close to her bag. SALOMON picks up the phone and dials)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

(on the phone)

Yes. Frederick Salomon... Yes, I'm good, thank you...
No. Absolutely not. This room's a pig style... Why should that concern me? It looks like someone just left this room two seconds ago... Five minutes? Five western minutes or five local minutes?... Well, I hope so. Thank you. Goodbye.

(SALOMON hangs up. He shakes his head in disapproval of the panties, tossing them in the trash)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

Sorry, I didn't think that-- If you like, we could do the interview somewhere else, perhaps somewhere more sanitary.

HANNA

No, it's fine.

SALOMON

Are you certain?

HANNA

Right here is fine.

(SALOMON removes his jacket. SALOMON is visibly warm. He meticulously folds his jacket before setting it down in a place that he dusts off)

SALOMON

I really don't have that much time. In about a half hour they're coming to get me for the ceremony and lunch at the presidential palace with--well, I'm sure you already know--with all the members on the committee, a few dozen ambassadors, and the Minister of I-don't-know-what.

HANNA

The Minister of Tourism and Communication.

SALOMON

That's it. I see that you've done your homework.

HANNA

That is my job.

SALOMON

(motioning to the suitcase)

Do you mind if I...?

HANNA

Please, go ahead.

SALOMON

Can I offer you anything while you wait?

HANNA

No, I'm fine, thank you.

(SALOMON grabs his suitcase and opens
it on the bed. He unpacks his clothes,
putting them in the closet)

HANNA (Cont'd)

You know I've been dreaming of doing this interview for
years.

SALOMON

Thank you.

HANNA

It really means a lot to me.

SALOMON

Now which paper did you say you worked for?

HANNA

Which one do you think? We only have one national
newspaper.

SALOMON

What happened to the other one?

HANNA

They closed it down last month for being unpatriotic.

SALOMON

Really? I'm so sorry to hear that.

HANNA

Why?

SALOMON

I don't know... Aren't you sorry?

HANNA

It wasn't my newspaper they shut down.

SALOMON

Even still...

HANNA

When was the last time you were here?

SALOMON

Twenty years ago.

HANNA

And after all this time have you noticed many changes?

SALOMON

A democracy has been installed.

HANNA

A democracy that also shuts down newspapers.

SALOMON

But in the end, it is a democracy. Your people should be proud. Especially you.

HANNA

Me?

SALOMON

How old are you? Twenty-five? Thirty? You've lived the majority of your life in wartime. Now, however--

HANNA

We're still living in wartime, Mr. Salomon. Just because you don't hear the bombs exploding doesn't mean the war is over.

SALOMON

But now you have the peace treaty.

HANNA

If you can call it that.

SALOMON

What else would you call it?

(HANNA gives no response. Pause.
SALOMON has finished putting his
clothing and suitcase in the closet)

HANNA

Are you expecting me to thank you?

SALOMON

For what?

HANNA

For the peace.

SALOMON

Thank me?

HANNA

Yes, you, your country, the United Nations. What's the
difference?

SALOMON

Don't be ridiculous.

HANNA

That's why they're giving you the award, isn't it?

SALOMON

(bitterly)
I didn't do anything.

HANNA

Yes, I know that.

(Pause. SALOMON and HANNA size each
other up with sudden suspicion. A
strong breeze blows the curtains and
causes some of the papers to fly off
the table)

SALOMON

Shit.

(SALOMON rushes to collect the papers. He returns them to their original spot on the table and goes to close the window. He hesitates and first looks out the window to survey below. Quickly taken aback, a terrified SALOMON looks at HANNA before returning to look below)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

There's a woman down on the street. She's...

(HANNA approaches the window and looks out and below)

HANNA

(expressionless)

She's naked.

SALOMON

She's dead.

HANNA

She must have jumped from one of the hotel windows.

SALOMON

But...how long do you think that...

HANNA

It's the tallest building in the city. Some people come here just to ensure an easy death.

(SALOMON goes over, grabs the phone, and dials)

SALOMON

(on the telephone)

Yes, Frederick Salomon... Forget the damn room! There's a dead woman below on the lawn! Has anyone even noticed?... I don't know. Why don't you try calling an ambulance!... Yes, on the west side of the building... Well, I hope so.

(Hanging up, SALOMON returns to the window. HANNA has moved off to the side but remains focused on him. He remains fixed on the action below)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

Let's see if they get their asses in gear... How is it possible that-- For the love of God!

(Pause. SALOMON's attention remains on the action outside below. Meanwhile, HANNA situates herself behind him)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

Now they're finally out there.

(HANNA pulls a handgun from her bag and points it at SALOMON)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

A young woman... I'd say she's around your age, but I can't be sure. Poor girl.

(Pause. SALOMON continues watching outside.)

HANNA cocks the gun without SALOMON noticing)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

They're taking her inside. Do they call an ambulance? No. Publicity like that wouldn't be good for the city's best hotel.

HANNA

This is fairly common. People die. No one asks questions.

(At this moment, IDA enters the room from the bathroom. IDA appears the same age as HANNA and is dressed in a conservative yet appealing blue dress. IDA wears her long hair loose, allowing it to hide her neck and back. IDA stops between HANNA and SALOMON to toss and fix her hair. IDA is unaware of the others' presence as are they to her presence)

(HANNA continues to point the gun as it shakes in her hands. With his back still turned, SALOMON remains unaware)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

I was so close to not even coming here, you know? Because of this. Death. And this day in particular. But you should know about that. You've done your research. That's your job. And for all this: the award. It's one thing to see it all on TV, but to see it here--

(SALOMON cuts himself off, as if about to cry, but he holds it back.

Pause.

HANNA lowers her weapon, returning it to her handbag)

(IDA checks the time and looks out the window, next to SALOMON, as if waiting for someone)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

It's like nothing happened. A woman just killed herself and people go on like it's any other day.

HANNA

People are still afraid of getting too close to the windows.

(IDA sticks her head out the window and looks around)

SALOMON

I shouldn't have... Look, someone else is looking out their window a few floors down. She's wearing a beautiful dress.

(A knock at the door. IDA goes to open the door and fixes her hair along the way)

(SALOMON pulls back to close the window, truly affected by what he has seen)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

If you'll excuse me a moment... We can start the interview in a bit. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'll--

(SALOMON cuts himself off and goes into the bathroom, closing himself inside)

(IDA opens the hotel room door. DOCTOR BROWN, a man in his forties who fears getting older, enters the room. His clothing, mannerisms, and the kiss he plants on her cheek come across as paternal and chivalrous. He carries a briefcase)

BROWN

Hello, sweetheart.

IDA

Hello, Dr. Brown.

BROWN

Did they let you in without any trouble?

IDA

(preoccupied)

Like always. I want to ask you how...?

BROWN

How am I? I'm good, very good.

IDA

Sara.

BROWN

Ah, yes. She's still in intensive care.

IDA

But she is better?

BROWN

No change.

IDA

When can I see her?

BROWN

It's still early, Ida.

IDA

But--

BROWN

We need to keep her isolated.

IDA

I don't understand why they do this to me.

BROWN

It's better for her.

IDA

It's better for her that she be with her mother.

(HANNA approaches the bathroom to
listen outside the door)

BROWN

Are you complaining?

IDA

(submissive)

No.

BROWN

Yes, you are complaining and there is no reason.

IDA

No. I am not complaining. I am very thankful.

BROWN

That's better.

IDA

But I...I only want to give her a little kiss. To be
by her side.

BROWN

Remember that any infection could be fatal. Is that
what you want? To kill her with one of your kisses?

(No response from IDA. BROWN sees that his comment has not been well received)

(HANNA goes to SALOMON's jacket, fishes out his wallet, and looks through it)

BROWN (Cont'd)

We're doing everything we can.

IDA

I'm sorry.

BROWN

It's all right.

IDA

I brought you her favorite storybook. Maybe you can give it to a nurse there or... I don't know. She likes you to read it before she goes to sleep.

(HANNA pulls money from the wallet, which she counts to find a large amount. Returning the money to the wallet, she pulls out a photograph, which grabs and holds her attention)

BROWN

Ida...

IDA

The main character is a little pig. A little pig that travels in a balloon and finds other animals. Sara likes it when you imitate the animals. Will you tell the nurse to imitate them? If she does not imitate them, the story is not funny.

BROWN

I can't promise anything.

IDA

She will hear it, right? She can hear it even if she is still...like that. I read it one time in a magazine.

BROWN

Of course she can.

(The sound of the bathroom door opening can be heard. HANNA quickly puts back the photo and wallet. SALOMON emerges from the bathroom where he has washed his face and taken no notice of her snooping)

SALOMON

We can start whenever you like.

IDA

We can start whenever you like.

HANNA

If you're not feeling well...

BROWN

If you're not feeling well...

SALOMON

(shaking his head no)

It's just the weather. This damn heat. It's going to my head.

(IDA shakes her head no and goes over to the bed. Once there, she slowly and submissively begins to undo the top of her dress to reveal a blue bra. BROWN sets his briefcase down to watch her)

SALOMON (Cont'd)

(sitting)

It'll probably be best if we got this over with as soon as possible. Do you have your tape recorder?

HANNA

(sitting and pulling out a notepad and pen)

I'll just take notes.