



The Children's Hour

by Lillian Hellman
directed by Nick Bowling

STUDY GUIDE

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HISTORY MEETS THEATRE: The Background Story

True Scotland Story: The Interplay of Fact and Fiction

At age 25, Lillian Hellman thought her writing career was over. She had published several mediocre “lady-writer stories” — she described them as “the kind where the man puts his fork down and the woman knows it’s all over.” Deciding she was no good, she quit writing and took jobs reading others’ manuscripts; at the very least, she could recognize a lack of talent.

Enter Dashiell Hammett, her lover at the time.

As he was seeking inspiration for a new story, he came across William Roughead’s *Bad Companions*, a book on infamous British court cases. One chapter in particular, “Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case,” seemed excellent fodder for a play. Hammett passed the material to Hellman, and her work on *The Children’s Hour* began.

“Closed Doors” tells the story of a scandal in 1810 Edinburgh, Scotland. A young girl accused the two headmistresses of her girls’ boarding school of having “an inordinate affection” for one another. The girl’s grandmother, believing the women to be an affront to decency, removed her from the school. Within two days, every student had been withdrawn from the school, without reason. When the headmistresses finally learned that they’d been accused of being lovers, they sued the grandmother for libel, and spent the rest of their lives trying to restore their names and recover financially.

Hellman recognized a good story and borrowed from history for her play. All of this is straight from Hellman’s source:

Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, the headmistresses, built their school from scratch, investing time, money and effort — an atypical move for women of the times. Woods’ Aunt Ann had been a moderately successful actress, performing alongside the famous Sarah Siddons. Moreover, she was constantly at odds with Pirie over control of the school. For example, Pirie and Woods would return to school after a holiday to find that Ann had redecorated, and, on more than one occasion, Pirie was unable to charge items on house accounts that remained in Ann’s name. Accusations were indeed made against the headmistresses by young Jane Cumming. Her grandmother, Dame Helen Cumming Gordon, once a patron of the school, single-handedly orchestrated the students’ mass exodus by writing their parents and informing them of the moral threat. Pirie and Woods sued, but the libel action failed initially; the school never reopened.

Equally interesting are Hellman’s digressions from history. In transforming Jane Cumming into Mary Tilford, for example, she left out an intriguing bit. In actuality, the girl was a dark-skinned half-Indian. Dame Cumming Gordon’s son, George, had fathered Jane with a 15-year-old Indian girl while on business there. Suddenly taken ill and knowing it would not go well for Jane in Scottish society when he died, he contacted a distant cousin in Calcutta, sent him a large sum of money and asked that he keep watch over her. The cousin enrolled Jane in a Christian boarding school in Calcutta, but it was not long before she complained of being mistreated by other students because of her race. After a few more

moves and ill-fitting schools, Jane was sent to Scotland to live with her grandmother, who begrudgingly took her in, likely to appease the guilt she felt after her son's death. Within a few weeks, Jane was enrolled at Pirie's and Wood's school where, by Roughead's account, she felt "odd and unwanted."

Why Hellman chose to obscure this point is unclear. Her memoirs reveal a life-long fascination with malice and seemingly motiveless evildoing. In a play rife with lies and illicit love, Hellman perhaps felt that the race card would only complicate matters, supplying a legitimate gripe for a young girl whom she clearly wanted to portray as needlessly destructive.

Other changes she made seem calculated to mitigate the lesbian theme and maximize the catastrophic effects of the lie:

- The character of Karen, one of the teachers, is given a fiancé; her impending marriage, for Hellman, is a casualty of the scandal — and insurance against accusations of lesbianism (in and outside the play).
- Karen and Martha, the other teacher, have separate bedrooms, whereas their real-life counterparts allegedly slept, and had intimate relations, in the same rooms as their young wards. Mary thus has to work harder to make her story plausible, which involves an invented subplot in which she blackmails a classmate, Rosalie, into corroborating the rumors.
- The schoolgirls are presented as too innocent to know of lesbianism, so Hellman "educates" them by way of a salacious French novel, plus creates dialogue about Martha's "unnatural" affection that they can overhear.
- There also is a suicide in the play and — in a quite different ending — Mary's accusations are revealed to be untrue.
- The collateral damage extends to Mary's discredited grandmother, repentant in the play's final moments in a way that Dame Cumming Gordon was never forced to be, as her charges stuck.

Hellman went to great lengths to write a play about the potency of a lie. But then she seemingly undercut her intentions with one last third-act historical deviation: Martha admits to Karen that she *has* desired her, as the girls suggested.

For all of Hellman's insistence that *The Children's Hour* was not about lesbians, this final revelation sets the stage for a confrontation between the two women that gives the play a fascinating power over its audience.

Courtroom Drama

As Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods watched the last student withdraw from their school in November 1810, they undoubtedly suspected Dame Helen Cumming Gordon's involvement: that her granddaughter's withdrawal from the school had precipitated the mass exodus.

They wrote to her, requesting an audience to know how they had offended. They received no response. They appealed to her youngest daughter, Mary Cumming; again, no response. In desperation, Pirie's sister Margaret, a former governess to the dowager's grandchildren, paid a visit to the family's home in Charlotte Square. She was denied entry.

As rumors began to reach the teachers, they realized they would have to proceed legally and hired John Clerk, a lawyer known for his eloquence and persistence, to begin a libel suit against Dame Cumming Gordon. Attempts were made to settle out of court, but the teachers wanted nothing less than a public rescinding of the charges made against them, while the grandmother thought it best for the women to leave the country. The case was heard March 15 through May 23, 1811 before the Court of Session in Edinburgh. Here are some highlights:

- The seven judges were a motley crew who, by today's standards, never would have been able to hear the case. They included a known drunkard, Dame Cumming Gordon's neighbor and her relative by marriage. In addition, one judge, Lord Polkemmet, was absent for all of the testimony. Their daily notes and comments speak ill of most of the witnesses and reveal a host of prejudices — racial, economic, ageist and sexist. Moreover, their decisions seemed to be governed by two supposed implausibilities: Either the women were innocent because the judges could not conceive how they might have pleased one another or they were guilty because no young girl could have thought up such a scandalous story on her own.
- The judges were so worried the scandalous content of the trial would corrupt the women and young girls of Scotland that they closed the proceedings and only permitted 20 copies of the transcripts to be made for those involved with the case. Two copies weren't destroyed, giving William Roughead the raw material for the chapter of *Bad Companions* that Lillian Hellman used as the basis for *The Children's Hour* — "Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case."
- Jane Cumming, Dame Cumming Gordon's granddaughter, testified that, on several occasions, she heard Woods get into the bed that Jane shared with Pirie. She described in detail the noises and conversation she heard pass between the women, as well as the repeated shaking of the bed. Clerk, along with several judges, commented on the girl's slow, methodical recounting and her seeming creation of the story. She also stopped speaking when asked to reconcile contradictions and broke into tears when challenged.

- Janet Munro, Jane's Cumming's classmate, corroborated Jane's tale with one major difference: Janet experienced Pirie's visits to the bed Janet shared with Woods. Her affection for the teachers, though, plus her guileless recitation of events, led several judges to believe she perhaps had overheard one woman massaging the other's rheumatic joints and been encouraged to come to a more salacious interpretation by Jane's claims.
- Charlotte Whiffin, a maid at the school, supposedly observed the teachers embracing and kissing in the drawing room — through a keyhole. This viewing method was discredited: based on its placement in the room, the settee on which the women were supposed to have been intimate could not be seen through the keyhole. In addition, when called to testify, Whiffin denied ever having seen them, much less having told the story to the students.

The judges announced their decision June 25, 1811. Although three believed the headmistresses were innocent victims of malice, the others could not conceive of a young girl concocting such a scandalous story.

Pirie and Woods lost their case.

Clerk wasn't about to quit. He immediately petitioned the court to review the case on the grounds that his clients had lost by the narrowest margin and that all seven judges expressed doubt about the correctness of their ruling. The review was granted, and, on Feb. 26, 1812, the case received another 4-3 verdict, but this time it favored the plaintiffs. There had been significant turnover in the court; several new judges made eloquent defenses of the teachers and ordered Dame Cumming Gordon to make financial restitution.

The Scottish legal system allowed Dame Cumming Gordon to appeal the decision to the House of Peers, and she did so less than two weeks later. But this national governing body was even more frightened that publicity surrounding the case would corrupt the morals of Scottish women. They refused to hear further testimony, preferring to read the transcripts of the earlier hearings. They repeatedly tabled their decision. Finally, seven years later — December 1819 — they dismissed the case and ordered the grandmother to pay the teachers as previously instructed.

Pirie and Woods first asked for £10,000 from Dame Cumming Gordon on Jan. 28, 1820. This figure took into account the income they would have earned had the school remained open. Through a yearlong series of quibbling notes, letters, rejoinders and replies, Dame Cumming Gordon refused.

In desperation, the women reduced their request to £5,000. Though Woods had been fortunate enough to find employment through the help of an old friend, Pirie was living in poverty and her health was declining. She needed any money she could get.

Dame Cumming Gordon also refused this request.

They begged for £4,000; she countered, offering £3,500.

The teachers asked the court to intervene on Feb. 1, 1821, claiming that Pirie's half of this offer would never compensate for the damage that had been done to her.

That is the last record that remains of the case. No one is certain how, or if, things ever were settled.

THE MANY FACES of *The Children's Hour*

The Other "L" Word

Though Hellman insisted that *The Children's Hour* was about a lie and its disastrous effects, the 1934 theater world was abuzz with another "L" word, one the playwright fervently disavowed: lesbianism.

From the first week of rehearsal, worried producer Lee Shubert badgered director Herman Shumlin: "This play could land us all in jail." His anxiety was well founded; in 1926, a play with lesbian characters entitled *The Captive* had been closed by the police and its leading ladies carted off to jail. No surprise then, that several prominent actresses turned down the roles of Martha and Karen before Shumlin found his cast.

And no wonder, too, that every precaution was taken to ensure a "decent" production. Shumlin cast women over 18 as the schoolgirls, so as not to expose children to the mature subject matter. In addition, to give the authorities as few reasons as possible to shut down the show, actors were forbidden to smoke backstage, a safety code regulation that usually was ignored.

Despite a string of good reviews and the fact that the word "lesbian" was never spoken onstage, the play's scandalous reputation followed it. *The Children's Hour* was banned in Boston in 1935 and, after a lawsuit for \$250,000 against the city failed, didn't play there until it arrived on the silver screen in 1961. In Chicago, Hellman sat herself behind the censor to see if she could gauge what response the play was getting. As Martha confessed her love to Karen onstage, Hellman noticed the censor whispering to her friend. Anxious to hear, Hellman slid to the edge of her seat in time to catch, "I really like what she's wearing." Despite the vote of confidence for the costume designer, the play was banned in Chicago until 1953. In London, several enterprising directors found a way around the Lord Chamberlain's ban by staging performances in private clubs and homes, away from the public eye.

The "L" word's most damaging effect became apparent in spring 1935 when the Pulitzer Prize committee passed over *The Children's Hour* in favor of Zoe Akin's *The Old Maid*. Reportedly, the Rev. William Lyon Phelps, a committee member, refused to see the play. Moreover, the committee broke its rules when it awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama to an adapted — not original — script. In response, New York theater critics established the Drama Critics' Circle Award to protest the sham and any future slights by the Pulitzer committee.

One critic took issue with Hellman for not exploring the lesbian theme more deeply. In *The Times* of London newspaper, the critic regretted that "it [was] not until the third act, and then only in a brief scene, that Martha has a

chance to communicate that depth of passion which is hinted at in the opening and might, if it had been fully developed, have made the play even more moving than it is.”

This lone voice hints at an opinion contrary to the strident prudery of the day and foreshadows some of the negotiations Hellman would be able to make in adapting her work for the 1952 theater revival and the 1936 and 1961 screenplays.

Critics Love Mary – But Not the Third Act

When *The Children’s Hour* opened Nov. 20, 1934, despite everyone’s concerns, very few critics batted an eye at the lesbian theme. Instead, the almost unanimously enthusiastic responses centered upon two other factors.

First, in writing her play about the power of a lie, Hellman perhaps underestimated the potency of her *liar*.

As Brooks Atkinson wrote in *The New York Times* on Dec. 2: “Although the two headmistresses are suspected of an abnormality, which is usually a sensational theme in the theatre, Mary Tilford is the sensation of the play.” Various other reviewers described her as “a pathological demon,” “imperious,” “cruel and diabolically clever” and “a miniature genius of wickedness.”

Initial public fascination with the character of the malicious student paved the way for an unfortunate development in future productions: namely, the tradition of casting a precocious child who devours the role with a lack of subtlety and a penchant for overacting.

Later in life, Hellman bemoaned a similar phenomenon in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and was perplexed that this should have happened to her play: “When I read that story, I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant character which playgoers see in her. I never see characters as monstrously as the audiences do — in her case I saw her as a bad character but never outside life. It’s the *results* of her lie that make her so dreadful.”

Second, nearly every critic had reservations with the third act.

George Jean Nathan, writing in *Vanity Fair*, found it too melodramatic, while Robert Benchley complained in *The New Yorker* that “the play [had] too many endings.” Brooks Atkinson was particularly bothered by Hellman’s slavish dedication to tying up loose ends, having found the rest of the play so compelling: “Please, Miss Hellman, conclude the play before the pistol shot and before the long arm of coincidence starts wobbling in its socket.”

Hellman stood behind most of the events she had created for her third act. However, when reworking the play for its 1952 revival, she agreed with the critics about the grandmother’s reappearance. She tried to write her out of the ending, but failed: “I was determined to rectify my mistake and went back and worked for weeks trying to take out the last eight or ten minutes of the play ... but I couldn’t do it. It had been built into the play so long back ... that I finally decided that a mistake was as much a part of you as a non-mistake.”

The Children's Hour on the Big Screen

When film producer Samuel Goldwyn bought the movie rights to *The Children's Hour* in 1935, he must have known that Lillian Hellman's script would never be made.

In 1930, responding to "immorality" in the movies, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) adopted the Production Code, a set of regulations governing the content of films. Though initially ineffective, the Code was being enforced by 1934, when Joseph Breen was hired to head the Production Code Administration (PCA). For 20 years, Breen, in league with the Catholic Legion of Decency, exercised almost unchallenged authority in changing film scripts before they could be produced.

The topic of lesbianism flew in the face of the Code's ban on "sex perversion" and Hellman made changes in the screenplay (see *table*). The most drastic change substituted accusations of an affair between Martha and Karen's fiancé Joe for the original lesbian rumors.

Though the new script was unrecognizable, this still wasn't enough for Breen. Fearing the play's fame had spread, he forbade Goldwyn to use the play's title or make any reference to it in the advertising. Hellman almost didn't receive credit for *These Three* (1936), as the movie was now titled: Breen feared the public would connect the dots from playwright to play to lesbianism.

But the fight to bring *The Children's Hour* to the screen wasn't over.

	<i>The Children's Hour</i> (1934 stage original)	<i>These Three</i> (1936 film version)	<i>The Children's Hour</i> (1952 stage revival)	<i>The Children's Hour</i> (1961 film version)
The Accusation	Mortar accuses Martha of " unnatural " feelings for Karen; Mary concocts illicit noises coming from Karen's bedroom and says that she has seen the women kissing.	Martha is interested in Joe, but he only has eyes for Karen, so she keeps silent; Mortar says Martha is lonely and questions her " goings on " with Joe; Mary sees Joe leave Martha's room after a late-night conversation and interprets it as an affair.	A less strident Mortar encourages Martha to find a husband, then queries her " unnatural " feelings; Mary concocts her tale after reading a French novel and from what she learned from girls at camp. (Hellman uses these devices to explain the young girl's sexual knowledge.)	Mortar accuses Martha of " unnatural " feelings. Mary sees the women quarrel and kiss to make up interprets that Martha is jealous of Karen's marriage, intuits from conversation with Tilford that Martha's love for Karen would be more scandalous and concocts lesbian story.
The Rumor	"...that Martha and I are in love with each other "	"... that Martha and Joe have known each other "	"...that Martha and I have been lovers "	"...that Martha and I have had sinful sexual knowledge of each other "
Martha's Confession and Demise	" I have loved you the way they said ... I wanted you " Commits suicide.	" I loved Joe, but nothing happened between us. He loved you. " Production Code curbs suicide, Martha insures truth comes out, sends Tilford to apologize and leaves town with Mortar so Karen can follow Joe to Vienna.	"I have loved you the way they said ... I wanted you" Commits suicide, but Karen is less severe with her. The suicide seems to stem more from the fallout of the lie than discomfort with her sexuality/Karen.	"I have loved you the way they said ... I wanted you," but the speech is extended and includes more guilt and shame. Commits suicide, after Tilford comes to exonerate the women and Karen offers to go away with her. No reason to die; the suicide seems to stem from self-loathing.

Karen and Joe's Romance	<p>Hellman gives the sense that Karen has been hemming and hawing about marriage until the school is safely on its feet; she indicates to Martha, though, that it will be happening soon.</p> <p>Karen sends Joe away when it's clear he will never fully trust her.</p>	<p>Hellman includes more back story, including their first meeting; Joe's preference for Karen over Martha; and the date to the carnival — the heterosexual love story becomes central.</p> <p>The couple ends up together after the truth comes out. Karen follows Joe to Vienna.</p>	<p>Hellman gives the sense that Karen's marriage plans are more definite — she and Joe have set a date and purchased a home. This serves as a way to remove any shadow of a doubt about her sexuality.</p> <p>Karen sends Joe away when it's clear he will never fully trust her.</p>	<p>More kissing than other versions, as well as heightened stereotypes: Joe is crankier about the impending nuptials, Audrey Hepburn (Karen) is gorgeously dressed and sweet and Shirley MacLaine (Martha) is in cardigans and old skirts, and even quips that it's her job to work hard and make money so Karen can continue to dress nicely.</p> <p>Karen sends Joe away when it's clear he will never fully trust her, then defiantly walks past him on her way out of town after the funeral.</p>
Also of Interest		<p>Without the “lesbian question,” the women can be a little stronger without inviting queries about their sexuality. In the scene at Tilford's, they do most of the talking, and Joe is quiet until he interrogates Mary.</p>	<p>Mrs. Mortar has new lines throughout that find her giving advice to the girls about the “natural” and “unnatural” way of courtship and relations between the sexes — i.e., what men want in a lady.</p>	<p>As the women try to go for a walk in Act Three, they look out the front door to see a dozen surly men standing around pick-up trucks in front of the school - perhaps director William Wyler's personification of the censorious Production Code.</p>

Complaining that “Miss Hellman’s play has not yet been filmed,” director William Wyler tried again in 1961. He received support from United Artists’ president Arthur Krim, who suggested he’d be willing to release a film that didn’t conform to the Code.

The PCA had no choice but to capitulate. Since Breen’s departure in 1954, the office had been weakened by a number of producers who knew their films could make money without the censors’ approval. On Oct. 3, 1961, the Code was amended to allow for tasteful treatment of “sexual aberration,” and *The Children’s Hour* (1961) was released, lesbian storyline intact.

It turned out to be a pyrrhic victory.

The changes that had been made by Wyler and screenwriter John Michael Hayes (see table) reinforced the moral perspective of the Code. A lesbian appears, but she is a cliché, full of guilt and self-loathing for what is — at best — her illness and — at worst — her sin.

From what we know of Hellman’s personality, it is hard to imagine this violence being done to her play had she been opposed. Yet, in her writings and interviews — as well as how she had reworked the play for its 1952 revival on Broadway (see table) — she seems determined to present lesbianism as a tangential issue, or even abandon it.

All of which — discomfort with the topic, a fear of being labeled a lesbian, a desire to see her work produced and making money — makes for fascinating biography.

LILLIAN HELLMAN: A Life

A Timeline of the Playwright's Life

1905: Lillian Hellman is born on June 20th in New Orleans, an only child.

1911: As a young girl, Hellman moves to New York City, but still spends half the year in New Orleans. She attends schools in both cities.

1925: Hellman's first job – as a manuscript reader for a New York publisher – brings her into contact with press agent (and later playwright), Arthur Kober. They are married on New Year's Eve.

1926: Hellman is published for the first time – as a short story writer – in *The Paris Comet* magazine.

1927: Struggling financially, Hellman takes on a few more jobs; she writes book reviews for the *New York Herald Tribune* and reads scripts for several Broadway producers. An interest in the theatre is born.

1930: Hellman and Kober move to Hollywood, where she is hired at MGM to read screenplays. That fall, she meets author Dashiell Hammett for the first time; they are immediately intimate.

1931: Hellman divorces Kober, moves back to New York City and lives with Hammett in the Sutton Hotel. She continues writing short stories, while he works on a novel.

1933: Inspired by a true courtroom story handed to her by Hammett, Hellman begins writing *The Children's Hour*. That fall, she takes a job reading plays for producer-director Herman Shumlin, with whom she is soon romantically involved. When he asks for the best play she has read, she gives him a copy of her own (minus her name). Shumlin decides to give it a production, and Hellman reveals herself as the author.

1934: A big year for Hammett and Hellman: In January, *The Thin Man* is published and Hammett claims that the character of Nora Charles is based on his beloved Lillian. On November 20th, *The Children's Hour* opens at the Maxine Elliott Theatre and runs for 691 performances.

1936: In March, *These Three*, the sanitized movie version of *The Children's Hour*, opens, in which a heterosexual love triangle is substituted for Hellman's more "scandalous" intrigue. In London, the play is banned by the Lord Chamberlain – yet is given a private performance at London's Gate Theatre.

1937: On her way to Moscow to attend a theatre festival, Hellman stops off in Berlin and delivers \$50,000 to a childhood friend who is fighting fascists in an underground movement. She also begins taking an interest in the Spanish Civil War, securing financial backing for another friend's documentary film.

1939: *The Little Foxes* opens on February 15th and runs for 410 performances.

1941: *Watch on the Rhine* opens on April 1st, runs for 378 performances and wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best American play of the year.

1942: At age 48, Dashiell Hammett enlists in the army and is stationed in New Jersey. Shortly before he leaves, Hellman's first *Four Plays* are published by Random House.

1944-45: While in Moscow, attending rehearsals of productions of her plays, Hellman spends two weeks on the front with the Russian army. Though the Russians are our allies at the time, this prompts raised eyebrows in the US only six years later.

1946: Fed up with directors, Hellman directs her own play for the first time; *Another Part of the Forest* opens on November 20th and runs for 182 performances.

1948: More politically "suspect" behavior: Hellman supports the Progressive Party candidate for President, Henry Wallace, and flies to Europe to interview Yugoslavian Communist dictator, Tito, in Belgrade. She is labeled pro-Communist by the American press.

1950: *The Children's Hour*, still banned from public performance in London, receives another private production at New Boltons, a club theatre.

1951: Hammett is sentenced to six months in prison for refusing to name people who had contributed to a reportedly pro-Communist organization.

1952: On May 21st, Hellman testifies before the House Un-American Activities Committee. As promised in a letter written beforehand, she speaks only of her own activities and opinions, staunchly refusing to discuss other people. She is blacklisted in Hollywood and – fully aware of the irony – directs a revival of *The Children's Hour* that runs for 189 performances.

1953: Hammett pleads the Fifth when questioned by Joseph McCarthy about his involvement in espionage. After a thirteen-year ban, *The Children's Hour* receives its first production in Chicago.

1956: *The Children's Hour* receives yet another private production in London.

1960: Hellman wins another New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for *Toys in the Attic*, which runs for 556 performances. She is elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1961: Hammett dies on January 10th.

1962: The second film version of Hellman's play, now titled *The Children's Hour*, opens in February with Audrey Hepburn, Shirley Maclaine and James Garner.

1966: An edition of Hammett's fiction, *The Big Knockover*, is published with a loving and intimate introduction penned by Hellman.

1969: Hellman publishes her first book of memoirs, *An Unfinished Woman*; it wins the National Book Award the following year.

1973: Another set of memoirs, *Pentimento*, is published. Four years later, the movie *Julia*, starring Jane Fonda as Hellman, will be based on a chapter from this book.

1976: Volume three of Hellman's memoirs, *Scoundrel Time*, is published.

1980: Hellman files a defamation suit against Mary McCarthy for comments made on the Dick Cavett show: "Every word [Hellman] writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*."

1984: On June 30th, Hellman dies on Martha's Vineyard.

Hellman and Hammett

Lillian Hellman's romantic life could be described as an exercise in "keeping one's options open" — this despite being married to playwright Arthur Kober from 1925 to 1931. She had many lovers, including publisher Ralph Ingersoll, American diplomat John Melby and the original director of *The Children's Hour*, Herman Shumlin. Even at age 79, on the night before her death in 1984, she is rumored to have propositioned a male guest at the dinner party she was attending.

But the man who most frequently captured her attentions — and on many days her heart — was writer Dashiell Hammett, the famed author of *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Thin Man* and many other hard-boiled detective stories. They had an on-again, off-again affair that spanned 30 years until his death from lung cancer in 1961. He was 66.

The pair met at a party in autumn 1930; they began conversing about T.S. Eliot over appetizers and soon found themselves in his parked automobile, where they covered literature, politics and Hollywood until sunrise. Less than a year later, Hellman was divorced, and they were living together in a New York City hotel.

Not surprisingly, words continued to play a central role in the years that followed. Often apart — in separate countries, even — they were avid letter

writers. Hammett was a fervent encourager of Hellman's writing and would compose detailed critiques that often sharpened her craft. She was grateful for his patience and brutal honesty: "Without that, I don't think I would have done much." In the final years of his life, a bed-ridden Hammett, already shy and diffident, relied on Hellman to be his voice to friends, admirers and interviewers.

Not that their romance was always sunny. They never married, and had to turn a blind eye to each other's occasional dalliances. His frequent drinking binges and her temper also made it impossible for them to live together year round, until he became ill. Their political differences were a major point of contention. While Hellman refused to claim alliances, Hammett was a proud radical. Authorities may not have been wrong to accuse him of espionage and communist sympathies. She was constantly afraid he might be jailed again for his repeated defiance, while he forbade her to read the cartoon "Li'l Abner" because he found it fascist.

Still, over the years, something powerful was forged between them that, ironically, transcended their chatty beginning. A beautifully inarticulate Hellman told Bill Moyers after Hammett's death: "It took a long time to find out, but we both knew in the end ... long before the end ... what we felt. We didn't talk about it a great deal. We both were very ... I think we were good to each other. I think. I'm sure."

"You're always difficult, I suppose, if you don't do what other people want."

On Oct. 26, 1934, Hammett left New York for California, just as *The Children's Hour* began rehearsals. Ostensibly, he'd been hired by MGM to write a second "Thin Man" screenplay. More than likely he also had no desire to observe the early stages of romance brewing between Hellman and her director, Herman Shumlin. And so he ceded the playing field — perhaps also in part to allow Hellman the spotlight of her first major success.

His calming presence was undoubtedly missed; Hellman found herself in the midst of altercations throughout the process.

The first week of rehearsal, as she sat in the theater with her feet propped up on the seat in front of her, she was accosted by a tense little man who came barreling down the aisle and demanded that she remove them. Undaunted, she asked the man for his name but only received a repeated command to sit with her feet on the floor. Hellman rushed onstage, interrupted Shumlin's rehearsal and inquired about the identity of the rude man standing in the house. Shumlin shouted from the stage: "Mr. Shubert, get out of here! This is the author! Get out of here!" Such was Lillian Hellman's introduction to the man who not only owned the theater but had provided the financial backing for her first play. Lee Shubert continued to grumble at her throughout the rehearsal and run, even forgetting at times that she had penned the lines being spoken.

There also was friction in Hellman's working relationship with Shumlin; a young writer fearful of compromising the integrity of her words, she seemed to be looking for a fight. A friend of Shumlin's watched a rehearsal and commented that a character's lisp was silly and difficult to understand. Shumlin agreed and was only too happy to remove it. But then he had to deal with the stubborn

playwright, who later confessed that their disagreement was blown out of proportion: “None of the arguments was worth anything. It could have easily come out. I don’t know why he made [a great fuss], probably because I had been so difficult. But I think I made it because I had made up my mind that nothing was going to be done by anybody else.” Hellman won the battle; the lisp stayed in.)

Upon hearing the crowd’s thunderous opening-night applause, a very inebriated Hellman phoned Hammett to tell him of her success and the strain his absence had caused her. It wasn’t until a few days later — after she had sobered up — that Hellman recalled an anonymous female voice answering Hammett’s phone.

In no time, she was on a plane to California to give him a piece of her mind. This fateful surprise visit is described in the one-woman play, *Lillian*, also running concurrently at TimeLine on Sunday and Monday nights.

Hellman Before the House

In 1952, Hellman experienced what she called “the power of a lie” firsthand when she was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee for suspected involvement in the Communist Party. The subpoena came as no surprise; she had been feeling the financial effects of an unspoken blacklist in Hollywood since 1948, and Hammett had served jail time for refusing to supply the names of contributors to a “Red” organization only a year before.

What *did* shock Hellman was the behavior of people she had known for years. In a bizarre “fraternity of the betrayers and the betrayed,” as she put it, accused theater folk phoned friends before testifying to let them know that they would be named as a communist. In many cases, the soon-to-be-implicated would give their permission, as if to say, “I don’t blame you for needing to keep your job and make money.” Hellman was equally disturbed by the response of liberal “clowns,” as she called them — people who took to the hills or refused to stand up for the truth when fingers were pointed: “Few people acted large enough for drama and not pleasantly enough for comedy.”

Hellman was determined to be more courageous. After receiving the summons Feb. 21, she consulted with several defense lawyers and settled upon Joseph Rauh, a young lawyer from the District of Columbia. Rauh immediately began strategizing: He would deflect the committee’s suspicion by highlighting the ways in which Hellman had been at odds with the Communist Party. This was most apparent in her support of Gen. Josip Tito of Yugoslavia, the first communist leader to sever relations with Moscow.

But Hellman wanted nothing of this plan. In her estimation, the communists were already taking enough of a beating; she would not compound their problems by adding her conviction that they were off base. Instead, she told Rauh, she would answer the House committee’s questions honestly. His job was to make sure that she wasn’t forced to name names, didn’t have to resort to pleading the Fifth Amendment and didn’t end up in jail.

Rauh drafted a letter to the HUAC, presumptuously detailing the circumstances under which Hellman would testify, but she didn’t like his wording,

so she composed her own. It is addressed to John S. Wood, the Democratic representative from Georgia, then the head of the committee. Here are excerpts:

Dear Mr. Wood:

As you know, I am under subpoena to appear before your Committee ...

I am most willing to answer all questions about myself. I have nothing to hide from your Committee and there is nothing in my life of which I am ashamed. ...

But I am advised by counsel that if I answer the Committee's questions about myself, I must also answer questions about other people, and that if I refuse to do so, I can be cited for contempt. ... I am not willing, now or in the future, to bring bad trouble to people who, in my past association with them, were completely innocent of any talk or any action that was disloyal or subversive. ...

To hurt innocent people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions, even though I long ago came to the conclusion that I was not a political person and could have no comfortable place in any political group. ...

I am prepared to waive the privilege against self-incrimination ... if your Committee will agree to refrain from asking me to name other people. If the Committee is unwilling to give me this assurance, I will be forced to plead the privilege of the Fifth Amendment at the hearing.

*Sincerely yours,
Lillian Hellman*

The HUAC sent a terse response, stating they had no intention of compromising.

Hellman sat before the committee on May 21 in the new dress, hat and white gloves she had purchased in one final shopping spree before potential financial ruin. In truth, her answers were a bit confusing: She would deny having been a communist and then plead the Fifth when asked the same questions, making her earlier answers seem suspect. Most likely, she was anxious. But she stuck to her guns in not implicating others. And when Rauh managed to get copies of her letter into reporters' hands, Rep. Wood knew that Hellman had won a moral victory.

Hellman later regretted not taking a harder stand à la Arthur Miller and others who had refused to talk at all, seeming to almost welcome imprisonment. Her freedom, though, enabled her to revamp *The Children's Hour* for a revival that autumn. She reworked it into a witch-hunt play that suddenly bristled with new relevance.

Discussion Questions

About the History

- Given what you know about the young girl, Jane Cumming, what do you think motivated her to spread these stories about her schoolteachers, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods?
- We have no idea if the teachers and Dame Cumming Gordon ever came to any sort of settlement after the last court battle. Based on events before and during the trial, how do you think this story ended in actuality? What became of the major players?
- This case is shrouded in mystery. Who do you think is the most reliable character in the actual historical tale? Why? Who do you think is least trustworthy? Why? What do you believe happened?

About the Play

- Dr. Joe Cardin is the only character whom Hellman completely invented for her play. What are the effects of having him in the play? What purposes does he serve?
- Lillian Hellman went to great lengths to differentiate the personalities of the various girls at the Wright-Dobie school so that they are distinct individuals. How would you describe each one of the girls?
- At the end of the play, Martha admits that she does have feelings for Karen. Where throughout the play do you see hints of her secret love for Karen? Where does it pop up? What hints do we see beforehand? Why does she kill herself?

About the Production

- How does the use of technical elements (costumes, sounds, lighting) differ between the first and second acts? What's the reason for this? How do these differences affect the way you perceive the action?
- What is Karen's attitude toward Martha and toward all that has happened to the women in Act Two? What choices did the director and actress make to convey these feelings?
- Whose performance did you enjoy most and why?

Projects for Students

- As an exercise in costume and scenic design, give each student an opportunity to design their own uniform and / or chair, as though they were students at the Wright-Dobie school. Students may use a variety of art supplies – crayons, markers, colored pencils, construction paper, scissors, glue, clay, etc – and let them create their design on a large sheet of drawing paper. Students should be reminded to design something that will reflect their individual personality and some of the unique things that make them who they are. When finished, students should present their designs to one another, explaining the rationale behind why and how they built it and what it tells viewers about themselves.
- Assign each student the role of a judge in the libel case against Mrs. Amelia Tilford. Have them write a one-page statement declaring whether they believe her to be innocent or guilty – based upon the events they see in *The Children's Hour*. Do they believe her guilty of spreading malicious lies or do they think there was something to the rumors that she spread? Remind each student to draw from specific examples from the play to support whatever position they take on the matter.

Recommended Reading

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