

**“These Three”:  
The Influence of William Wyler and  
Gregg Toland on Lillian Hellman**

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“Playwrights who go to Hollywood for any length of time seldom come back without a fatal *streptococcus septicus*,” said George Jean Nathan in a 1937 article in *Scribner’s Magazine*. “The potential of mauve motor cars, marble dunking pools, English butlers, and seven-dollar neckties” in Nathan’s analysis leads writers to disregard their independence and integrity: “Hollywood harlotry,” he calls it (66).

Nathan articulates a commonly held assumption: Hollywood is often seen as pillaging the American theatre of its talent and its scripts, of turning great directors and actors into journey-men, most of all of seducing the dedicated men and women of the theatre with the promise of untold wealth. Fine refers to this as the “Hollywood-as-destroyer” legend:

Novelists and playwrights of acute sensibility and talent, so the legend goes, were lured to Hollywood by offers of huge amounts of money and the promise of challenging assignments; once in the studios they were set to work on mundane, hackneyed scripts; they were treated without respect by the mandarins who ruled the studios; and they were subject to petty interferences by their intellectual inferiors. In the process, they were destroyed as artists. (3)

For Fine, the secret to avoiding artistic destruction in Hollywood “lay in drawing a distinct line between movie work and serious writing.” Playwrights—“Eastern writers,” Fine calls them—“became, in a sense, literary schizophrenics, acting out one identity when working on what mattered to them and another when in the studios” (156).

An “Eastern writer” who had a long professional association with Hollywood was Lillian Hellman. Hellman represents a challenge to

Fine's "Hollywood-as-destroyer" legend and particularly his view that Hollywood writers were compelled to become "schizophrenic." Robert Kirsch argues that some writers "found in Hollywood and in the movies material and techniques which enhanced their work" (qtd. in Fine 9). This was certainly the case with Lillian Hellman. This essay will consider Hellman's appropriation of elements of the film technique of her Hollywood collaborators, Gregg Toland and William Wyler, for theatrical purposes. It will do so by comparing a play by Hellman from before her first serious professional contact with Hollywood (*The Children's Hour*) to a play written after she had spent some time working in the film industry (*The Little Foxes*). The essay will show thus that not all contact between playwrights and Hollywood was destructive. Furthermore, it will show that a refusal to separate "serious writing" and work for the movies brought creative dividends for at least one American playwright.

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Following the success of her first play, *The Children's Hour* (1934), Lillian Hellman came to Hollywood to work as a scriptwriter for Samuel Goldwyn. Other writers of the Goldwyn stable included Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard, Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, and Robert Sherwood, but Hellman became "a prize of Goldwyn's collection" (Wright 105). Goldwyn and Hellman would work together on several films: *The Dark Angel* (1935), an adaptation by Hellman of a silent film of the same name by Frances Marion, from an original play by Guy Bolton; *These Three*, an adaptation of *The Children's Hour* (1936); *Dead End*, a version of Sidney Kingsley's play (1937); *The Little Foxes*, an adaptation of Hellman's own hit play (1941); and *The North Star*, an original screenplay by Hellman (1943). Two other screenplays by Hellman were also produced in Hollywood, the William Dieterle directed *The Searching Wind* (1946) from her play, and Arthur Penn's *The Chase* (1966). Hellman contributed to several other

screenplays, including the adaptations of her plays *Watch on the Rhine* (1943), to which she is credited as providing “Additional Scenes and Dialogue,” and the 1962 version of *The Children’s Hour* (see Dick).

*These Three*, *Dead End*, and the film of *The Little Foxes* were directed by William Wyler (who later also would direct the 1962 version of *The Children’s Hour*) and photographed by Gregg Toland, a frequent collaborator with Wyler. Toland also photographed *Dark Angel*. Of the Wyler-Toland-Hellman triumvirate, assembled by Goldwyn, Dick writes, “for the brief period they worked together (1936-41), screenwriter, director, and cinematographer functioned as a team” (36). The Wyler-Toland visual style—it can be called that, for their collaboration certainly produced a distinctive visual aesthetic—had significant influence on Lillian Hellman’s writing for the stage. The influence of working with Wyler and Toland is visible in the differences between Hellman’s play *The Little Foxes* (first produced in the theatre in 1939) and her first, pre-Goldwyn play, *The Children’s Hour* (1934).

Before considering the influence of Wyler and Toland on Hellman, some aspects of the particular style of a Wyler-Toland film need to be identified. Wyler’s “styleless” style—which “emphasises maintaining the integrity of the space, action, and sound of the filmic image, intruding only subtly upon the illusion of reality that such ostensibly unmanipulated images render” (Casty 136)—has two features to which attention is consistently drawn. First of all, he tended to favor long takes. Second, Wyler frequently used “shot in depth” techniques, developed and perfected by Toland, where different planes of action comment on and complement one another—where the camera can deal, “without conventional cutting and jumping, with a number of intersecting dramas and problems of character as discrete, yet keep them simultaneously within a coherent large frame” (Beidler 599).<sup>1</sup> “There is manipulation still in this kind of structuring of the feel of reality” (Casty 136)—Wyler alludes to this himself when he refers (in a letter to Fredric March, star of *Best Years of Our Lives*) to the need for March to lose weight because Wyler “would hate to have something like the proverbial little ‘pouch’

spoil the illusion” (qtd. in Herman 283). At the same time, the effort is to render the manipulation invisible—the editing does not draw attention to itself and the use of shot in depth minimized the need for editing. Examples of long takes and the use of deep-focus techniques are visible in each of the three films Hellman made with Wyler and Toland. In *These Three*, for example, Wyler films without editing a conversation between friends Martha and Karen concerning Martha’s aunt, Lily Mortar, that takes place in the first act of the play. As the conversation comes to an end, a car horn sounds and Joe, Karen’s boyfriend, arrives. Karen goes to the door that leads to the garden outside and opens it, introducing, as it were, another plane of action. Joe’s car is seen pulling up. He gets out and embraces Karen. In the middle foreground, Martha—who is also in love with Joe—stands still looking into space. Both planes of action are in focus in the shot, which is 66 seconds long (when the average shot length for a Hollywood film was between 9 and 14 seconds [see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 61]).

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The play *The Children’s Hour* predates Hellman’s involvement with Wyler and Toland and her contract with Goldwyn. The stage setting for the play is uncomplicated:

*A room in the Wright-Dobie School for girls, a converted farmhouse about ten miles from the town of Lancet, Massachusetts. It is a comfortable, unpretentious room used as an afternoon study-room and at all other times as the living room.*

*A large door left center faces the audience. There is a single door right. Against both back walls are bookcases. A large desk is at right; a table, two sofas, and eight or ten chairs. (Collected Plays 5)*

Even when the action moves in the first scene of the second act to another location, the Tilford house, the setting remains simple.

*Living room at Mrs. Tilford's. It is a formal room, without being cold or elegant. The furniture is old, but excellent. The exit to the hall is left; glass doors, right, lead to a dining room that cannot be seen. (Collected Plays 29)*

As the above suggest, the action in *The Children's Hour*, in whatever setting, takes place within one plane. In the schoolroom, the stage directions dictate that the doors are to the left and right and it is significant that bookcases line the back wall, thus blocking off the use of that space. Mrs. Tilford's house also blocks off certain planes: the audience is aware of a dining room but, significantly, it cannot be seen. The setting for *The Little Foxes*, a play written at the same time as Hellman was collaborating with Wyler and Toland, is much more complex than the setting for *The Children's Hour*.

*The living room of the Giddens home, in a small town in the deep South, the spring of 1900. Upstage is a staircase leading to the second story. Upstage, right, are double doors to the dining room. When these doors are open we see a section of the dining room and the furniture. Upstage, left, is an entrance hall with a coatrack and umbrella stand. There are large lace-curtained windows on the left wall. The room is lit by a center gas chandelier and painted china oil lamps on the tables. Against the wall is a large piano. Downstage, right, are a high couch, a large table, several chairs. Against the left back wall are a table and several chairs. Near the window there are a smaller couch and tables. (Collected Plays 139)*

The space within which the action of *The Children's Hour* takes place is, certainly in terms of depth, one-dimensional. The setting for *The Little Foxes*, on the other hand, specifies a variety of planes of action: the staircase; the second story; the dining room (which the audience can sometimes see); the entrance hall; the downstage space. Even within the downstage space a variety of playing spaces are identified, principally by the fact that they contain seats for actors to sit on. Wyler, using tools developed by Toland, as has already been said, favored

multi-plane shots; Hellman's use of more complex stage settings in *The Little Foxes* reflects and was influenced by Wyler's interest.

Wyler used the interplay between various elements across the planes of the shot for a range of effects. *The Little Foxes* shows similar interest and differs, in this respect, once more from *The Children's Hour*. An important turning point in the action of *The Children's Hour* occurs during an argument between Martha and Mortar in Act One. In the midst of the argument, "there is a sound outside the large doors center."

*Martha breaks off. After a moment crosses to the door and opens it. Evelyn and Peggy are to be seen on the staircase. For a second she stands still as they stop and look at her. Then, afraid that her anger with her aunt will color anything she might say to the children, she crosses the room again and stands with her back to them. (Collected Plays 19)*

This scene can be contrasted with the famous scene from *The Little Foxes* where Horace has a heart attack in front of Regina. When she does not move to help him,

*He makes a sudden, furious spring from the chair to the stairs, taking the first few steps as if he were a desperate runner. Then he slips, gasps, grasps the rail, makes a great effort to reach the landing. When he reaches the landing, he is on his knees. His knees give way, he falls on the landing, out of view. Regina has not turned during his climb up the stairs. (Collected Plays 195)*

In the scene from *The Children's Hour*, the two spaces—the living room and the space outside the door—play off one another but are not depicted at the same time. In *The Little Foxes*, on the other hand, the action happens on two planes at once—the living-room, where Regina sits impassively, and the stairs, where Horace collapses. The later play makes use of the multiple planes on which its action is set and allows

action on one plane to interrelate with action on another in a way that is reminiscent of the same interplay in films by the Wyler-Toland team.

*The Children's Hour* utilizes off-stage space at several key moments. In the scene above, the girls' spying is revealed by a sound outside the door (*Collected Plays* 19). Later, Martha commits suicide following the revelation that she has sexual feelings toward Karen. Her death is signaled by an off-stage gunshot (*Collected Plays* 66). As befits a play that concerns itself with imprisonment within social convention, *The Children's Hour* draws attention to the limited nature of its space. The first act of the play indeed forms an effort on Hellman's part to map out the prison in which the characters find themselves. The entry into the classroom of Mary Tilford, the girl whose gossip about Karen and Martha's relationship scandalizes the local community and leads to Martha's revelation and suicide, is part of this effort: "*the door opens enough for Mary Tilford, clutching a slightly faded bunch of wild flowers, to squeeze cautiously in*" until "*seeing Mary sidling along the wall toward other end of the room, [Mortar] turns to her to avoid Peggy and the book*" (*Collected Plays* 8). Mary traces the outline of the room as she enters, drawing attention to the boundaries of the space. Frequently through the first moments of the play, in fact, characters circumscribe the place in which they operate: Mortar stands, returns to her chair; Peggy and Evelyn (two pupils) go to the window, return; Lois (another pupil) reads from the back of the room while Karen enters and goes to the front. *The Little Foxes* does not utilize off-stage space in the same way. In the scene described above—a scene, indeed, that occupies the same position in the plot as Martha's suicide—Horace's collapse happens, almost in its entirety, on stage. In some ways the stage space of *The Little Foxes* is more expansive. In part the decision not to utilize off-stage space has to do with the doubt within the play as to whether an alternative world to that of the Hubbards can exist: Wiles comments on the play's uncertain ending and on the fact that "we never know how the called-for alternative idea to the Hubbards' worldview can prevail" (102). Deborah Thomas draws attention to the

importance of the relationship between on-stage and off-stage spaces in film, suggesting that, particularly in American small-town melodramas, the on-stage/off-stage dynamic has to do with whether characters “are putting on a face and taking on a role for the benefit of others, or are revealing something like an ‘authentic’ self that lies beneath the surface presentation” (40). Thomas’s understanding is helpful in understanding Hellman’s deployment of space in *The Children’s Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, both of which may be considered small-town melodramas. *The Children’s Hour* concerns itself with the differences between the “private” and “public” self—Martha’s love for Karen is hidden from the world and, when it is revealed, Martha kills herself, alone and in private, off stage, the only space where her authentic self can be expressed. In *The Little Foxes*, on the other hand, the coldness of the characters is reflected in the play’s denial of off-stage space. There are no private spaces here because these people have no authentic selves: what is seen on stage is what constitutes the character. Barlow argues, in this vein, that “in *The Little Foxes*, ‘truth’ is the province of the best liar and every character—from the most pitiable to the most loathsome—is practised at fabricating stories” (159).

In the construction of space and in the interplay between spaces within the stage setting Hellman clearly follows the Wyler-Toland style. A second aspect of that style, the use of long takes, is also evident in *The Little Foxes*, a play which, again, may be contrasted with *The Children’s Hour*. It is obvious that, in a play, there are very few “takes”—only as many as there are clearly labeled acts or scenes. Within an act or scene, however, certain patterns suggest the equivalent to the cinematic “take.” For instance, the entry and exit of characters may denote a change of “scene,” particularly where one set of characters leaves and another set of characters arrives. In the first act of *The Children’s Hour*, there are several separate “takes” denoted by entrances and exits. For instance, the first “take” in the play is the class presided over by Mrs. Mortar. Karen arrives, the classroom empties, and there follow a series of conversations around Karen: she speaks to



Mary, then to Martha. Martha then becomes the central character and there follows conversations between Martha and Karen, Martha and Mortar, and Martha and Joe. After a brief scene where Karen takes over for Martha, Mary Tilford becomes the center of attention. The pattern across the first act of *The Children's Hour* then suggests that there are several “takes”—the classroom with Mortar; the scenes around Karen; the scenes around Martha; the final scene presided over by Mary. *The Little Foxes* does not contain as many “takes” as *The Children's Hour*, mainly because there are fewer exits and entrances and, therefore, the population of the stage is generally constant. Measured in pages of *The Collected Plays*, the first acts of both plays are about the same (the first act of *The Children's Hour* is just over 22 pages long; the first act of *The Little Foxes* is 21 pages long [see 5-28; 139-60]). However, there are eighteen entrances and exits in *The Children's Hour*, ten in *The Little Foxes* (including the entrances and exits of servants). The latter play is dominated by two long exchanges between the play's main characters, the post-dinner party conversation with Marshall, and the conversation that follows Marshall's departure; the first act of *The Children's Hour* is made up of a series of shorter conversations, the longest being that between Martha and Mortar (four pages in *The Collected Plays*; the post-dinner party conversation with Marshall is six pages long; the conversation after Marshall leaves is ten). In its longer “takes,” *The Little Foxes* clearly shows the influence of the Wyler-Toland mode.

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Wyler and Toland's visual style was famously celebrated by André Bazin in the late 1940s. Importantly, for Bazin the Wyler-Toland style—dominated by multiple focus shots and long takes—“is not just a formal step forward.” “In addition to affecting the structure of film language,” he suggests, “it also affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the inter-

pretation of the spectacle” (35). Beidler, summarizing Bazin, argues that shot in depth involves everything in the scene being “kept in focus at once, with the viewer ‘democratically’ allowed to participate in the scene, and in fact actually asked to make a choice in a given moment about which part of the drama to concentrate on” (600). Wyler stressed the “democratic” element of the technique himself: the use of multiple focus “makes for smooth continuity, an almost effortless flow of the scene, for much more interesting composition in each shot, and *lets the spectator look from one to the other character at his own will, do his own cutting*” (qtd. in Herman 289; emphasis added). Bazin contrasts the Wyler-Toland “democratic” style with montage, where the spectator’s attention follows along “smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here [in films where long takes and depth of shot are used] he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice” (36). Hellman’s adoption of something approaching the Wyler-Toland style at least in *The Little Foxes* must be read as an effort on her part to appropriate a democratic style for her theatre. In “Back of Those Foxes,” an article published in the *New York Times* in 1939, Hellman defended herself against the accusation that she wrote mere melodrama:

If you believe, as the Greeks did, that man is at the mercy of the gods he might offend and who will punish him for his offense, then you write tragedy. The end is inevitable from the beginning. But if you believe that man can solve his own problems and is at nobody’s mercy, then you will probably write melodrama. (2)

Grimsted links the melodramatic mode, importantly, with democracy: “the melodrama reflected and supported what is perhaps the key element in democratic psychology: the sense which individual men have of their ability to decide, and hence of their right to participate vitally in the wielding of power” (qtd. in Belton 121). Hellman argues in “Back of Those Foxes” that a theatrical style reflects a certain kind of

worldview and her effort following *The Children's Hour* was to find a style that allowed the audience to be “at nobody’s mercy”—to find a “democratic” style. She found a version of that style in the films of Wyler and Toland.

From *Literature/Film Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (July 2009): 176-183. Copyright © 2009 by Salisbury University. Reprinted with permission of Salisbury University.

### Author's Note

The author also wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Inter-library Loans office at the Luke Wadding Library, Waterford Institute of Technology; the School of Humanities, Waterford Institute of Technology; and of the staff of the Harry Ransom Centre of Humanities at the University of Austin, Texas, where some of the research for this article took place.

### Note

1. “Deep focus,” frequently associated with the Wyler-Toland style, is only one aspect of “shot in depth.” “Deep focus” implies that multiple planes of action within a scene are *in focus* at the same time. This is not always the case in Wyler. Sometimes, he chose not to have background action in focus, for instance, though the technical means were at his disposal to do so.

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## Filmography

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