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LILLIAN HELLMAN'S POLITICAL PLAYS: WATCH ON THE RHINE
AND THE SEARCHING WIND**

(AS PEÇAS POLÍTICAS DE LILLIAN HELLMAN:
WATCH ON THE RHINE E THE SEARCHING WIND)

(DIE POLITISCHEN THEATERSTRÜCKE VON LILLIAN HELLMAN:
WATCH ON THE RHINE UND THE SEARCHING WIND)

SUMMARY

Watch on the Rhine (1941) and *The searching wind* (1943) were both molded from Lillian Hellman's radical opposition to the totalitarianism of Mussolini and Hitler. Neither of these two politically committed plays supplies a convincing guidance to the bewildered war years. Yet they both demonstrate the protest of the dramatist (and the audience who applauded them) against Fascism and Nazism.

RESUMO

Watch on the Rhine (1941) e *The searching wind* (1943) foram fruto da oposição radical da teatróloga Lillian Hellman ao totalitarismo de Mussolini e Hitler. Essas peças, de cunho claramente político, não veiculam soluções, mas sim o protesto da autora (e da platéia que a aplaude) contra o Fascismo e o Nazismo.

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In the plays *Watch on the Rhine* and *The Searching Wind* Lillian Hellman deals once more with the struggle between good and evil. Totalitarianism is evil, anti-totalitarianism is good. In *Watch on the Rhine* the bravery of the underground movement is typified by Kurt Müller and his prodigious family. In *The Searching Wind* Fascism stands against young American idealism represented by Samuel Hazen.

These two dramas treat Miss Hellman's thesis that the inactive ignorant may blunder more than the actual villains. Yet they also present characters who, like Whalen and Wilkie, understand facts and are active parts of their environment. These characters are able to face truth, even if it leads them to hardship and death. The other characters, in contrast, are unaware of facts, living comfortably in ignorance and "peace." The life of diplomats (war makers) is juxtaposed with that of soldiers (war fighters). The former are seen as utopians who blunder into evil; the latter as active people, either villains or heroes, but always better than the first. It is the world of doers versus that of the dreamers, the world of politicians versus that of the political reformers. The politicians and dreamers insulate themselves from life around them, and find protection in their position and selfishness. W. David Sievers (1955) says: *"With keen awareness of the interaction of psychological and political factors, the author shows our isolationist foreign policy during the thirties as an inevitable expression of the personal escapism of the man who made the policy."* The same point is made by one of the actors in the original cast of *The Searching Wind*. Earl E. Fleischman (1945) writes: *"To Miss Hellman there is a fundamental bond between the*

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moral verities which hold between individuals in their personal lives and those which govern the relations between nations." In both plays some characters come to understand their world. The result is generally drastic change. The final violence typical of Miss Hellman's plays is clear in *Watch on the Rhine* (the murder of a traitor on stage) and implied in *The searching wind* (the cutting off of a young soldier's injured leg. This violence is decisive. It shakes a few of the passive individuals "out of the magnolias."¹ But only a few. Most refuse to consider more than their immediate spheres, ignore their influence, and comfortably believe that it is impossible for one man to change the course of events - to modify history.

Watch on the Rhine is set in an elegant district outside Washington D.C., in the house of the aristocrat and individualist Fanny Farrelly. Her daughter Sara, married to a member of the German underground, is back home with her husband, Kurt Müller, and their three children, Joshua, Bodo and Babette. Count Teck de Brancovis, a Roumanian refugee, and Marthe, his wife, are also Fanny's guests. When Teck discovers Kurt's plan to return to Europe with American funds to free some of his fellow comrades, Teck blackmails him, asking for \$ 10,000 in order to keep quiet. Kurt has no way out but to murder the count and so involve his wife's family (now politically enlightened) in the war. In a subplot Miss Hellman tells about a love affair between Sara's brother, David, and the count's wife.

The searching wind, like *Watch on the Rhine*, interweaves two stories. One concerns the political conflicts of the Second World War, and the other a love triangle. The action begins with a dinner party at the Hazen's in Washington D.C.. By that time

the United States had been thoroughly involved in the war discussions. Emily and Alexander Hazen, their son Samuel, his grandfather Moses, and Catherine Bowman (an old family friend) are the members of this reunion, which, in the development of the action, becomes less of a social event than an examination of conscience or a group analysis. This is the only play where Miss Hellman uses the flashback technique. The action jumps back and forth, from Washington 1944 to Rome 1922 (when Mussolini took over), then quickly back to the Washington living room again, only to return to Europe, to a Nazi attack on a Jewish section of Berlin in 1923. The next scene is set in Paris, 1938, on the eve of the Munich Pact. The denouement returns the audience back into the Hazen home in 1944. The plot parallels Alexander's political and family duties. He fails on both counts because of his concessions as a statesman and his weaknesses as a man. In these last plays Miss Hellman again uses the technique of relating the life of her characters with their moral obligations. Kurt is politically active; he is also a good husband and father. Alexander neglects both his country and his wife and son. The whole thematic philosophy of *Watch on the Rhine* and *The searching wind* goes back to General Griggs' old idea of action and lack of action, of self-indulgent individualism as opposed to altruistic cooperation for the purpose of accomplishing individual and social justice. Alexander, like General Griggs, Grossman, Mrs. Mortar, Cora and Carrie, belongs to Miss Hellman's cast of passive watchers. He is afraid of taking a firm stand not only in his private but also public life. Kurt, like Sophie, is a doer. He murders and she blackmails, but their crimes are minor crimes since they lead to altruistic

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ends. Kurt wishes to free his comrades, and Sophie to aid her mother and to repay their debts.

In the Political Plays Miss Hellman deliberately chooses an American diplomat and a European warrior for the main masculine roles. She makes the first wavering and passive, and the latter active and resolute. The reasons for that are not new in literature. They are directly related to the influence of environment and setting upon human behavior, as Mark Twain and Henry James show. In *Watch on the Rhine* Miss Hellman brings Europe - in the form of a titled couple of refugees and of a German anti-Nazi family - into a typical American diplomat's home in the suburbs of Washington D.C.. In *The searching wind* she inverts her formula and takes the family of an American diplomat into the heart of the European conflict. The ideas of these dramas depend to a remarkable extent on action, though characterization and dialogue also play a part. The action originates from the characters themselves and from their relations to the world around them. Kurt and his family are the fruit of a certain historical and political moment and so are Alexander, Emily, Cassie, Moses and Sam. The main characteristic of their moment is a clash of the two ideologies. A second characteristic deals with human behavior, with a horizontal contrast (that is, a contrast between people of a same generation) between European maturity and American naïveté, European endurance and American unsteadiness. When, for instance, Teck mentions that Kurt's imprisoned friends have not informed against him, Kurt remarks: "*I was sure they would not. I know all three most well. They will take what punishment will be given them*" (p. 254). To which Teck retorts: "*There is a deep sickness in the German*

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character, Herr Müller. A pain love, a death-love - " (p. 254). Of course this is not the real reason for Kurt's behavior and it is Teck himself who later explains: "We are Europeans, born to trouble and understanding it " (p. 256). Kurt is afraid, but acts. He says to Teck: "My hands were broken: they are bad when I have fear," "I understand I am a man who has so many fears " (p. 246). Alexander, in turn, has no personal reason to be afraid, but vacillates until there is no longer time for a decisive action. He comments to James Sears his secretary: "Washington must think I'm dead. My report should have been sent five days ago -," "I don't want to hear what Halsey thinks. (He lies down on the couch). What's the matter with me, Jim? Am I just tired? I can't put the pieces together, or maybe I don't want to. I don't know " (p. 307). Miss Hellman skillfully contrasts Alexander and Count Max von Stammer, a German representative of the ways of war in the following "casual" dialogue:

Von Stammer (giggles). All liberals retired with the Versailles Treaty. (Leans down, strokes Alex's briefcase) I like leather. I have never had for myself a briefcase. Next year I buy one. (Pats it) Expensive?

Alex (smiles). I don't remember.

Von Stammer. That is interesting: not to remember how much something costs. (p. 309)

This same cultural opposition found among the male characters also exists in the female cast. Although Sara is American born, Europe and the war have molded her into a compassionate individual, very different from Emily. There is a striking contrast between their attitudes towards politics and

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the war. Emily is a mere spectator. As Mussolini takes over she plays the piano, completely indifferent to her surroundings, and when Cassie tells her to stop it because *"It doesn't go well with guns"* (p. 293), she simply replies, *"Nothing goes well with guns"* (p. 293), and quickly returns to her own private world. Later Emily discusses the war as a bit of social gossip. She is only interested in her own welfare:

Emily. ... Last night at dinner Toni said the Czechs were acting like fools. He said if Hitler got what he wanted now that would shut him up for good. And Baudouin said if there is war it means Russia in Europe and -
Alex (sharply). That's what I meant. That kind of people and that kind of talk. Toni has been doing business with the Nazis for years and Baudouin's bank is tied up with the Japs.
Emily. I have a lot of investments in his bank. (p. 315)

Sara, in turn, is socially and politically oriented and as such is Emily's antithesis. She says to Teck as they carry on a conversation about Germany and National Socialism:

Sara (pleasantly). No, sir, you haven't offended me. I just don't like polite political conversations.
Teck. All of us, in Europe, had too many of them.
Sara. Yes. Too much talk. By this time all of us know where we are and what we have to do. It is an indulgence to sit in a room and discuss your beliefs as if they were the afternoon's golf game. (p. 230-1)

Another striking cultural difference between the two women has to do with their physical appearance and clothes. Sara is forty-one, but she looks older. The hard times have left many marks on her. She wears unstylish clothes: *"her dress is too long, her shoes were bought a long time ago and have no relation to the dress"*

(p. 213). Emily is about forty, dresses very well and is noticed by social columnists: *"It was, if I say so myself, a brilliant gathering. The last to arrive was the handsome Mrs. Alexander Hasen "* (p. 323). Her modish behavior and her attitude towards clothes, money and society reminds the audience of Regina's self-centered conduct.

In all Miss Hellman's plays Sara is the only thoroughly good woman, Kurt is the only thoroughly heroic man, and their marriage is the only successful one. It contrasts with that of Alexander and Emily whose relationship reveals self-preoccupation and a consequent decrease of social responsibility. This state of affairs prevails in Miss Hellman's plays and is found, though slightly changed, in all the other alliances: Regina/Horace, Birdie/Oscar, Rose/Griggs, Sophie/Frederick, Nina/Ned, Albertine/Henry, Lily/Julian, Julie/Andrew, Karen/Joseph, and Marthe/Teck.

Another striking behavioral contrast is vertical. It deals with people of different generations and shows the opposition between the adult grandchildren (Joshua, Bodo and Babette) and the childlike grandmother (Fanny Farrelly), between the active grandson (Sam) and the passive and complacent grandfather (Moses Taney). This contrast illustrates Miss Hellman's thesis of environmental influence upon conduct. Fanny's egotism results from her easy life in a luxurious house surrounded by her servants and isolated from the world's political disputes. She behaves like a spoiled child born in elegance and wealth, unaware of hardships. As Joshua notes, *"Grandma has not seen much of the world "* (p. 232). David, her son, also knows it and less kindly says to her as she rings him down for an

early breakfast, *"Mama, I think we'll fix up the old chicken house for you as a playroom. We'll hang the room with bells and you can go into your second childhood in proper privacy "* (p. 208). Fanny undergoes a gradual maturing throughout the play. This maturing is not a natural consequence of the passing of time, but a more direct influence exerted on her by Teck, Kurt, Marthe and Sara, and by the adultlike reaction of her grandchildren. Fanny notices their attitude immediately after having exchanged a few words with them and remarks, *"Are these CHILDREN?"* (p. 218). Kurt, the father, regrets it: *"I wish I could say love your mother, do not eat too many sweets, clean your teeth - (Draws Bodo to him) I cannot say these things. You are not children. I took it all away from you "* (p.262). He notices the difference between Fanny and David and the boys: *"Fanny and David are Americans and they do not understand our world - as yet "* (p. 254). Joshua, in his usual cutting style and much to the point, is proud of it: *"Bodo talks so fancy, we forget sometimes he is a baby "* (p. 264), and then he says to Kurt, *"You are talking to us as if we were children "* (p. 262).

The old generation, in both plays, is the antithesis of the young one. Moses' cowardice is a variation of Fanny's egotism. He gradually explains it to Sam and to the audience:

Sam (points to the paper). Grandpa, why did you ever sell the paper? Everybody says it used to be so good, and now it's nothing when it's not downright bad.

Moses. I didn't sell it. I never could have sold it. It was that way in my father's will. I leased it to them.

Sam (after a second). How could you let them make it into something like this? I'd always thought you

sold it, needed the money or something -
Moses. I don't read it often. I advise you not to.
Sam (frowns). Don't you care? How could you have
given it up?

Moses. It's a long story, son. Like all former thinkers,
I'm writing a book. Or rather I keep a book. It's
meant for you to read. (p. 273)

Later on he says to Cassie "casually:"

Moses (to Cassie, suddenly, as if he had just
remembered). I remember that day in Rome. That
was the time I duennaed you and Emily to Italy.
And you and I and Sophronia came home alone and
Emily stayed on to play the piano. That was the
day I decided to retire and let the world go to
hell without my help. (p. 280)

Moses' actual surrender comes in a flashback scene still in the First Act, as he discusses politics with Alex:

Moses. That's well said and mostly true. But I didn't
want this and I have fought hard, in my way, to
stop it. I don't like to see people put down by
gangsters who make a job of doing it for those
who want it done. (Very sharply) Don't worry, and
tell your boss not to worry. I'll give no interviews
and write no pieces. I want no more of it. Anywhere.
I'm through with the paper. (Slowly, wearily, he
goes toward his room) I want to cry. And you should
want to cry. You are young. This is a sad day, and
you will pay for it. (He goes into room). (p. 292)

Moses and Fanny belong to a class of people in America — the men of good-will — who had cleared the way for leaders like Mussolini and Hitler to take over. Theirs had been a generation of appeasers very different from that of Kurt and his children's in Europe and from that of Sam in the United States. Sam, Joshua, Bodo and Babette as well as Kurt and Sara are Miss Hellman's mouthpieces. They confront life more historically than the

others and they try to change history. Their aggressive environment has made them stronger than their complacent ancestors.

Watch on the Rhine and *The searching wind* are not so appealing as the Hubbard Plays nor so mature as the Mood Plays. They serve once more to teach Miss Hellman's lesson that the unit is important to form the whole, that there is a constant interaction between the one and the many, and that the successes and failures of the individual are a symbolic representation of the failures and successes of society.

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