

Second Chances: The Remake of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

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She found the lie with the ounce of truth.

—*The Children's Hour*, film

Because of the major changes forced on William Wyler when he made Lillian Hellman's smash Broadway play *The Children's Hour* into the film *These Three* (1936), the director commented, "Miss Hellman's play has not yet been filmed" (Gardner, 191). The Hays Office would not allow Wyler or United Artists to make reference to the original play in any advertising of the film, and they forced a title change. No screen credit was given to Hellman along the lines of "based on the play by Lillian Hellman." Hellman wrote the screenplay herself, changing the whispered rumor of a lesbian relationship between the two teachers to an illicit, though heterosexual, love affair between one of the teachers and her colleague's fiancé. Hellman's having to wrestle her own material into some kind of shape amenable to the Hays Office is indicated in the struggles she had with a new title, contemplating "The Hour of Liberty" and "Angel Child" for a script completed in October 1935. She settled on *These Three* for the final draft a month later.

Twenty-five years later, Wyler got a second chance to film the play, again for United Artists, producing it himself. Miriam Hopkins, Martha in the first version, returned to play Mrs. Mortar, providing an interesting continuity between the two casts. Title questions persisted, however. Under consideration were "Infamous," "The Infamous," and "The Loudest Whisper." The title from the original play, though, won out, and *The Children's Hour*, with Lillian Hellman's name blazoned across the "based on" screen credit, was released in 1961.

While Hellman had adapted her own play the first time around, this time the task fell to John Michael Hayes. Hellman gets screen credit for

“adapting” Hayes’s script, though she claimed later that she “didn’t have anything to do with it. It was done by somebody else” (Bryer, 170). According to Bernard Dick, “Hammett’s death in 1961 caused her to lose interest in the project” (43). The Hayes screenplay actually followed the action of the drama more closely than Hellman did herself 25 years earlier. Despite the apparent fidelity, however, this second film version of *The Children’s Hour* is no more faithful an adaptation than *These Three*. Both films avoid the issues of power that are central to the original play.

As Wyler began the project of finally filming the play, homosexuality and lesbianism were still considered reasons to prohibit a movie’s release. In 1961, the fact that the play did not contain the actual word “lesbian” did not make it any easier to film than it was 25 years earlier. Ultimately, however, *The Children’s Hour* enjoyed more success against the censors than did *These Three*, which capitulated entirely to Hays Office demands. The remake became one of a handful of landmark films contributing to the revamping of the Production Code, which was eventually replaced with the somewhat more liberal ratings system. The changes came about largely because of market pressures, however, not because the Motion Picture Association of America had suddenly become a kinder, gentler censoring body. According to Vito Russo:

[In] addition to *The Children’s Hour* and *Advise and Consent*, Gore Vidal’s *The Best Man* and Morris West’s *The Devil’s Advocate*, both with homosexual subplots, were under consideration by major studios. It seemed that the film industry, waiting to deal with this subject, had successfully put the squeeze on an already weakened Code. For producers knew that their films, like Preminger’s *The Moon Is Blue* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, would do well at the box office even if they were released without a seal. (122)

At the time that Wyler made *These Three*, moviehouses would not run films without the MPAA seal of approval, which allowed the censors to