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## Old Wine in Old Bottles

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

## Old Wine in Old Bottles

*Jack L. B. Gohn (bio)*

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There are always new plays on Broadway, of course, but it will be a rare week when more than half the mere handful of non-musicals playing there are new, as opposed to revivals. And these revivals seldom hold

out much promise of novelty, especially in the casting. Instead, productions of revived plays on the Great White Way tend to rely on the formula of old wine in old bottles, warhorse dramas starring actors we most likely know already, from the big or small screen. While we know that novelty is not an indispensable ingredient in theater, and that star power exists for a reason, it is still a fair question whether this recipe provides adequate theatrical nutrition.

The answer to the question, naturally, is: It depends. I sampled one enjoyable mess of empty calories and one more substantial treat on a **[End Page 624]** recent Wednesday, watching Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* with Laura Linney, Cynthia Nixon, and Richard Thomas, in the afternoon, and Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* with Kevin Kline and Kate Burton and television star Cobie Smulders in the evening.

As I watched, I tried to articulate the problems that were nagging at me. What I came up with was this: These are plays written in another time for other theatergoers, preoccupied with other issues; do they speak to us? And are we over-relying on established actors?

Lillian Hellman supplied the empty calories. Her reputation has taken a tumble from heights it occupied in her heyday (she lived from 1905 to 1984). That reputation always came with a sort of asterisk for fabulation and political dissimulation. For instance, Hellman would not allow Tallulah Bankhead and the original company of *The Little Foxes* to do a benefit show for Finland, recently invaded by the Soviet Union. Hellman claimed she had been to Finland and "it seems like a little pro-Nazi Republic to me." In fact, Hellman had not been to Finland, and her motive for the refusal seems to have been reflexive Stalinism, plain and simple. People had always known this about her, and it took an increasing toll on her reputation. Dishonesty and totalitarian sympathies (however congenial in modern Washington) have never been popular on Broadway.

This is not to say that probity or political wisdom is necessarily required of an artist, although it tends to matter more with artists whose work has a definite political dimension, as much of Hellman's did. Take that

issue out of the evaluation, however, and give due note to the fact that still her plays continue to be produced, the most recent case in point being Washington's Arena Stage, which devoted much of its 2016–17 season, including ancillary programming, to a Lillian Hellman Festival.

Has the consensus that she is not of the first rank been wrong? It is time for a reevaluation? It has recently been so asserted: Washington Post critic Peter Marks, reviewing last year's Arena Stage revival of *The Little Foxes*, starring Marge Helgenberger, which kicked off the festival, argued that the fact that the play "has not been judged to be quite in" the league of *Death of a Salesman* or *A Streetcar Named Desire* "is an oversight." Making allowances for the caveat that I do not admire *Salesman* as much as most other critics do, I found little, at least in the Broadway revival, to incline me to agree with Marks. *The Little Foxes* is, to be fair, a smoothly running drama with various crises for which the groundwork has been properly laid, and the dialogue is workmanlike, and the characterizations are strong. But none of this adds up to a cast-iron case for either reevaluation or revival.

What exactly *is* the value proposition of *The Little Foxes*? Well-made drama? Exposé of Southern gentility? Eruption of bitterness at the folly of life? Or just a star vehicle? I'd argue against any of these responses but the last. The play is set in "a small town in the South" in the year 1900, and concerns the efforts of three Hubbard siblings, Oscar, Ben, and Regina...

accompanies Ravi Deepres's hypnotic film of waves advancing in extreme slow motion. Although McGregor's intent seems clear, the fact that Woolf drowned herself in the River Ouse, miles from the ocean, creates some confusion.

Nevertheless, "Tuesday" is *Woolf Works'* strongest section, and while its evocation of Woolf's death feels simultaneously exploitative and sentimental, Ferri inspires McGregor's best choreography of the evening, especially in her opening pas de deux with Bonelli, who seems to embody Woolf's heterosexual attachments. Their duet brims with lifts, in some of which Ferri appears either to swim or to fly, and steadying pulls up on pointe—that is, back into life. Sarah Lamb seems to represent Woolf's lesbian side, and although she and Ferri dance together, at other points Ferri rebuffs her. A crew of children appear, playing games and eventually following Ferri in a kind of dance lesson, and the suggestion of the lively world and the future generation the childless Woolf is leaving behind grows cloying. When Bonelli returns at the end as a sort of death figure, they invert their initial duet, its emphasis now on horizontality rather than elevation. Finally he lays her down as the waves continue their slow roll.

There's something simplistic about *Woolf Works'* final section, and its superficial use of Woolf's death feels convenient and smug, as though Woolf owed her artistic genius to the same forces that drove her to kill herself. At the same time, Ferri's performance as a woman bidding life farewell relieves, ironically, the dreariness of the two supposedly more lively acts that have preceded it. McGregor hasn't presented a balletic equivalent of literary modernism's stream of consciousness; rather, he's offered meditations on a smattering of Woolf's themes and characters. Given the daunting nature of the challenge, it's understandable that even *Woolf Works'* strongest section could succeed only through evasion and subterfuge.

—Jay Rogoff

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