CHAPTER I

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Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw were all committed writers, deeply concerned with the fight for social justice. They are products of the economic depression of the Thirties. The decade of the Thirties was not a pleasant one. It began with industrial chaos, collapse of the financial structure, and mass unemployment. It ended with the Second World War. The theatre during this period became an active participant in the struggle to arouse a disheartened people to renewed conviction. The advent of the war restored the economy to full production and united a divided nation in the common struggle against totalitarianism. With the unprecedented prosperity after the Second World War, the theatre of social protest fell into disrepute. A public enjoying a booming economy preferred not to be reminded of the terrifying days of the depression.

Lillian Hellman has been a considerable figure in the American theatre for forty years. Although she spent enough time in the South, it would be more accurate to describe her background as urban Jewish. She is the author of eight original plays, beginning with The Children's Hour in 1934. Her best plays are ironic
and novelistic. Hellman wrote more hit plays than any other female playwright, all of them on serious themes. The themes include destructiveness of simplicity, effect on character of lies, greed, malice, money, lesbianism, melodrama, blackmail, character assassination and moral indignation. The first two plays became sign-posts marking the directions to be taken by the later plays. The Children's Hour concerns itself with active evil - the ruin of two women by the spreading of a malicious lie. The drama points the way towards the three plays whose chief characters are despoilers, those who exploit or destroy others for their own purposes. The despoiler plays are The Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest, and Watch on the Rhine. Each is a tightly constructed drama, leading to a violent climax that is the result of evil doing. Most of the characters are clearly defined as evil or good, harmful or harmless. But the so-called bystander plays, The Searching Wind, The Autumn Garden and The Toys in the Attic are different from the despoilers in structure as well as in theme.

The play, The Little Foxes, is widely regarded as Miss Hellman's best play. The theme of this play is money. Hubards appear funny in their role-playing and scheming but they are dangerous. Anti-social vices like envy and greed motivate them to action. Hellman uses
melodramatic devices like stolen bonds, threats and blackmail in this play. The industrial revolution is the backdrop against which the "foxes" play their human or inhuman roles. They are the aggressive ones. The "foxes" are those who despoil the land of the South.

Watch on the Rhine is Hellman's best anti-Nazi play of the War years. In this play the European-American contrast is skilfully drawn. Watch on the Rhine is Hellman's tribute to Julia and also to the men willing to die for what they believe in. Here Hellman presents Kurt Muller as the lone protagonist because he acts decisively and courage. Kurt is Hellman's most eloquent spokesman for human rights and liberty. After killing Teck, he makes an inspiring speech in which he says, "until it gets in shape man will steal and lie and kill. But for whatever reason it is done, and whoever does it you understand me - it is all bad."

Hellman's play The Autumn Garden concerns itself with individual persons, bystanders who try to come to terms with what they have made, or failed to make, of their own private lives. The Autumn Garden has a Chekhovian grace. In this play, the moral is within the situation and within the characters, not superimposed upon it by a skilful playwright. The characters move from the world of realism into the world of art. Six
people are paying summer guests at the home of Constance Tuckerman. These people try to recapitulate their past. They are confronted with the truth about themselves. The play has the trappings of a family melodrama. The themes of the plays are succinctly summarized by Ellen Moers in the following words:

All the plays (not the four adaptations) are built around two consuming obsessions: family and capital. Capital is power, lust, hate, duty and destiny: Large public themes do of course march across the surface of Hellman’s plays in step with her times like society’s persecution of lesbians in The Children’s Hour, class war and strike breaking in Days to Come, exploitation and corruption in the New South in The Little Foxes, the fight against Nazism in Watch on the Rhine, complicity of the rich liberal classes in the rise of World Fascism in The Searching Wind. Only in the two plays of the 1950s, in some ways the most interesting of all (The Autumn Garden, 1951, and Toys in the Attic, 1960), is the new stuff of family melodrama allowed to stand alone, without public trappings.

In The Children’s Hour, the first of her plays, the theme, is good and evil. The evil in the play is in the character of Iago. It is like a phenomenon of nature
which cannot be eradicated. It differs from all other evils that Hellman has so meaningfully set forth in her later plays. For instance, in *The Little Foxes* and *Watch on the Rhine*, the forces set in opposition like good against evil are pretty evenly matched. The child Mary in *The Children's Hour* precipitates the tragedy out of her own malice. As Barrett Clark says, "She is almost a monster and as such the drama that follows is in a way accidental."³

In "Lillian Hellman as Southern Playwright," Kenneth Holditch observes that in terms of characters in general "Hellman's people often have one or two traits that distinguish them as being of the South, although the qualities that set apart her most remarkable creations are not confined to any region. Greed and ruthlessness are, after all, without restrictions of time or place." Characters such as Lavinia (*Another Part of the Forest*), Birdie (*The Little Foxes*) and Carrie and Lily (*Toys in the Attic*) clearly exhibit such a quality in a distinctively Southern mold.⁴

Hellman's plays are more in the realistic mode than in the "theatricalist." Hellman's argument is that the stage is a

tight unbending, unfluid, meager form in which to write ... (The author) has three
walls of a theatre and he has begun
his pretense with the always rather
comic notion that the audience is
the fourth wall. He must pretend and
he must represent ... it is not that
I wish to deny to other writers their
variations of the form, but that for
me, the realistic form has interested
me most.

As to the criticism that she writes well-made plays,
Heilman points out that the theatre itself is a trick
and demands that the playwright "trick up the scene."^5

In certain respects Hellman does in fact
depend upon conventions of the well-made play. She uses
these conventions to lure the audience into confrontation
with unpleasant truths. Hellman developed a craft of
play-writing to tell good stories suspensefully, initially
in the manner of Ibsenite social realism, where the plot
functions as the diversionary avenue by which the drama-
tist attacks particular contemporary issues. As she
freely acknowledges in the Paris Review interview,
Hellman often relies upon what she calls "tricks" of the
theatre, strong curtains, overheard conversation, black-
mail, and such props as Horace's bottle of medicine and
safe deposit box in The Little Foxes to propel dramatic
action. These devices and other dramatic coincidences
do periodically test credulity on the printed page, though much less obviously in a well directed production.

Hellman's dark world of those who triumph through a calculated disregard of moral values is as grim and full of pain as the most extreme theatre of the absurd. Her dramas differ from the theatre of the absurd in the sense that they are portraits of people and not abstract symbols. Events are causative and the individual the product of his environment. Lillian Hellman's strength lies in the dramatic power she can extract from the realistic form. The Little Foxes, like Ibsen's Ghosts, is almost flawless in economy and structure, realisation of character and pertinence of dialogue.

A theme that recurs in Hellman's plays is the destructive havoc that can be caused inadvertently by simple loving natures. While imparting to her mother goodness, gentleness, and kindness, she makes it clear that her mother caused problems for those she loved. In Hellman's later writings, she gives a woman of almost sublime nobility her mother's name, Julia.
Heilman wrote her strong anti-Nazi play, Watch on the Rhine, during the period of the Russian-German alliance when American Communists were either mute about Hitler or were actively seeking justification for him. For this reason the play was denounced by the Communist press in the United States, but was later praised after Hitler invaded Russia, thereby rendering anti-Nazism once again the party line. If Hellman was a communist, she was remarkably free of its discipline.

In 1967, The Little Foxes was triumphantly revived at Lincoln Centre confirming its status as an American Theatre Classic. Elizabeth Hardwick, however, struck a dissenting note in a review in the New York Review of Books. Hardwick accused Hellman of writing an "American version of Socialist Realism" and of pandering to Broadway tastes:

And yet how wearying is the air in which The Little Foxes drifts, the sky rich with the stars, the earth voluptuous with stuffs, the setting heavy and dark, pampered like some plum-plushy whorehouse in which the girls are no longer young but ripe and experienced in giving customer-satisfaction.

In its rejection of sentimentally tidy endings, its Marxist treatment of wealth, its apparent conviction that the meek are destined to disinherit the earth, and
in its barely veiled anger, Heilman's universe resembles that of Brecht. In an extended analysis of Heilman's plays, Timothy Wiles examines her links with Brecht and with the entire dramatic tradition of depression America. Her best plays, suggests Wiles, "demonstrate that political art is both a product of its age and a force of innovation, one which can lead to wider speculations about the genre and towards a more substantial evaluation of her current reputation as a feminist precursor."

Since so many characters in Heilman's plays commit atrocious acts, early critics alleged that Heilman's dramatic persons represented melodramatic extremes. Heilman's characters are frequently deceptive, complicated beyond their surface impression by her ironic recognition (especially in the Hubbard plays, The Children's Hour, Watch on the Rhine, and Toys in the Attic) that skull-duggery can be entertaining, even while it is being exposed to ethical condemnation. Modelled on Heilman's mother's family, the rapacious Hubbards were intended, for example, as a composite portrait of the comic and evil elements inherent in greed and cheating.

Like Brecht, Heilman expects her audience to be enraged enough and take social action. While urging her audience towards political action to correct social
ills, she simultaneously indicts them for their complicity in the perpetuation of these social evils. Such attitudes account for John Gassner's charge that Hellman is the "hanging judge of the American theatre," and that her plays extend insufficient compassion to flawed characters like Amelia Tilford, the gullible grandmother of The Children's Hour who discovers her error and seeks forgiveness that is denied to her. Philip Armato argues forcefully about The Children's Hour that Hellman seeks to restore compassion to the world of the play and that the final confrontation between Mrs. Tilford and Karen Wright reaffirms the dramatist's central concern with "the dichotomy between primitive justice and mercy."  

Hellman's plays are written in the realistic mode, as distinguished from the "theatricalist." In the history of the theatre, realism is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating from the late nineteenth century. Realism may include any form of drama from tragedy to drawing room comedy. Realism assumes that there is a certain logical connection between events, that all actions have consequences. Doris Falk insists on the idea that Hellman is strictly a well-made realistic playwright. She divides the eight original dramas into categories depicting "despoilers" who exploit or destroy other figures for selfish ends, and "bystanders" who
behave as passive victims in a group of more discursive plays. Lederer on the other hand sensibly debunks the "automatic genre labelling of the plays, which is precisely the sort of distortion evident in Falk's reading."12

Certain reviews however reveal key responses that contribute to an evaluation of Hellman's proper place in the American theatre. She is considered a staunch moralist who attacks the evils of society. But she is often criticised for denoting her universe in exaggeratedly moralistic terms. It is commonly and often erroneously assumed that she employs the devices of melodrama to achieve her ends but the melodramatist's label is attached both to applaud and to condemn her dramaturgical style.

The Children's Hour (1934), the play that made Hellman an over-night sensation, won strong praise for its tight craftsmanship. The play is associated with the idea that Hellman is essentially a melodramatist, a term that was current through her play-writing career. Robert Benchley objected not to Hellman's use of melodrama but to her departure from it in favour of O'Neillian tragedy in the last act of the play.13
Brooks Atkinson, however combining the critical vocabulary of tragedy and melodrama considers the work "venomously tragic" and repeats Benchley's criticism of the last act, but on precisely the opposite ground. He maintains that in it Heilman lapses into excessively melodramatic conventions. Hellman, suggests Bentley, tries to tell two conflicting stories at once: "The first is a story of heterosexual teachers accused of lesbianism: the enemy is a society which punishes the innocent. The second is a story of lesbian teachers accused of lesbianism: the enemy is a society which punishes lesbians."  

Of goodness and badness in her play, The Children's Hour, Hellman says in an interview thus:

Goodness and badness is different from good and bad people, isn't it? The Children's Hour... I didn't know how to write a play and I was teaching myself, I chose or Dashiell Hammett chose for me, an actual law case, on the theory that I would do better with something that was there, had a foundation in fact...
The play was based on a law case in a book by William Roughhead. I changed it, of course, completely, by the time I finished. The case took place in Edinburgh in the nineteenth century, and
was about two old maid school teachers who ran a sort of second rate private school. A little Indian girl - an India Indian - had been enrolled by her grandmother in the school. She brought charges of lesbianism against the two teachers. The two poor middle aged ladies, spent the rest of their lives suing, sometimes losing, some times winning until they no longer had any money and no school.\footnote{16}

In *The Children's Hour* Hellman posits mercy as an ultimate good and cruelty as an ultimate evil. To understand the merciless world and its cruelty, one must move beyond the notion that Mary Tilford is the embodiment of it. In the first two acts of the play, Hellman develops three relationships which are characterised by the destructive content of the victim-victimizer syndrome. The play recalls Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, where a Jew who is socially inferior to a Christian is mistreated by the Christian, and attempts to use the Duke as a vehicle for his revenge. In *The Children's Hour*, an adolescent pupil who is socially inferior to an adult teacher is mistreated by the teacher and proceeds to use the matron, Amelia Tilford, as a vehicle for her revenge. In the third act, Hellman, like Shakespeare, posits mercy as the only solution to
the moral dilemma which is created when we deal justly with *The Children's Hour*. It suggests that adults are too often children. The last act discovery of Karen Wright shows on the part of Hellman a more mature concept of compassion. The conclusion of *The Children's Hour*, like that of *The Wild Duck*, ends not with a suicide but with "a brief discussion running down the issues as a result of the suicide."\(^{17}\)

The anonymous *Time* reviewer wrote a characteristic review of *Little Foxes* wherein he praised Hellman as a "Moralist" and the creator of powerful, exciting "Melodrama."\(^{18}\) Richard Watts Jr., claims that this play surpasses even *The Children's Hour*. He considers it a bitter, merciless study of "the relentless emergence of a New Industrialism from the ashes of a sentimental past."\(^{19}\)

*The Little Foxes* does, in fact, remains Hellman's most popular play and one of the most frequently revived in the American theatre. What prompted Hellman to go back to the theme and the characters of *The Little Foxes*, was that she intended to do *The Little Foxes* as a trilogy.

Very much a play of a particular time and place in American political history, *Watch on the Rhine* (1941)
argues against American isolationism. It opened on Broadway just eight months before the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the United States entry into World War II. Much in the play resists the erosion of time, including the preface of one of Hellman's memorably sharp-tongued figures in the person of Fanny Farely. The urgency of its massage possibly led critics to overpraise Watch on the Rhine as Hellman's best play.  

The Autumn Garden is a unique play in the American theatre with a Chekhovian ring about it. The play is neither "too well-made" nor entirely melodramatic, if these two characteristics are enumerated as limitations of a Hellman's play. If The Children's Hour and The Little Foxes present theatrical contrivances which are too obvious in the Autumn Garden, Hellman organises her materials in terms of artistic principles. The realism in this play is to the essence of human existence, not to the representation of life. The moral in this play is within the action of the play and not superimposed upon it. The characters with their roots in money and tradition show themselves to be a Chekhovian cast. If The Searching Wind and Another Part of the Forest make use of symbolism from nature and emphasize the organic, natural aspects of human existence, in the Autumn Garden the symbolism inherent in the title of the play adds a
poetic dimension to it. A typical example of modern tragedy, the play sketches more than the psychological as in the case of Tennessee Williams or sociological as in the case of Arthur Miller. The play is "poetic" like Chekhovian tragedy. As in Chekhov's The Three Sisters which Hellman appreciates for its deep social ideals, the central theme of The Autumn Garden is nostalgia for a non-existent past and the individual's frustrating search for love and the meaning of life.

Many critics have appreciated the multiple character technique, again citing Chekhov as Hellman's "new source." In fact, the reflective, rueful voice of the play has its structural roots not in Chekhov, but in the elements within Watch on the Rhine, The Searching Wind, and Another Part of the Forest.

When Hellman was asked, "which of your plays do you like best?," she replied thus:

I don't like that question, you like best the last thing you did, you like to think that you got better with time. But you know it is not always true. I very seldom reread the plays. The few times I have, I have been pleasantly surprised by things that were better than I had remembered and horrified by other things I had thought were good.
But I suppose Autumn Garden, I suppose
I think it is the best play if that is
what you mean by "like."²¹

Hellman's anger reveals a hatred for the cruel
mistakes of an unjust order, both natural and political,
inflicted on her and others. Like Ibsen, she believes
drama to have a function beyond mere entertainment. She
believes that drama is an apt vehicle for social
commentary and psychological insight. It provides her
with an artistic means of probing the festering wounds
of a corrupt society. Her conviction is that the theatre
is an instrument of transformation of unethical, unjust
and essentially venal world. Money, which is one of
her major subjects, functions as a symbolic device in
The Toys in the Attic. It acquires a concrete, almost
organic nature. It is stroked as if it were a domestic
animal. In the tradition of a melodramatist, Hellman
portrays her confrontations between good and evil with
a fierce and savage indignation which is one of the
hallmarks of her writing. Her anger, with all its bursts
of passion is a liberating force.
REFERENCES:


