THE ART OF THEATER NO. 1
LILLIAN HELLMAN

Miss Hellman spends her summers in a comfortable white house at the bottom of a sandbank in the town of Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, on the island of Martha's Vineyard. There is none of old Cape Cod about it; a modern house, newly built with lots of big windows and a wooden deck facing on the harbor. Miss Hellman observes the ferries of Woods Hole—Martha's Vineyard—Nantucket Steamship Authority, weighted down with passengers and automobiles, push through the harbor on their midsummer schedule and disgorge ever more visitors upon this teeming, heterogeneous resort. It is a measure of Miss Hellman's dedication to her work that she achieves so much in her exposed situation, not half a mile from the ferry dock. Here she stays with her maid and a big barking poodle that discourages few of the peak-of-the-season visitors who troop through her parlor.

Behind this new house and out of view on top of the sandbank is the old one, which Miss Hellman sold after Dashiell Hammett died. A frame house with yellow painted shingles and climbing roses, plainer and more regional in its architecture, like a Yankee farmhouse of the last century, it had a complex of boxlike rooms where Miss Hellman's guests thronged. Removed from these, on

the far east wing of the house, stood a tower formed by the shell of an old Cape Cod windmill. Up in this windmill tower was the room where Dashiell Hammett lived; he always escaped there when company came. He had been an invalid since the war; he became a recluse, and at the end of his life talked to almost nobody. Hammett was a thin, finely built man and very tall—when he was seen walking in delicate silence, in the cruel wasting of his illness, down a crowded sidewalk on his way to the library, unrecognized, unknown, forgotten, the proudness of his bearing set him off from the summer people.

Occasionally, a stranger would come in the house uninvited and catch Dashiell Hammett off guard. He might be reading in an easy chair. Miss Hellman would introduce him, and he would elegantly rise and shake hands. Like many a famous writer who detests being disturbed in his private self, a million miles from any social confrontation, he had learned to scare off the intruder with his smile. Here he was luckier than most, for rather than looking pained and fraudulent, rather than a predictable Sam Spade/Humphrey Bogart hard-guy leer, the smile Dashiell Hammett produced on his clear-eyed, lean, aristocratic face was so nearly beatific that it disarmed the intruder long enough for Dashiell Hammett, with no more than a how-do-you-do, to vanish from the room. The armchair or the book gave his only evidence. Even the invited dinner guest coming punctually into the room would know the same ectoplasmic presence, when Miss Hellman, the laughter mingled in her greeting, would immediately explain what Dash had said—what his joking exit line had been on, it seemed, the instant of your entrance. He was elusive but never aloof. Through the medium of Miss Hellman it was possible to carry on a running extrasensory conversation. A question to him, put through to her, on one evening (as how to clean a meerschaum pipe) or a request for an opinion (on somebody's writing, on something President Eisenhower did) was sure to be answered on another. And five years before the meeting with Miss Hellman, a request had been put in writing for a *Paris Review* interview. He

was by then at the end of his tether, often too weak to take his meals at the table. An answer came: "Sorry. Don't think it would work. Lilly will explain." Which she does, though neither by design nor by coincidence, in this interview. On a table in the parlor where she talked was a framed snapshot of Dashiell Hammett as he looked in World War II as a corporal in the Army Service Forces. He is lighting his cigarette on a PX Zippo lighter and looking every inch a soldier in his impeccably creased suntans and overseas cap tilted toward the right of his head of white hair.

Miss Hellman's voice has a quality, not to be captured on the page, of being at once angry, funny, slyly feminine, sad, affectionate, and harsh. While talking here she often allowed her laughter, like an antidote to bitterness, to break into her thoughts and give a more generous dimension to her comments, which, in print, may seem at first glance merely captious. These pages are compiled from three afternoon conversations in the more than usually harrying conditions of the Labor Day weekend on Martha's Vineyard, while Miss Hellman was driving herself to finish a movie script for Sam Spiegel. There were many interruptions—telephone calls and people coming and going in the room. Such circumstances cannot excuse but may in part explain some of the interviewers' unrehearsed and too eagerly "literary" questions.

—John Phillips & Anne Hollander, 1965

INTERVIEWER

Before you wrote plays, did you write anything else?

LILLIAN HELLMAN

Yes, short stories, a few poems. A couple of the stories were printed in a long-dead magazine called *The Paris Comet* for which Arthur Kober worked. Arthur and I were married and living in Paris. Let's see, about 1928, 1929, somewhere in there. They were

very lady-writer stories. I reread them a few years ago. The kind of stories where the man puts his fork down and the woman knows it's all over. You know.

INTERVIEWER

Was it Dashiell Hammett who encouraged you to write plays?

HELLMAN

No. He disliked the theater. He always wanted me to write a novel. I wrote a play before *The Children's Hour* with Louis Kronenberger called *The Dear Queen*. It was about a royal family. A royal family who wanted to be bourgeois. They kept running away to be middle class, and Dash used to say the play was no good because Louis would laugh only at his lines and I would laugh only at mine.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your plays do you like best?

HELLMAN

I don't like that question. You always like best the last thing you did. You like to think that you got better with time. But you know it isn't always true. I very seldom reread the plays. The few times I have, I have been pleasantly surprised by things that were better than I had remembered and horrified by other things I had thought were good. But I suppose *Autumn Garden*. I suppose I think it is the best play, if that is what you mean by "like."

INTERVIEWER

Somebody who saw you watch the opening night in Paris of Simone Signoret's adaptation of *The Little Foxes* said that through the performance you kept leaving your seat and pacing the vestibule.

HELLMAN

I jump up and down through most performances. But that particular night I was shaken by what I was seeing. I like *Little Foxes*, but I'm tired of it. I don't think many writers like best their best-known piece of work, particularly when it was written a long time ago.

INTERVIEWER

What prompted you to go back to the theme and the characters of *The Little Foxes*? Only seven years later you wrote *Another Part of the Forest*.

HELLMAN

I always intended to do *The Little Foxes* as a trilogy. Regina in *The Little Foxes* is about thirty-eight years old, and the year is 1900. I had meant to take up with her again in about 1920 or 1925, in Europe. And her daughter, Alexandra, was to have become maybe a spinsterish social worker, disappointed, a rather angry woman.

INTERVIEWER

In the third act of *The Little Foxes* is a speech which carries the burden of the play. It says there are people who eat the earth and all the people on it, like the locusts in the Bible. And there are the people who let them do it. "Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand by and watch them do it." At the end of this play, Alexandra decides that she is not going to be one of those passive people. She is going to leave her mother.

HELLMAN

Yes, I meant her to leave. But to my great surprise, the ending of the play was taken to be a statement of faith in Alexandra, in her denial of her family. I never meant it that way. She did have

courage enough to leave, but she would never have the force or vigor of her mother's family. That's what I meant. Or maybe I made it up afterward.

INTERVIEWER

These wheelers and dealers in your plays—the gouging, avaricious Hubbards. Had you known many people like that?

HELLMAN

Lots of people thought it was my mother's family.

INTERVIEWER

Might you ever write that third play?

HELLMAN

I'm tired of the people in *The Little Foxes*.

INTERVIEWER

In *Regina*, the opera Marc Blitzstein based on *The Little Foxes*, the badness of Regina is most emphatic.

HELLMAN

Marc and I were close friends, but we never collaborated. I had nothing to do with the opera. I never saw Regina that way. You have no right to see your characters as good or bad. Such words have nothing to do with people you write about. Other people see them that way.

INTERVIEWER

You say in your introduction that *The Children's Hour* is about goodness and badness.

HELLMAN

Goodness and badness is different from good and bad people, isn't it? *The Children's Hour*—I was pleased with the results—was

a kind of exercise. I didn't know how to write a play and I was teaching myself. I chose, or Dashiell Hammett chose for me, an actual law case, on the theory that I would do better with something that was there, had a foundation in fact. I didn't want to write about myself at the age of twenty-six. The play was based on a law case in a book by William Roughead. I changed it, of course, completely, by the time I finished. The case took place in Edinburgh in the nineteenth century and was about two old-maid schoolteachers who ran a sort of second-rate private school. A little Indian girl—an India Indian—had been enrolled by her grandmother in the school. She brought charges of lesbianism against the two teachers. The two poor middle-aged ladies spent the rest of their lives suing, sometimes losing, sometimes winning, until they no longer had any money and no school.

INTERVIEWER

As a rule, does the germ of a play come to you abstractly? Do you work from a general conception?

HELLMAN

No, I've never done that. I used to say that I saw a play only in terms of the people in it. I used to say that because I believed that is the way you do the best work. I have come now to think that is it people *and* ideas.

INTERVIEWER

Have characters invented themselves before you write them?

HELLMAN

I don't think characters turn out the way you think they are going to turn out. They don't always go your way. At least they don't go my way. If I wanted to start writing about you, by page ten I probably wouldn't be. I don't think you start with a person. I think you start with the parts of many people. Drama has to do with conflict in people, with denials. But I don't really know much

about the process of creation and I don't like talking about it.

INTERVIEWER

Is there something mysterious in what a play evokes as art and the craft of writing it?

HELLMAN

Sure. That is really the only mystery, because theories may work for one person and not for another. It's very hard, at least for me, to have theories about writing.

INTERVIEWER

But you had to begin with a clear idea of what the action of the play would be?

HELLMAN

Not always. Not as I got older. It was bright of Hammett to see that somebody starting to write should have a solid foundation to build on. It made the wheels go easier. When I first started to write I used to do two or three page outlines. Afterward, I didn't.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the kind of play you do—the well-made play, one which runs the honest risk of melodrama for a purpose—is going to survive?

HELLMAN

I don't know what survives and what doesn't. Like everybody else, I hope I will survive. But survival won't have anything to do with well made or not well made, or words like "melodrama." I don't like labels and isms. They are for people who raise or lower skirts because that's the thing you do for this year. You write as you write, in your time, as you see your world. One form is as good as another. There are a thousand ways to write, and each is as good as the other if it fits you, if you are any good. If you can

CAL

Miss Zan she had two helpings frozen fruit cream and she tell that honored guest, she tell him that you make the best frozen fruit cream in all the south.

ADDIE

(Smiles, pleased)

Did she? Well, save her a little. She like it right before she go to bed.

(Cal nods, exits. After a second the dining room doors are opened and quickly closed again by BIRDIE HUBBARD. Birdie is a woman of about forty, with a pretty, well-bred, faded face. Her movements are usually nervous and timid, but now, as she comes running into the room, she is gay and excited)

BIRDIE

(Running to the bell-cord)

My, Addie. What a good dinner. Just as good as good can be.

ADDIE

You look pretty this evening, Miss Birdie, and young.

BIRDIE

(Laughing, pleased)

Me, young!

(ADDIE looks at her as she rings the bell again)

I want one of the kitchen boys to run home for me. He's to look in my desk drawer, the left drawer, and bring my music album right away. Mr. Marshall is very anxious to see it because of his father and the opera in Chicago. Mr. Marshall is such a polite man with his manners, and very educated and cultured ——

(CAL appears at the door)

Oh, Cal. Tell Simon or one of the boys to run down to our house and look in my desk, the left drawer, and ——

(The dining room doors are opened and quickly closed by OSCAR HUBBARD. He is a tall, thin-faced man in his late forties)

OSCAR

(Sharply)

Birdie.

BIRDIE

(Turning, nervously)

Oh. Oscar. I was just sending Simon for my music album.

OSCAR

(To Cal)

Never mind about Simon. Miss Birdie has changed her mind.

Manuscript page from *The Little Foxes*

break into a new pattern along the way, and it opens things up and allows you more freedom, that's something. But not everything, maybe even not much. Take any form, and if you're good—

INTERVIEWER

Do you have to do with the casting of your plays?

HELLMAN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you were well served always?

HELLMAN

Sometimes, sometimes not. *Candide* and *My Mother, My Father and Me* were botched, and I helped to do the botching. You never know with failures who has done the harm. *Days to Come* was botched. The whole production was botched, including my botching. It was an absolute horror of a failure. I mean the curtain wasn't up ten minutes and catastrophe set in. It was just an awful failure. Mr. William Randolph Hearst caused a little excitement by getting up in the middle of the first act and leaving with his party of ten. I vomited in the back aisle. I did. I had to go home and change my clothes. I was drunk.

INTERVIEWER

Have you enjoyed the adaptations you have done of European plays?

HELLMAN

Sometimes, not always. I didn't like Anouilh's *The Lark* very much. But I didn't discover I didn't like it until I was halfway through. I liked *Montserrat*. I don't seem to have good luck with adaptations. I got nothing but pain out of *Candide*. That's a long story. No, I had a good time on *Candide* when I was working

alone. I am not a collaborator. It was a stormy collaboration. But I had a good time alone.

INTERVIEWER

Candide was a box-office failure, but obviously it was a success. The record is very popular.

HELLMAN

It has become a cult show. It happens. I'm glad.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think *My Mother, My Father and Me* was a cult show?

HELLMAN

It opened during the newspaper strike, and that was fatal. Yes, I guess we were a cult show. Oddly enough, mostly with jazz musicians. The last week the audience was filled with jazz musicians. Stan Getz had come to see it and liked it, and he must have told his friends about it. I hope it will be revived because I like it. Off Broadway. I had wanted it done off Broadway in the beginning.

INTERVIEWER

Can you comment on your contemporaries—Arthur Miller?

HELLMAN

I like *Death of a Salesman*. I have reservations about it, but I thought it was an effective play. I like best *View from the Bridge*.

INTERVIEWER

After the Fall?

HELLMAN

So you put on a stage your ex-wife who is dead from suicide and you dress her up so nobody can mistake her. Her name is

Marilyn Monroe, good at any box office, so you cash in on her, and cash in on yourself, which is maybe even worse.

INTERVIEWER

In an important subplot of this play a man who was once briefly a communist names a close friend before a congressional committee.

HELLMAN

I couldn't understand all that. Miller felt differently once upon a time, although I never much liked his House Un-American Activities Committee testimony: a little breast-beating and a little apology. And recently I went back to reread it and liked it even less. I suppose, in the play, he was being tolerant: those who betrayed their friends had a point, those who didn't also had a point. Two sides to every question and all that rot.

INTERVIEWER

And Tennessee Williams?

HELLMAN

I think he is a natural playwright. He writes by sanded fingertips. I don't always like his plays—the last three or four seem to me to have gone off, kind of way out in a conventional way. He is throwing his talent around.

INTERVIEWER

Mary McCarthy wrote in a review that you get the feeling that no matter what happens, Mr. Williams will be rich and famous.

HELLMAN

I have the same feeling about Miss McCarthy.

INTERVIEWER

She has accused you of, among other things, a certain "lubricity," of an overfacility in answering complex questions. Being too facile, relying on contrivance.

HELLMAN

I don't like to defend myself against Miss McCarthy's opinions, or anybody else's. I think Miss McCarthy is often brilliant and sometimes even sound. But, in fiction, she is a lady writer, a lady magazine writer. Of course, that doesn't mean that she isn't right about me. But if I thought she was, I'd quit. I would like critics to like my plays because that is what makes plays successful. But a few people I respect are the only ones whose opinions I've worried about in the end.

INTERVIEWER

There is a special element in your plays—of tension rising into violence. In *Days to Come* and *Watch on the Rhine,* there are killings directly on stage. Was there possibly, from your association with Dashiell Hammett and his work, some sort of influence, probably indirect, on you?

HELLMAN

I don't think so, I don't think so. Dash and I thought differently and were totally different writers. He frequently objected to my use of violence. He often felt that I was far too held up by how to do things, by the technique. I guess he was right. But he wasn't writing for the theater and I was.

INTERVIEWER

You have written a lot of movies?

HELLMAN

Let's see. I wrote a picture called *The Dark Angel* when I first started. I did the adaption of *Dead End*. I did the adaptation of *The Little Foxes*. Right now I'm doing a picture called *The Chase*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever worry about Hollywood being a dead end for a serious writer?

HELLMAN

Never. I wouldn't have written movies if I'd thought that. When I first went out to Hollywood one heard talk from writers about whoring. But you are not tempted to whore unless you want to be a whore.

INTERVIEWER

The other night when we listened to Pete Seeger sing his folk songs you seemed nostalgic.

HELLMAN

I was moved by seeing a man of conviction again.

INTERVIEWER

We aren't making them like that any more?

HELLMAN

Not too many. Seeger's naïveté and the sweetness, the hard work, the depth of belief I found touching. He reminded me of very different times and people. There were always *X* number of clowns, *X* number of simpleminded fools, *X* number of fashionables who just went along with what was being said and done, but there were also remarkable people, people of belief, people willing to live by their beliefs. Roosevelt gave you a feeling that you had something to do with your government, something to do with better conditions for yourself and for other people. With all its

foolishness, the thirties were a good time and I often have regrets for it. Many people of my age make fun of that period and are bitter about it. A few do so out of a genuine regret for foolish things said or foolish things done—but many do so because belief is unfashionable now and fear comes with middle age.

INTERVIEWER

Do people still mention your statement before the House Un-American Activities Committee: "I can't cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions"?

HELLMAN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Did that put you in contempt of Congress?

HELLMAN

No, I never was in contempt. They brought no contempt charges at the end of that day. My lawyer, Joseph Rauh, was so proud and pleased. He was afraid I would be harmed because I might have waived my rights under the Fifth Amendment.

INTERVIEWER

You took the stand that you would tell the committee all they wanted to know about you, but you weren't going to bring bad trouble upon innocent people no matter if they had been fooled?

HELLMAN

We sent a letter saying that I would come and testify about myself as long as I wasn't asked questions about other people.* But the committee wasn't interested in that. I think they knew I was innocent, but they were interested in other people. It was very common in those days, not only to talk about other people,

* Following the interview is the text of this letter. The Committee rejected the proposal contained in the letter.

but to make the talk as interesting as possible. Friendly witnesses, so-called, would often make their past more colorful than ever was the case. Otherwise you might turn out to be dull. I thought mine was a good position to take—I still think so.

INTERVIEWER

Was it something of a custom among theater people in those days, when they were going to name some old acquaintance to a committee, to call him beforehand and let him know? Just to be fair and square, as it were?

HELLMAN

Yes. They would telephone around among their friends. In several cases, the to-be-injured people actually gave their permission. They understood the motive of their friends' betrayal—money, injury to a career. Oh, yes, there was a great deal of telephoning around. Kind of worse than testifying, isn't it?—the fraternity of the betrayers and the betrayed. There was a man in California who had been barred from pictures because he had been a communist. After a while he was broke, this Mr. Smith, and his mother-in-law, who was getting bored with him—anybody would have been bored with him—said that he could have a little piece of land. So he started to build a two-room house, and he borrowed the tools from his closest friend, his old college roommate, Mr. Jones. He had been working on his house for about seven or eight months and almost had it finished when Mr. Jones arrived to say that he had to have the tools back because, he, Mr. Jones, was being called before the committee the next day and was going to name Mr. Smith and thought it was rather unethical for Mr. Smith to have his tools while he was naming him. I don't know whether the house ever got finished. Clowns, they were.

INTERVIEWER

A little-known aspect of Lillian Hellman is that she was the inspiration for Dashiell Hammett's Nora Charles, the loyal wife of

Nick Charles, the detective-hero of *The Thin Man*. That marriage is beautifully evoked in the book and was played by William Powell and Myrna Loy in the movies.

HELLMAN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't it give you some gratification?

HELLMAN

It did, indeed.

INTERVIEWER

When Myrna Loy turned into her, then she became the perfect wife.

HELLMAN

Yes. I liked that. But Nora is often a foolish lady. She goes around trying to get Nick into trouble.

INTERVIEWER

And that was about you both?

HELLMAN

Well, Hammett and I had a good time together. Most of it, not all of it. We were amused by each other.

INTERVIEWER

Was it because of that book that Gertrude Stein invited you to dinner?

HELLMAN

Miss Stein arrived in America and said that there were two people that she wanted to meet. They were both in California at

that minute—Chaplin and Dash. And we were invited to dinner at the house of a friend of Miss Stein; Charlie Chaplin, Dash and myself, Paulette Goddard, Miss Toklas, our host and hostess, and another man. There was this magnificent china and lace tablecloth. Chaplin turned over his coffee cup, nowhere near Stein, just all over this beautiful cloth, and the first thing Miss Stein said was, "Don't worry, it didn't get on me." She was miles away from him. She said it perfectly seriously. Then she told Dash he was the only American writer who wrote well about women. He was very pleased.

INTERVIEWER

Did he give you any credit for that?

HELLMAN

He pointed to me, but she didn't pay any attention. She wasn't having any part of me. I was just a girl around the table. I talked to Miss Toklas. We talked about food. It was very pleasant.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Nathanael West?

HELLMAN

He managed a hotel, the Sutton Club Hotel. We all lived there half free, sometimes all free. Dash wrote *The Thin Man* at the Sutton Hotel. Pep West's uncle or cousin owned it, I think. He gave Pep a job out of kindness. There couldn't have been any other reason. Pep liked opening letters addressed to the guests. He was writing, you know, and he was curious about everything and everybody. He would steam open envelopes, and I would help him. He wanted to know about everybody.

Dash had the Royal Suite—three very small rooms. And we had to eat there most of the time because we didn't have enough money to eat any place else. It was awful food, almost spoiled.

* S. J. Perelman was West's brother-in-law.

I think Pep bought it extra cheap. But it was the depression and I couldn't get a job. I remember reading the manuscript of *Balso Snell* in the hotel. And I think he was also writing *Lonelyhearts* at that time. Dash was writing *The Thin Man*. The hotel had started out very fancy—it had a swimming pool. I spent a good deal of time in the swimming pool . . . I had nothing else to do with myself.

Then the Perelmans* bought a house in Bucks County. We all went down to see it. There was a dead fish in a closet. I don't know why I remember that fish. Later we would all go down for weekends, to hunt. I have a snapshot of the Perelmans and Dash and me and Pep and Bob Coates.

Even in a fuzzy snapshot you can see that we are all drunk. We used to go hunting. My memory of those hunting trips is of trying to be the last to climb the fence, with the other guns in front of me, just in case. Pep was a good shot. He used to hunt with Faulkner. So was Dash.

INTERVIEWER

Did Faulkner come around a lot in those days?

HELLMAN

Faulkner and Dash liked each other. Dash's short stories were selling, the movies were selling. So we had a lot of money, and he gave it away and we lived fine. Always, he gave it away—to the end of his life when there wasn't much, anymore. We met every night at some point for months on end, during one of Faulkner's New York visits. We had literary discussions. A constant argument about Thomas Mann. This must have taken up weeks of time.

INTERVIEWER

Was Faulkner quiet?

HELLMAN

He was a gallant man, very Southern. He used to call me Miss Lillian. I never was to see him much after that period, until a few

years ago when I saw him a couple of times. We remembered the days with Dash, and he said what a good time in his life that was and what a good time we had had together.

INTERVIEWER

Was any play easy to write?

HELLMAN

Autumn Garden was easier than any other.

INTERVIEWER

At the very end of the play, the retired general, Griggs, makes one of the rare speeches in your plays that is of a remotely "philosophic" nature.

HELLMAN

Dash wrote that speech. I worked on it over and over again but it never came right. One night he said, "Go to bed and let me try." Dash comes into this interview very often, doesn't he?

INTERVIEWER

"That big hour of decision, the turning point in your life, the someday you've counted on when you'd suddenly wipe out your past mistakes, do the work you'd never done, think the way you'd never thought, have what you'd never had, it just doesn't come suddenly. You trained yourself for it while you waited—or you've let it all run past you and frittered yourself away."

HELLMAN

Yes, the basic idea was his. Dash was hipped on the subject. I think I believe that speech . . . I know I do . . . Dash worked at it far harder than I ever have, as his death proved. He wasn't prepared for death, but he was prepared for the trouble and the sickness he had, and was able to bear it—I think, because of this belief—with enormous courage, and quietness.

INTERVIEWER

What is the sensation the writer has when he hears his own words from the mouth of somebody else? Of even the most gifted actor?

HELLMAN

Sometimes you're pleased, and the words take on meanings they didn't have before, larger meanings. But sometimes it is the opposite. There is no rule. I don't have to tell you that speech on the stage is not the speech of life, not even the written speech.

INTERVIEWER

But do you hear dialogue spoken when you are writing it?

HELLMAN

I guess I do. Anyway, I read it to myself. I usually know in the first few days of rehearsals what I have made actors stumble over, and what can or cannot be cured.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have disputes with actors who want their lines changed?

HELLMAN

Not too many. I took a stubborn stand on the first play and now I have a reputation for stubbornness.

INTERVIEWER

Is that because you have written always to be read, even more than to be acted?

HELLMAN

Partly. But I had learned early that in the theater, good or bad, you'd better stand on what you did. In *Candide* I was persuaded to do what I didn't believe in, and I am no good at all at that game. It wasn't that the other people were necessarily wrong, I just

couldn't do what they wanted. With age, I guess, I began to want to be agreeable.

INTERVIEWER

Would you mind if your plays were never produced again but only read?

HELLMAN

I wouldn't like it. Plays are there to be acted. I want both.

INTERVIEWER

The famous Hemingway dialogue, the best of it, turns to parody when actors speak it verbatim in adaptations of his work.

HELLMAN

That's right. It shows up, it shows up. That's just what I meant by listening to the actor. Writing for the theater is a totally different form. But then, if you want to be good and hope people will also read the plays, then it becomes a question of making sure the two forms come together. Very often in the printed form, you must recast a sentence. I do it—when I'm not too lazy—for the published version. But in minor ways, like changing the place of a verb, or punctuation. I overpunctuate for theater scripts.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the political message in some of your plays is more important than the characters and the development?

HELLMAN

I've never been interested in political messages, so it is hard for me to believe I wrote them. Like every other writer, I use myself and the time I live in. The nearest thing to a political play was *The Searching Wind*, which is probably why I don't like it much any more. But even there I meant only to write about nice, well-born people who, with good intentions, helped to sell out a world.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe this was one play in which you were more concerned with a situation of crisis than with your characters?

HELLMAN

Yes. But I didn't know that when I was writing it. I felt very strongly that people had gotten us into a bad situation—gotten us into a war that could have been avoided if fascism had been recognized early enough.

INTERVIEWER

What were you doing in those war years?

HELLMAN

In 1944 I was invited by the Russians to come on a kind of cultural mission. Maybe because they were producing *Watch on the Rhine* and *The Little Foxes* in Moscow.

INTERVIEWER

What were those productions like?

HELLMAN

The Little Foxes was an excellent production. *Watch on the Rhine* was very bad. I had thought it would be the other way around. I would go to rehearsals of *Watch on the Rhine* with Sergey Eisenstein, and when I made faces or noises, he would say, "Never mind, never mind. It's a good play. Don't pay any attention to what they are doing. They can't ruin it." I saw a great deal of Eisenstein. I was very fond of him.

INTERVIEWER

When did you discover that you could no longer earn money by writing for the movies?

HELLMAN

I learned about the blacklisting by accident in 1948. Wyler and I were going to do *Sister Carrie*. Somebody, I think Mr. Balaban, told Wyler that I couldn't be hired. That unwritten, unofficial, powerful blacklist stayed in effect until two or three years ago.

INTERVIEWER

Weren't you offered clearance if you would sign something? If you made an appropriate act of contrition?

HELLMAN

Later. Shortly after the first blacklisting I was offered a contract by Columbia Pictures—a contract that I had always wanted—to direct, produce, and write, all three or any. And a great, great deal of money. But it came at the time of the famous movie conference of top Hollywood producers. They met to face the attacks of the Red-baiters and to appease them down. A new clause went into movie contracts. I no longer remember the legal phrases, but it was a lulu. I didn't sign the contract.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think about what was happening?

HELLMAN

I was so unprepared for it all, so surprised McCarthy was happening in America. So few people fought, so few people spoke out. I think I was more surprised by that than I was by McCarthy.

INTERVIEWER

People in the theater or pictures?

HELLMAN

Yes, and literary people and liberals. Still painful to me, still puzzling. Recently, I was asked to sign a protest about Polish writers. I signed it—it was a good protest, I thought—and went out to

mail it. But I tore it up when I realized not one of the people protesting had ever protested about any of us.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think was going to happen?

HELLMAN

I thought McCarthy would last longer than he did. I thought the whole period would be worse and longer than it was. You know, I was very worried about Dash. He was a sick man, and I was scared that he might go back to prison and get sicker—I lived for a long time in fear that he would go back and not get good medical treatment and be alone and— But jail hadn't worried him much or he pretended it hadn't. It amused him to act as if jail was like college. He talked about going to jail the way people talk about going to college. He used to make me angry . . .

INTERVIEWER

The Maltese Falcon was taken off the shelves of the U.S.I.S. libraries when Roy Cohn and David Schine were riding high. Dashiell Hammett was called before Senator McCarthy's committee.

HELLMAN

Yes. It was on television and I watched it. They called Dash, and Dash was a handsome man, a remarkably handsome man, and he looked nice. One of the senators, I think McCarthy, said to him, "Mr. Hammett, if you were in our position, would you allow your books in USIS libraries?" And he said, "If I were you, Senator, I would not allow any libraries." A good remark. McCarthy laughed. Nobody else did, but McCarthy did. Dash had an extremely irritating habit of shrugging his shoulders. For years I would say, "Please don't shrug your shoulders." I don't know why it worried me, but it did. He was shrugging his shoulders like mad at the committee. He'd give an answer, and he'd shrug his shoulders with it. And when he was finished and got to the airport

he rang me up and said, "Hey, how did you like it? I was shrugging my shoulders just for you."

INTERVIEWER

Did that period—and its effect on people—appeal to you as a subject?

HELLMAN

I've never known how to do it. It was really a clownish period. It was full of clowns talking their heads off, apologizing, inventing sins to apologize for. And other clowns, liberals, who just took to the hills. Ugly clowning is a hard thing to write about. Few people acted large enough for drama and not pleasant enough for comedy.

INTERVIEWER

Then you went to England to do a movie?

HELLMAN

I used to try to explain that it wasn't as bad as they thought it was. And it wasn't. They were exaggerating it because they don't always like us very much. So much talk about fascism here and how many people were in jail. The only time I ever met Richard Crossman, he didn't know I knew Hammett. Hammett was in jail, and Crossman said what a disgrace that was. "What's the matter with all of you, you don't lift a finger for this man? It couldn't happen here, we'd have raised a row." I told him I had lifted a finger.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever think of living abroad as other Americans were doing?

HELLMAN

I was tempted to stay in England, but I couldn't. I like this country. This is where I belong. Anyway, I don't much like exiles. But I used to try to persuade Dash to go away, just to save his life.

He had emphysema. He caught tuberculosis in the First World War and emphysema in the Second. He had never been to Europe. He used to laugh when I suggested his leaving here. He had a provincial dislike of foreigners and an amused contempt for Russian bureaucracy. He didn't understand all of our trotting around Europe. Thought it was a waste of time.

INTERVIEWER

Did he laugh at the idea that they admired him over there?

HELLMAN

No. He liked it, but it didn't interest him much. When I told him that André Gide admired him, he made a joke, which you can't print.

INTERVIEWER

Let's be bold.

HELLMAN

All right. He said, "I wish that fag would take me out of his mouth."

INTERVIEWER

Whom did he want to admire his work?

HELLMAN

Like most writers, he wanted to be admired by good writers. He had started off as a pulp writer, you know, and had a wide audience—he wrote a lot for a pulp mystery magazine, *The Black Mask*. But I believe Dash took himself very seriously as a writer from the beginning.

INTERVIEWER

He helped you with your work. Did you help him with his?

HELLMAN

No, no.

INTERVIEWER

Did he show you his novels while he was writing them?

HELLMAN

The Thin Man and some stories, and a novel unfinished at his death. The other novels were written before I met him.

INTERVIEWER

But he worked very painstakingly with you, on your work.

HELLMAN

Oh, yes, and was very critical of me. The rules didn't apply the other way. I had many problems writing *The Little Foxes*. When I thought I had got it right, I wanted Dash to read it. It was five o'clock in the morning. I was pleased with this sixth version, and I put the manuscript near his door with a note, "I hope *this* satisfies you." When I got up, the manuscript was outside my door with a note saying, "Things are going pretty well if you will just cut out the liberal blackamoor chitchat."

INTERVIEWER

He meant the Negro servants talking?

HELLMAN

Yes. No other praise, just that.

INTERVIEWER

So you knew you were all right?

HELLMAN

No, I wrote it all over again. He was generous with anybody who asked for help. He felt that you didn't lie about writing, and

anybody who couldn't take hard words was about to be shrugged off, anyway. He was a dedicated man about writing. Tough and generous.

INTERVIEWER

Was he always reasonably successful?

HELLMAN

Oh, no. He earned a kind of living at first, but pulp magazines didn't pay much. He was not really discovered until shortly before I met him, in 1930. He had been writing for a long time.

INTERVIEWER

He read constantly?

HELLMAN

Enormously. He had little formal education. He quit school at thirteen to work. He was the most widely read person I ever knew. He read anything, just anything. All kinds of science books, farm books, books on making turtle traps, tying knots, novels—he spent almost a year on the retina of the eye. I got very tired of retinas. And there was a period of poisonous plants and Icelandic sagas and how to take the muddy taste from lake bass. I finally made a rule that I would not listen to any more retina-of-the-eye talk or knot talk or baseball talk or football talk.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself to be closely tied to the theater and to "theater people"?

HELLMAN

In the early days I didn't think it out, but I stayed away from them. I was frightened of competing. I felt that the further I stayed away, the better chance I had. No, I don't know too many theater people.

INTERVIEWER

A man who has known both breeds said that on the whole writers are even more narcissistic and nastier and more competitive than people in showbiz.

HELLMAN

Hard to know the more or less. But people in the theater are usually generous with money and often with good will. Maybe the old-troupers' world—having to live together and sharing. Writers are interesting people, but often mean and petty. Competing with each other and ungenerous about each other. Hemingway was ungenerous about other writers. Most writers are. Writers can be the stinkers of all time, can't they?

INTERVIEWER

The playwright knows dangers that are different from those the novelists know?

HELLMAN

Yes, because failure is faster in the theater. It is necessary that you not become frightened of failure. Failure in the theater is more dramatic and uglier than in any other form of writing. It costs so much, you feel so guilty. In the production of *Candide*, for the first time in my life, I guess, I was worried by all this. It was bad for me.

INTERVIEWER

Writing about the Lincoln Center Repertory in the *New York Review of Books*, Elizabeth Hardwick said that the trouble with the present theater is that it is all professionalism and is divorced from literature.

HELLMAN

Yes, of course she was right. There shouldn't be any difference between writing for the theater and writing for anything else. Only that one has to know the theater. Know it. To publish a novel or a

poem one doesn't have to know print types or the publishing world. But to do a play, no matter how much one wishes to stay away from it, one has to *know* the theater. Playwrights have tried to stay away, including Shaw and Chekhov, but in the end, they were involved. Chekhov used to send letters of instructions and angry notes. A play is not only on paper. It is there to share with actors, directors, scene designers, electricians.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe there are many talented writers working at present?

HELLMAN

Yes, but nothing like the period when I was very young, in the twenties. That was a wonderfully talented generation, the one before mine. But, you know, I think there's talent around now. Maybe not great talent, but how often does that occur anyway? It is good that we have this much. And there are signs now of cutting up. They are not always to my taste, but that doesn't matter. Cutting up is a form of belief, a negative expression of it, but belief.

INTERVIEWER

The hard professionalism in writers of that generation, like Ring Lardner, Dashiell Hammett, or Dorothy Parker, seems very unfashionable now. Young writers take themselves very seriously as highbrows and artists.

HELLMAN

The writer's intention hasn't anything to do with what he achieves. The intent to earn money or the intent to be famous or the intent to be great doesn't matter in the end. Just what comes out. It is a present fashion to believe that the best writing comes out of a hophead's dream. You pitch it around and paste it up. So sentimental.

INTERVIEWER

Sentimental or romantic?

HELLMAN

Romantic and sentimental. I am surprised, for example, at the sentimentality in much of Genet, and surprised that people are romantic enough not to see its sentimentality. I mean a sentimental way of looking at life, at sex, at love, at the way you live or the way you think. It is interesting that the "way-out" is not the sharpness of a point of view or the toughness, but just tough words and tough actions, masking the romantic. Violence, in space, is a romantic notion. Antibourgeois in an old-fashioned sense.

INTERVIEWER

Philip Rahv said the old idea of *épatisme* is dead. You can no longer scandalize the bourgeois. He may be vicious about defending his property; but as to morality, he is wide open to any and all nihilistic ideas.

HELLMAN

Yes, indeed. He has caught up. That is what words like "the sexual revolution" mean, I guess—the bourgeois sexual revolution. I agree with Philip. "Epataying" is just a sticking out of the tongue now, isn't it? The tongue or other organs.

INTERVIEWER

You have seen a lot of the contemporary theater in Europe. How does it compare with ours?

HELLMAN

The British have more talented young men and women than we have here, but I doubt if they are major talents. Genet and Ionesco are interesting men, but they are not to my taste in the theater. Beckett is the only possibly first-rate talent in the world theater. But he must grow larger, the scale's too small. We don't

know much about the Russian theater. Obviously, it hasn't produced good playwrights. Certainly not when I was there. But Russian production, directing, and acting are often wonderful. But that's a dead end. When the major talents are directors, actors, and scene designers—that's dead-end theater. Fine to see, but it ain't going nowhere. You have to turn out good new writers.

INTERVIEWER

What about the revival of Brecht?

HELLMAN

Brecht was the truest talent of the last forty or fifty years. But a great deal of nonsense has been written about Brecht. Brecht himself talked a great deal of nonsense. Deliberately, I think. He was a showman and it is showman-like in the theater to have theories. But that doesn't matter. What a wonderful play *Galileo* is. Writers talk too much.

INTERVIEWER

What do you want to do next?

HELLMAN

I am going to edit that anthology. I had a struggle with myself because Dash would not have wanted it. He didn't want the short stories printed again. But I decided that I was going to have to forget what he wanted. Someday even the second copyrights will expire and the stories will be in public domain. I don't really know why he didn't want them reprinted—maybe because he was too sick to care. It will be a hard job. I have already started the introduction, and I find it very difficult to write about so complex a man, and even I knew so little of what he was. I am not sure I can do it in the end, but I am going to have a try. But I don't know his reasons. Probably when you're sick enough you don't care much. He went through a bad time.

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May 19, 1952
Honorable John S. Wood
Chairman
House Committee on Un-American Activities

Dear Mr. Wood:

As you know, I am under subpoena to appear before your Committee on May 19, 1952.

I am most willing to answer all questions about myself. I have nothing to hide from your Committee and there is nothing in my life of which I am ashamed. I have been advised by counsel that under the Fifth Amendment I have a constitutional privilege to decline to answer any questions about my political opinions, activities, and associations, on the grounds of self-incrimination. I do not wish to claim this privilege. I am ready and willing to testify before representatives of our Government as to my own opinions and my own actions, regardless of any risks or consequences to myself.

But I am advised by counsel that if I answer the Committee's questions about myself, I must also answer questions about other people, and that if I refuse to do so, I can be cited for contempt. My counsel tells me that if I answer questions about myself, I will have waived my rights under the Fifth Amendment and could be forced legally to answer questions about others. This is very difficult for a layman to understand. But there is one principle that I do understand: I am not willing, now or in the future, to bring bad trouble to people who, in my past association with them, were completely innocent of any talk or any action that was disloyal or subversive . . .

But to hurt innocent people whom I know many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions, even though I long ago came to the conclusion that I was

not a political person and could have no comfortable place in any political group . . .

I am prepared to waive the privilege against self-incrimination and to tell you anything you wish to know about my views or actions if your Committee will agree to refrain from asking me to name other people. If the Committee is unwilling to give me this assurance, I will be forced to plead the privilege of the Fifth Amendment at the hearing.

A reply to this letter would be appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Lillian Hellman