

**MICHAEL BILLINGTON on the first public staging of *The Children's Hour* in Britain**

## False pretences

**H**OW GOOD a play is Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934)?

It certainly gained an unfair notoriety through being banned by the Lord Chamberlain. In its treatment of adolescent evil and false witness it anticipated *The Bad Seed* and *The Crucible*. It holds the attention. Yet, even in Howard Davies's fine revival at the Lyttelton, one is aware of the way Hellman lapses into melodrama at crucial moments and changes tack in the last 15 minutes.

Hellman's ostensible theme is the destructive power of rumour. Two teachers, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, who run a private New England boarding school are falsely accused of lesbianism by a malicious pupil, Mary Tilford. Mary's charge is believed by her plutocratic grandmother, against whom the teachers bring a vain action of slander; both the school and Karen's planned marriage are ruined but finally Martha admits that she has always had a profound love for her partner.

The play starts perfectly credibly. Hellman builds up a richly plausible portrait of the boarding school in which Martha's aunt, a lapsed thespian, conducts booming lessons in verse-speaking. Even old Mrs Tilford's moral revulsion at her granddaughter's whispered accusations seems perfectly in character for a woman of her class and type. But, as the play gathers momentum, so Hellman falls back on melodramatic contrivance. Mary's blatant manipulation of a fellow pupil wouldn't impose on a rabbit.

And the last act — with its confessions, rejections, gunshot and recantations — is palpably overburdened. I've nothing against melodrama, but Hellman starts naturalistically and then switches styles.

That, in a way, echoes her own thematic confusion. Initially this is a play about a society which punishes the innocent by swallowing lies; the real target is American credulity and hysteria. But although Hellman

in the third act makes a vital point about the way false accusation debases language — as Karen says to her disenchanted fiancé: 'every word has a new meaning' — she gradually turns it into a play about sexual guilt. Lesbianism is simply a metaphor in the first two acts; in the third act it becomes the issue but one which Hellman evades through an improbable death.

For all its imperfections, the play is still worth reviving as an historical document; astonishingly, this is its first public performance on a British stage. And Howard Davies's production shrewdly binds it together by emphasising, rather than downplaying, its melodramatic aspects. Jason Carr's music underscores the action at critical moments, lightning plays outside the windows of Mrs Tilford's penthouse apartment and Ashley Martin-Davis's set shows the schoolroom itself finally stripped to a bare, bleak barn.

The acting is also first-rate. Harriet Walter makes Karen an instinctively tactile person, constantly caressing her pupils and partner, who in the last act shrinks nervously from Karen's touch; a perfect way of conveying the inhibitions of social pressure. Clare Higgins also carefully prepares the ground for Martha's final coming-out by seeming lazily relaxed with Karen and stiff with tension whenever her fiancé appears. And there is sterling support from Emily Watson as the evil pupil — actually the play's most interesting character — from Gillian Barge as her stately, pearl-encrusted gran and from Alison Fiske as the berouged ex-actress who has the unmistakable whiff of number-two tours. The presentation is immaculate, but it can't disguise Hellman's dilemma as to whether she is writing about a society that is guilty of witch-hunting the innocent or of ingrained sexual intolerance.

At the National Theatre, Lyttelton (071-928-2252).

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