

## “There is no keyhole on my door”: Musings on Visibility and the Power of the “Unmarked” in *The Children’s Hour*

Sally Shedd

In spite of Jenny Spencer’s admonition in a 2004 *Modern Drama* essay that “this is not a play that a feminist director would eagerly seek out,”<sup>1</sup> I found myself in 2005 drawn to direct *The Children’s Hour* for a variety of reasons: In a small program, we count on productions to supplement our theatre history offerings. *The Children’s Hour* was produced during the same semester we offered our “Twentieth Century Theatre” course (which is on a two-year rotation). It seemed a good opportunity to reinforce the basics of realistic style. After somewhat unexpectedly directing an all-female production of *Much Ado about Nothing* in 2004, *The Children’s Hour*, with roles for 14 females and two males, seemed a good choice in terms of casting possibilities. It provided an opportunity to stage the work of a female playwright. Lastly, and perhaps most simply, I like the play.

As someone who considers herself primarily a theatre practitioner, I value and enjoy the intellectual artistry of theory but am most interested in ways in which theory can inform and illuminate the processes of theatre artists and audiences. In this essay, I wish to address complexities of lesbian visibility in *The Children’s Hour* and suggest that the play might be more progressive today than Spencer’s statement would lead us to believe.

In *The Children’s Hour*, by Lillian Hellman, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright run the Wright-Dobie School for girls. Mary, a disgruntled young girl, dislikes the teachers at the boarding school and wants permission from her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, to return to the home they share. Mary runs away from the school and appears, unexpectedly, on her grandmother’s doorstep. Anxious to gain her way, Mary begins to work on her grandmother. She spins tale after tale—some loosely based upon scenes the audience has witnessed—in order to persuade her grandmother to let her stay. She finally hits a goldmine with stories of “unnatural acts” between the two teachers. Mary gets her way, setting off a series of events which culminate in the suicide of Martha Dobie.

Though in her earliest notes, Hellman lists Martha Dobie as “friend and partner. Unconscious Lesbian,”<sup>2</sup> Hellman ultimately took references to “lesbian” out of *The Children’s Hour* script. The word “lesbian” is never said in the play. It is likely that Hellman was trying to work around “decency issues” of her day. Regardless of Hellman’s intent, what is the result of that omission today? Can

---

Dr. Sally Shedd is Associate Professor of Theatre and Humanities Division Chair at Virginia Wesleyan College. This essay was inspired by a VWC production of *The Children’s Hour* under her direction.

this production stage complexities of visibility—*How* is lesbian made visible? *Can* lesbian be made visible? Is it *desirable* to make lesbian visible?—as opposed to the simplistic questions of “Is Martha a lesbian or not?”; “Is Mary telling the truth?”; “Is she or isn’t she?” Can a shift, in the minds of performers and audiences, to issues of visibility tap into hidden, transgressive potential in this seventy-plus year-old play?

### Visibility and the Power of the “Unmarked”

In the scene in which Mary begs her grandmother to allow her to stay at home rather than return to the Wright-Dobie School, Mary tries to hook her grandmother with allusions to everything from general mistreatment to “funny noises” to witnessing emotional outbursts between the teachers. Ultimately, what convinces Mrs. Tilford of lesbian presence at the school is Mary’s description of acts she alleges to have seen her teachers engage in through a keyhole on the bedroom door. It is the (untruthful) description of visible acts—a description never heard by the audience since Mary whispers it into her grandmother’s ear—that convinces Mrs. Tilford of the need to police the situation at the school. Not only does she keep Mary at home, she calls the parents of other students—ultimately leading to the closing of the school.

In the next scene, Martha, Karen, and Karen’s fiancé Joe (Mrs. Tilford’s nephew) appear at Mrs. Tilford’s home in order to confront her. Mary is called into the room and continues with her story of “unnatural acts” between the teachers. She says that she saw the acts herself: “It was at night and I was leaning down by the keyhole. And . . .” To which Karen replies, “There’s no keyhole on my door.” After a moment of panic, Mary recovers and states, “It wasn’t her room, Grandma, it was the other room, I guess. It was Miss Dobie’s room. I saw them through the keyhole in Miss Dobie’s room.”<sup>3</sup> In the ensuing conversation, despite the revelation that Martha Dobie shares a room with her aunt (making a tryst with Karen highly unlikely) and Mary’s admission that it was Rosalie that saw the “unnatural act” and told her about it, somehow Mrs. Tilford remains convinced of lesbian presence—aided by Rosalie lying for Mary in order to avoid being revealed as a thief.

As Hellman has cut any direct reference to “lesbian” by omitting the word, she can’t have Mary directly say to her Grandmother that the teachers are lesbian. She can’t have Mary tell her Grandmother that she heard the teachers use the word “lesbian” to describe themselves. If the play is framed with “Is she or isn’t she a lesbian?” then, in the absence of the word, today’s audiences trying to decipher Martha’s “true” sexual identity (Is she or isn’t she “really” a lesbian?) will likely, similarly to Mrs. Tilford, give weight to visual clues: Cultural stereotypes of lesbian physicality will come into play. In this light, 2007 productions of *The Children’s Hour* are, arguably, as regressive as previous productions which Spencer deals

with in her essay: Despite Martha's final act admission of "I have loved you the way they said,"<sup>54</sup> Ann Revere who played the character in the 1934 production, did not believe that Martha was "really" a lesbian: "She and the other girl were just good friends, in my mind, nothing more. Under the stress she cracks and thinks she is."<sup>55</sup> Reactions to Patricia Neal's portrayal of Martha in the 1952 revival (directed by Hellman), indicate that Walter Kerr collapsed Neal's "handsome" appearance, "husky voice," and "markedly mannish" work into his reading of a lesbian character,<sup>6</sup> and George Freedley commented that Neal played Martha in too "mannish a fashion."<sup>7</sup> Spencer states that reviewers of the 1952 revival "were most struck by Patricia Neal's playing of Martha in a way that telegraphed her sexual identity from the start."<sup>8</sup> Neal's "mannish" manner was read as evidence of the character's latent homosexuality—stealing the thunder of Martha's admission in the final act.

These responses are steeped in dominant culture's belief that lesbian can be "read" or made visible. (We can tell if she's *really* a lesbian.) In my opinion, this belief makes attempts to redirect focus upon the problematics of visibility doubly important and might even prove useful as we try to do so: Can dominant culture's expectation of clarity or "visibility" be used against itself?

Peggy Phelan begins her book *Unmarked* with an assertion that she "takes as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see is in every way related to what one can say. In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name and, thus, to arrest and fix the image of the other."<sup>9</sup> Though it haunts the play, the word "lesbian" is absent. I propose that this absence can be given new meaning for twenty-first century audiences. Put into the context of a 2007 production: In a twenty-first century world in which the word "lesbian" is not forbidden onstage or elsewhere, it can become conspicuously absent. Powerfully absent.

Phelan, discussing Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man Who Envied Women*, states that Rainer "implies that female presence in film might be best mediated through her visual absence."<sup>10</sup> In *The Children's Hour*, lesbian presence is mediated through a related kind of absence—not an utter visual absence but by a verbal absence leading the audience to focus on trying to read Martha's sexuality through interpreting visual cues, etc. Calling attention to these attempts to read Martha can highlight the process of making lesbian visible. Visibility implies that presence can be "seen," "read," or otherwise deciphered. Can it? Is it possible for lesbian to be "seen" in our current representational system? Is making lesbian presence "visible" the ultimate goal? Phelan suggests that "the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked; and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal."<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, do we really want a keyhole on that door?

The play itself points to some troubling aspects of visibility: Visibility can lead to efforts on behalf of dominant culture to police what they perceive to be deviant. Mrs. Tilford “outs” the teachers because “It had to be done.”<sup>12</sup> The ideology of the visible “erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen.”<sup>13</sup> *The Children’s Hour* can be utilized to call the basics of visibility into question and, therefore, might, ultimately, prove more transgressive than modern works that depict lesbian characters less ambiguously. In 2007, *The Children’s Hour* might be interpreted as “an active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility.”<sup>14</sup> It is the absence of the word “lesbian” and its subsequent haunting that illuminate *The Children’s Hour’s* ability to foreground issues of visibility and power for today’s audiences.

## Notes

1. Jenny Spencer, “Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*,” *Modern Drama* 47.1 (Spring 2004): 44.
2. Qtd. in Spencer 47.
3. Lillian Hellman, *The Children’s Hour* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1981) 51.
4. Hellman 66.
5. Qtd in Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 104. Referenced in Spencer 49.
6. Walter F. Kerr, Review of *The Children’s Hour*, by Lillian Hellman, *New York Herald Tribune* 9 Dec. 1952:18. Referenced in Spencer 54.
7. George Freedley, “Off stage—and on,” *Daily Telegraph* 26 Dec. 1952, morning ed:3. Referenced in Spencer 54.
8. Spencer 54.
9. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (London: Routledge, 1993) 2.
10. 89.
11. 6.
12. Hellman 48.
13. Phelan 7.
14. 19.