

# 'The Children's Hour' not for kids

By Kate McElroy  
Battalion Staff

The text of Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour" is well-written literature, but the actual production of her work is superior entertainment. But the play can be difficult to perform for two reasons — it has basically an all-female cast and the play's power lies in its themes, not necessarily its dialogue.

Those are two reasons Roy O'Valle decided to direct "The Children's Hour" for the Texas A&M University theater arts section, which presents the play tonight at 8 p.m. in Rudder Forum.

"I don't like to do plays that don't have any type of substance," O'Valle said.

"The Children's Hour" is definitely not a lighthearted farce; though the name is suitable for a juvenile show, this drama presents serious subjects like mistrust, human strength and lesbianism.

And because of predominately female cast — only two of the 14 characters are male — O'Valle can work with many of the women studying theater at Texas A&M. Of 51 theater arts majors, about three-fourths are women.

"I picked 'The Children's Hour' because our department has too many girls," O'Valle said. "They get to be sophomores or juniors and they never get a lead."

O'Valle has shown this concern for the theater arts females before — the last regular season show he directed (Fall 1977) was "The House of Bernada Alba," a Spanish drama about women. "The Children's Hour" is every bit as serious as his last production,

but is a more well-known play, which is another reason he selected.

"I picked this particular play because there has been a sort of a renaissance of Lillian Hellman," he said.

"The Children's Hour" has an extremely simple premise.

"The play is about a simple lie, a very simple, innocent lie and the repercussions it has on all the adult world," he explains. "It's this lie a young girl says and tells her aunt. And how this simple lie just ruins all these people."

Even though the show was first produced in 1934, its premise is still valid.

"Even today we have people who exaggerate the truth and it might be something very innocent," he said. "But the outcome of that exaggeration can be very devastating. It doesn't have to be about two women living together — it can be about anything."

But suggestion of lesbianism, a contemporary controversial topic, is important because of the seriousness of its implications.

"I think Lillian Hellman picked that (subject) because at that time, she was even accused of this type of behavior," he said. "And it was quite a challenge to write this type of play because it was unheard of."

"It was a period when all they did, on Broadway especially, was little comedies. And she comes about the relationship of two women and then having all this little girls — they came out with things that were unheard of at that time."

Because much of the emotional impact of Hellman's play isn't in the dialogue or



plot but in the subtle character portrayal, the acting often is more important than the lines themselves.

"It's a very difficult play because the actors are going to have to play a very honest type of emotion," O'Valle said.

He said the play is also hard to produce because he only has four weeks instead of the normal five weeks given to University productions. Many of his students were in Fort Worth for the Southwest Journalism Theater Conference, which was held the first week of school, when tryouts for the play were scheduled.

"The whole play was blocked in six days and then I had to start rehearsing," he said. "And we're still working on the subtlety of the lines."

"The actors have to build on levels, so the climatic part of the play has a point and we can sympathize with the characters."

"But if you start with no direction and just saying lines," he continued, "it becomes a very boring play because they talk about the most trivial things."

O'Valle is presenting the young students as 15-year-olds, instead of 12- or 13-year-olds as done in most productions. The Texas A&M University students find that age easier to portray, and the Forum's stage is so close to the seats, audiences could tell the real age of the performers.

The opening scene, O'Valle believes, is important to set the play's mood. The girls, students of a boarding school, are sewing or practicing Latin. The director says this scene is important for exposing each personality from which the characters will develop.


"We get a picture that this little girl likes to play baseball," he said, "this little girl wants to be veterinarian, this little girl is a teacher's pet..."

and then comes Mary. She's so different — the first thing she does is give what you could call the housemother a bunch of flowers she found in the garbage can. That tells you the type of girl she is.

"And the first thing that comes out of her mouth is 'You're picking on me again.'"

Junior Melissa Bradley plays Mary. Laura Bellamy is Karen, who runs the school with her friend Martha, played by Miki Bone. Tim Stimson is Karen's boyfriend, and Cindy Glendinning plays Mrs. Mortar, Martha's relative. Sharon Barrow is Mrs. Tilford, who is Mary's grandmother.

The show first runs Thursday through Saturday, Feb. 26-Feb. 28. The play will be performed again Thursday, March 5 through Saturday, March 7. Tickets are \$2.50 for Texas A&M students, and \$3.50 for the public, and are available at the door.



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