

STAGE

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Name In Lights

• • • LILLIAN HELLMAN • • •

SINCE the arrival of *The Little Foxes* at the National on February 15th, it must have become pretty apparent, even to the few who hadn't suspected it all along, that Lillian Hellman is American Woman Playwright Number One. And, in fact, among the top half-dozen of any gender.

For this caustic study of a venal Southern family at the turn of the century, both in writing and in production, holds every vitamin needed to make vigorous theatre. In it Miss Hellman has combined her spectacular gift for macabre characterization, that gift which gave *The Children's Hour* its peculiar force, with the subtle yet militant social insight that made *Days To Come* a notable, if not a successful, play. Add to this those rarest of current playwriting virtues—sound dramaturgy and an exceptional economy of style—and you have cause for cheering.

Four seasons ago when *The Children's Hour* was produced, that labeling which is the destiny of every important new playwright began. "Second Ibsen" . . . "American Strindberg" . . . "1934 Chekhov" . . . the rumors ran. In this latest and finest example of Miss Hellman's highly individual contribution to the current theatre, the Ibsen heritage seems most likely to win out. This piece of work stands squarely on its own feet as brilliant, if astringent, theatre entertainment. It has, also, a social conscience, universality, and a timeless theme.

The Hubbards and Giddens belong not alone to the Deep South of the early

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1900's. They are the cancer in almost any generation. They are principally what is the matter with the world today: "the people who eat the earth; and the other people who stand around and watch them do it." Across the stark logic and realism of Miss Hellman's thinking has shot one gleam of hope—a Hubbard-Gidden daughter, in whose spirit is blended the strength of the wicked and the goodness of the weak. She is one of the few left who will be "fighting some place where people just don't stand around and watch." She and her family are the symbols which a playwright, hurrying to save civilization, uses as a warning and a call to arms.

Not the least of the many satisfactions, by the way, which have accompanied this theatre event is discovering at first hand that Miss Hellman means what she seems to be meaning. Guessing games can be amusing, but not—to this reviewer, anyway—across footlights. She has been thinking about this story most of her life. Something like "Prelude" or "Preface" was her first thought for a title; because it does not end, but begins, at the final curtain.

Certainly no comment on *The Little Foxes*—even a few random notes of thanks like these—can fail to include a grateful mention of the other distinguished talents which have contributed to its success. Herman Shumlin, its director. Tallulah Bankhead, its star. That practically perfect cast—Patricia Collinge, Frank Conroy, Charles Dingle, Carl Benton Reid, and all of the other actors who have helped to make it one of the high experiences of this or any other theatre season.