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NORTHAMPTON 2003

the 22nd Annual Northampton Pride March
May 3rd, 2003

Starts at 12 noon at the Bridge Street School in Northampton, MA
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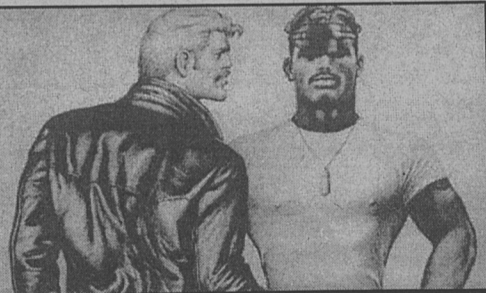
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TUESDAY MAY 27TH
1PM-4PM



BY KRISTIN PETTIT

Recently I spoke to Kim Bent of Lost Nation Theater, Montpelier, to check on the status of the up-coming production of *The Children's Hour*, a 1934 drama that not only initiated controversy – and a healthy long run – but also was the start of a long-run career for the playwright herself, Lillian Hellman (1906-1984).

Bent says auditions resulted in solid yet intriguing casting, thanks in large part to the jolt the play's bound to receive from talented students, high-schoolers who in March were concluding their workshop experience with Janice Perry (who will be playing Martha, the eventually suicidal schoolmistress), one of the faculty in LNT's Conservatory, a workshop for kids really interested in in-depth theatre work (see the April issue of *OITM* or call LNT at 802-229-0492 or email info@lostnationtheater.org).

Although the play is of Depression vintage, the Lost Nation Theater's presentation of *The Children's Hour* will still grip audiences today with its crushing blitzkrieg of lies and innuendo against the lives of two young women, headmistresses of a private New England girls' school, as they suffer the aftermath of having been cried out against as "unnatural," malevolent influences on the lives of the very girls they should be safe-guarding.

I remember reading Hellman's play one summer between my junior and senior year in high school, and thinking that, like Miller's play *The Crucible* or Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* – both about the results of cruel, self-serving, hysterical accusations – *The Children's Hour*, too, gives us a sense of devastating human destruction moving with such speed and force that the worthiest and most stalwart among us never can win, not immediately, anyway, and not in any way that truncated, fearful minds and spirits will ever acknowledge, or even recognize, when they see it.

I remember sitting alone in the Miracle Theatre on Miracle Mile, Coral Gables, in the smoking lounge at a weird time of day watching *The Children's Hour* – the 1962 film version – two times. I doubt if I was 20. Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine were the besieged headmistresses, while James Garner added the beefcake as Audrey's boyfriend.

I hadn't remembered who played that demon-from-hell student (Mary Tilford, played in the film by Karen Balkin, and in Montpelier by Dayna Cousins) who overheard a conversation about the "unnaturalness" of the headmistresses' relationship with one another. She then whispered the gossip to her grandmother, knowing full well that it would ruin her teachers and the prep school they worked so hard to establish.

At the time the film was overwrought, I kept telling myself, too darkly calamitous. But that was because I was too scared even to invite friends to see it with me. I would have written 'straight friends,' but in those days they were 'them,' and my budding gay identity was carefully hidden away like a beloved pet I had been told to kill.

And I took a certain level of comfort in the fact that Hepburn and

Janice Perry and Lost Nation Theatre's Conservatory Students



Lies Wrecking Lives

Lost Nation Theatre Mounts production of
Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

MacLaine actually took the roles, played the parts. I mean, they must have at least compassion for the suffering teachers and real disdain for those frightened bigots who allowed a spoiled child to break decent peoples' lives.

In college, my professors treated Hellman in an offhand manner and revealed they didn't like her much at all. She was, in fact, a fraud. She was a Stalin-lover, they all but said. She was unlovely, she drank like a fish and social-climbed and couldn't hold a candle to Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Mary McCarthy. She slept around, and without (first husband and play producer Arthur Kober and Dashiell Hammett and director William Wyler, where would she be? And there were insinuations about her relationship with a woman or two.

Even so, I admired her. I could well imagine what she had been up against, and I didn't begrudge her the booze, her treachery, even her lies. I felt that, if she were indeed a user, she got as good as she gave.

I had no idea, of course, what she thought of lesbians, especially if she sort of was one. In fact, she said *The Children's Hour* wasn't about lesbians at all, it was about "the power of a lie." There was a truth in the play that spoke, at least to me, about the possibility of dignity in the face of disaster and the hope that a way forward for the precious you you've always been hiding can be found.

A friend of mine wondered to me if, in rehearsing and presenting plays like this to better keep alive our history, on the one hand, how can we avoid giving "them" more reasons to hate us, to discriminate against us? I think I just don't care so much about their hatred anymore. It is, to me, a lesser thing, paler and even pathetic, silhouetted against the greater thing that is the very real diminishment of our hatred toward ourselves.

In the *New York Times*, Sunday, April 13, 2003, M. J. Gross wrote about Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, "documentary filmmakers who have been partners in business and in life" for about 21 years. Sometime during the week of April

14, their latest production *School's Out: The Life of a Gay High School in Texas* was shown as part of MTV's *True Life* documentary series.

I missed it, but I'll find it down the line, I hope. I know about high schools, and sitting in mine so long ago I never could have imagined a school like this. And the very horror of the schools like the one in *The Children's Hour* will give one pause and a quiet thanks will be felt that, even amidst present pain and hatred, beacons exist and no teacher attacked will ever again feel such aloneness.

Lillian Hellman, working from a true story suggested to her by Dashiell Hammett about two "old maid schoolteachers" in the Scotland of 1810 and what happened when they were accused of lesbianism, took that kernel and made up a story. She fashioned it so that it was – and is – true. Most of us, straight or gay, will feel the truth when we see it on stage in Montpelier.

And though she never wrote it down in the script, I think Hellman was fashioning the beginning of a world – perhaps glimpsed primarily through the character Karen, at the play's end – that can become more real.

I've never seen this play performed on stage. A script read alone or, perhaps in a classroom, doesn't begin to touch what the imaginations and energy of a talented ensemble of actors can do for Miss Hellman's electric words. She'd be the first to admit that a script is merely a guideline. The play's not the thing. It takes the actors for it to come alive and render the truth. ▼

Kristin Pettit is a semi-retired English teacher and drama coach who lives in Underhill with her partner. The *Children's Hour* will run May 15-June 1, Thursdays through Sundays. Tickets purchased through Mountain Pride Media for the Sunday, May 18 performance will benefit MPM. For benefit tickets, call or email Roland 802-383-7679 (days) or rfpvt@together.net. For other tickets, call Lost Nation Theater at 229-0492.