PREFACE

Along with many American writers of the 1930s, Lillian Hellman addressed the Great Depression in her plays of the period. She reflected in her plays on the aftermath of this and revealed her own political and social awakening. She shared with other thirties writers, the writers of the "red decade," a belief in collective action and the socialist ideal. She offered a condemnation of fascism and a critique of the capitalist personality. As Marxists say, her work's "manifest content" is the same as theirs — strikes, industrial expansion, class warfare, opposition to fascism. But her plays are much more complex variants of their thirties counterparts. Her Days to Come is much more than a strike play. It unfolds a social history to a far greater extent than Black Pit or Marching Song or even Waiting for Lefty. Plays like The Little Foxes and The Autumn Garden offer not only an indictment of the dominant social structures but show an intricate artistic design matched only by Awake and Sing! And Paradise Lost. Addressed more deliberately to the mainstream audience, plays like Watch on the Rhine and The Searching Wind, belonging to the anti-war genre, present facets of fascism.

Hellman wrote for Broadway and often achieved success there while most of the other engaged writers wrote for the Group Theater, a company
of like-minded artists whose political affiliations extended into the radical fringe. Unlike Miller’s plays, Hellman’s plays do not address a historical period or politics directly. Written in the realistic mode, as distinguished from the “theatricalist,” Hellman’s plays (except a couple of her adaptations) follow broadly the pattern of the “well-made plays.” Hellman asks the question, what if the play is contrived, as long as it is convincing? While saying that the realistic form interests her most, Hellman demands that the playwright “trick up the scene.” She uses the conventions of the “well-made” play to lure her audience into a confrontation with unpleasant truths by her refusal to overlook moral bankruptcy or to romanticize evasions of reality.

Brechtian in her approach in certain respects, Hellman expects her audience to correct social ills by exhibiting an urge for political action and she simultaneously indicts them for their complicity in the perpetuation of these social evils. Her conviction is that the theatre is an instrument of transformation of the unethical, unjust, venal world. And this she demonstrates by making use of Ibsenite social realism and giving us a novelistic technique and multiple character analysis which reminds us in plays like The Autumn Garden of a Chekhovian strain.

A major force on the Broadway stage, Hellman has produced plays which are described by epithets such as “melodramas of social protest,” “comedies of greed,” “somber Elizabethan comedies,” “Jamesian comedy
of manners." Unfolding American history of a particular period and focusing on family and capital, "two consuming obsessions," Hellman's plays are a major contribution to the American theatre. Plays like Another Part of the Forest, The Searching Wind and Toys in the Attic have not been touched upon in chapter length studies. But they have been referred to extensively and drawn upon in the various chapters in order to make the necessary comparisons relating to thematic foregrounding and to show the essential unity of Hellman's theatrical concerns. The plays themselves, however, were not taken up for full length treatment because, in the broad categorization made, they more or less conform to a general pattern which is sought to be illustrated through more representative plays.

Exciting as the diverse critical responses to Hellman's plays are, I have not only benefited from them but drawn on the insights provided by them. My indebtedness to Hellman criticism is acknowledged in the dissertation at various stages.

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