



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis, and Marc Blitzstein: Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* as Play, Film, and Opera

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ABSTRACT

While other American plays such as Elmer Rice's *Street Scene*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* have made the journey from stage to film and finally to opera, the film and operatic versions were faithful recreations of the original without the addition of new characters, including those from other works by the same playwright. Lillian Hellman's best play, *The Little Foxes* (1939), is unusual in two respects: in the 1941 film version, a character is added who did not appear in the original in order to provide a love interest for the protagonist's daughter, thereby resulting in a different ending; in the 1949 operatic version, a character from a later play by Hellman, *Another Part of the Forest*, is introduced to show how a young woman with romantic ideals evolved into the Lady Macbeth of American drama. Thus each version of *The Little Foxes* deepens our understanding of the original without altering the play's dramatic impact.

Key words: *Forest*, Tallulah Bankhead, Marc Blitzstein, Bette Davis, Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes*, William Wyler.

Available Online: 29th January, 2015.

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On 9 November, 1934, *Dark Victory* opened on Broadway. It told the story of an heiress, Judith Traherne, who eventually discovers that her worsening headaches and frequent memory lapses are the result of a brain tumor. Led to believe the tumor is benign, she discovers it is not and even marries Frederick Steele, the neurosurgeon, who performed the operation—both of them knowing that it is only a matter of time before the inevitable occurs. Judith had been forewarned of the signs: dimming of vision followed by blindness. In the play (the ending of the 1939 film version is slightly different, although equally tragic), when Steele is called away on an emergency, Judith sends him off, choosing to die alone so that he can save lives at the same time that she is losing hers.

The role of Judith was created by Tallulah Bankhead., who, in 1931, had returned to America after an eight-year sojourn in London, where she was the proverbial toast of the town, inspiring the kind of idolatry that is now reserved for rock stars. Her return vehicle was the 1933 comedy *Forsaking All Other*, which proved she was still a creature of the stage, endowed with “true stage sagacity,” as *New York Times* drama critic Brooks Atkinson phrased it (21). The play had a decent run—110 performances—and became an MGM movie the following year with Joan Crawford in Bankhead’s role.

Dark Victory was less fortunate: 51 performances. The play was not exactly panned. Atkinson, who was ambivalent about it, commended Bankhead for her “intuitive stage intelligence and ability to shift styles with startling swiftness” and noted that “the somber vivacity of Miss Bankhead lays a spell on your sympathies” (18). Still, he felt that it was not the play Bankhead and her admirers hoped would restore her to the same prominence she enjoyed in London, even though she had prepared the part of Judith “painstakingly.”

The play was the problem, after “a capital first act,” the audience must wait until the close of the last when Judith suddenly feels a storm brewing, only to be told by her housekeeper that the sun is shining. The moment has come; there will be no reversal of fortune. Judith will die, whether on or off stage doesn’t matter. What matters is that Judith and Steele have had their “victory over the dark” (Brewer, Jr. and Bloch 68).

The following year David O. Selznick bought the rights to the play, convinced it could be a vehicle for Greta Garbo (*Memo* 111-12). But Garbo preferred to die walking in front of a train in *Anna Karenina* (1935), and then from tuberculosis in *Camille* (1936), where she made death almost beatific, as she let her head fall back, with her face taking on a luminosity that should be the inalienable right of the dying. Unable to cast it properly, Selznick relinquished the rights, and Warner Bros. picked them up. Bette Davis probably never saw Bankhead in *Dark Victory* in 1934, when she was going from one film to another; but once she knew that her home studio had bought the rights, she campaigned to make the film, which she has always considered her best picture, as indeed it was. When the movie came out in March 1939, Bankhead was starring on Broadway in *The Little Foxes*, which had opened the month before. Moreover, two years later, the movie version of another Bankhead vehicle appeared as Bette Davis took on another Bankhead part: Regina Giddens in *The Little Foxes*.

In her autobiography, *The Lonely Life*, Davis says little about Bankhead, who also said little about Davis in hers, *Tallulah*. Bankhead was never really a film actress, just as Davis was never really a stage actress. Davis recalls her first meeting with Bankhead, who said, “So you’re the woman who does all my parts on the screen! And I do them so much better.” “I agree with you, Miss Bankhead,” Davis replied (*The Lonely Life* 164). One could imagine Bankhead saying what she did. Davis implies that she was above scathing ripostes, preferring to save her temperament for overbearing directors and executives who could not come up with decent roles for her.

Davis received some measure of satisfaction on two occasions, first when she played Margo Channing in *All about Eve* (1950)—a characterization that many thought was modeled after Bankhead, although it is vintage Davis, as even Bankhead realized: “Davis may have suggested a boiling Bankhead, but her overall performance was her own. I had seen Miss Davis play Regina Giddens on the screen, thus knew I had nothing to worry about” (*Tallulah* 325); then, two years later, when Davis starred on Broadway in

the musical revue, *Two's Company* (1952), she did a devastating impersonation of Bankhead. Why Davis, who had not appeared in a play for two decades, decided to star in a revue is hard to explain, except perhaps that she wanted to reveal other facets of her talent—her comic flair, perhaps, such as it was. Davis may even have believed that all *about Eve* was a comedy, which it was not, although it revealed the way Davis would have played stage comedy, heavily underscoring the lines in what had now become a voice without nuance and cadence. One can only imagine how Tallulah would have delivered “Fasten your seat belts. It is going to be a bumpy night.” She would not have hit every syllable as if she were carving it into the lexicon of memorable movie dialogue because she knew it was witty enough to end up there without her efforts.

Still, one had to admire Davis for undertaking a revue. The closest she came to being in one was Warner's *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (1943), in which she delivered a rather jaded rendition of “They're Either Too Young or Too Old,” sounding more world weary than disappointed. The few songs she had in *Two's Company* were not a problem; she could speak-sing them—and did. *Two's Company* had promise; the music and lyrics were by Vernon Duke (“Suddenly,” “Taking a Chance on Love,” “April in Paris”) and Ogden Nash, who wrote the lyrics for Kurt Weill's *One Touch of Venus* (1943), in addition to coauthoring the book with S.J. Perelman; Sammy Cahn, who had written the lyrics for Jule Styne's hit musical, *High Button Shoes* (1947), supplied additional lyrics. John Murray Anderson, known for his revues, supervised the production, and the sketches were directed by leftist director, Jules Dassin (*Brute Force* [1947], *Naked City* [1948], *Thieves Highway* [1949])—a strange choice for such light and, as it turned out, unsubstantial entertainment that ran for 89 performances.

One of the sketches was entitled “One's a Crowd,” in which Davis played a character known only as “That One.” She made her entrance, looking eerily like Bankhead, with hair undulating down the side of her face, and proceeded to disrupt the premiere of a Bette Davis movie by handing out copies of her recently published autobiography, *Tallulah*. To her credit, Davis played Tallulah the way Tallulah would have played Tallulah.

Yet Davis respected Bankhead, but resented being forced to see her in *The Little Foxes*, once Warner Bros. had agreed to loan her to Samuel Goldwyn for the movie version, in exchange for getting Gary Cooper for *Sergeant York* (1941), which brought Cooper his first Oscar: “I had been forced to see Tallulah Bankhead's performance. I had not wanted to. A great admirer of hers, I wanted in no way to be influenced by her work” (*The Lonely Life* 181). According to Bankhead's biographer, in October 1940, Davis, knowing that she would be playing Regina in the film, “came to watch Tallulah's performance in Cleveland, but didn't dare go backstage (Lobenthal 325).” William Wyler, who was scheduled to direct the film, caught the play in Washington in March 1941. We will never know what kind of performance each saw. “Wyler's vision of Regina was more complex. He believed that she had many shadings, that she was charming and funny as well as evil, that she was also very sexy” (Herman 223). Hellman herself felt the same way. Supposedly, Wyler wanted Davis to see Bankhead play Regina because that was the way he did **not** want it played. Davis, however, wanted to recreate Bankhead's characterization—the characterization she saw in Cleveland—which she believed was the definitive one. However, Bankhead was then touring with the play, and she may have well-adjusted her interpretation for a less sophisticated audience. Perhaps that was the case in Cleveland, although one suspects it was different in Washington. Since Bankhead's grandfather was John Hollis Bankhead, the distinguished senator from Alabama, it is more likely that in Washington she played Regina, not Tallulah. Even so, had Wyler and Davis consulted the reviews, they would have discovered that Bankhead gave the definitive interpretation on opening night, and, according to Hellman, continued to do so until she began playing herself.

It is interesting to compare Atkinson's review of the play with *Times* movie critic Bosley Crowther's review of the 1941 film. Atkinson gave more space to the play, whose construction he admired, than to the performances, although he did write this about Bankhead: “Sometimes our Tallulah walks buoyantly through a part without much feeling for the whole design. But as the malevolent lady of *The Little Foxes*, she plays with superb command of the entire character, sparing of the showy side and

constantly aware of the poisonous spirit within” (23). “Sparing of the showy side” suggests that her performance was not all bravura, with Bankhead as a Southern diva, but one that meshed with the “the whole design,” to use Atkinson’s phrase. Unfortunately, there is no visual record of that performance; yet if, as Atkinson suggests, Bankhead muted her natural flamboyance in the interests of the character and the play, she must have been the ideal Regina.

Now hear what Crowther says of Davis in the film. He begins glowingly, and ends like a flame that starts to flicker and then die, leaving behind a trail of smoke. “And Miss Davis’s performance in the role which Tallulah Bankhead played so brassily on the stage is abundant with color and mood. True, she does occasionally drop an unmistakable imitation of her predecessor; she performs queer contortions with her arms like a nautch-dancer in a Hindu temple, and generally she comports herself as though she were balancing an Academy ‘Oscar’ on her high-coiffed head. But the role calls for heavy theatrics...Miss Davis is all right” (19). And so, a performance “abundant with color and mood” becomes simply “all right.” Better than all right were the four members of the original cast: Charles Dingle as Ben, Carl Benton Reid as Oscar, Dan Duryea as Leo, and Patricia Collinge as the tipling Birdie.

What Atkinson called “sparing of the showy side” Crowther considered “brassy.” This may be the difference between the way a stage and a movie critic see a performance. “Sparing of the showy side” is the right way to play Regina. Apparently, that is how Bankhead played her—at least at the beginning of the run. As Hellman writes in *Pentimento*, “Tallulah, in the first few months of the play gave a fine performance, had a well-deserved triumph. It was sad to watch it all decline into high-jinks on the stage and in life. Long before her death, beginning with my play, I think she threw the talent around to amuse the campy boys who came to each opening night to watch her vindicate their view of women” (144). This was certainly true when she played Blanche duBois in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the New York City Center in 1956. Atkinson, who thought her too sophisticated for the role, noted that the audience “was disposed to regard Blanche’s tussle with the fates as pretty funny” but also felt that they had done the actress “an injustice (24).” The gays laughed at lines that were serious and behaved as if they were at a drag show, with Bankhead as the ultimate drag queen.

Strange as it may seem, Bankhead was not Hellman’s first choice for Regina. She wanted either Ina Claire, the doyenne of sophisticated comedy or Judith Anderson of the regal mien, who was the exact opposite (*Pentimento* 145). But either would have played it differently than Bankhead. Claire’s Regina would have been incredibly sophisticated; she would have used the living room, in which the entire action is set, as the equivalent of a drawing room, over which she would have presided, mingling charm with guile. Anderson’s Regina would have been more imperious, as if she were playing a classic heroine like Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler or Laura in Strindberg’s *The Father*, both of whom would have understood Regina—and vice versa. Anderson also knew how to deliver a comedic line, as she revealed in *And Then There Were None* (1945). After a servant had been killed, she lamented: “Very stupid to kill the servants. Now we don’t know how to find the marmalade.” Both declined the role for the same reason: an unsympathetic character like Regina would elicit a similar reaction from the audience. It was director Herman Shumlin’s idea to approach Bankhead, who by 1939 needed to reestablish herself as a Broadway star. And *The Little Foxes* did just that.

One must assume, then, that, at least at the beginning of the run, Bankhead was playing Regina as opposed to playing herself. In *Pentimento*, Hellman claimed that she originally conceived the play as satire (163). It obviously didn’t come off that way, but there is still humor in it—dark, even black—but still humor in the way the characters betray each other: Leo, stealing his uncle Horace’s bonds; Horace, a cardiac invalid aware of his mortality, allowing Leo to keep the bonds to finance the cotton mill that will apparently bring them millions, thus effectively writing Regina out of his will and cheating her out of her share of the profits; and Regina’s refusal to fetch Horace’s medicine when the bottle breaks. Knowing that another bottle is upstairs and that it is literally a matter of life or death, Regina makes no effort to retrieve it. In the play, Hellman’s stage directions are absolutely clear: “Regina has not turned during his climb the stairs” (Hellman, *The Collected Plays* 189). That is exactly what happens in the film, in which Horace is out of focus, pathetically making his way up the steps, only to expire before reaching

the top. It's a brilliant scene, with the camera trained on Davis slouched in her chair and waiting, as Regina said in the act 2 curtain line, for him to die: "I hope you die. I hope you die soon. I'll be waiting for you to die" (177). Her wish is fulfilled in act 3.

How did Regina become what she is—one of the little foxes who spoil the vine? In the play, it is clear that Regina's brothers, Ben and Oscar, have formed a patriarchy, taking over the role of their father, who is now dead. However, we meet their father, Marcus Hubbard, in the prequel, *Another Part of the Forest*, which premiered in 1946, with the film version arriving two years later. In *The Little Foxes*, we know only that Regina's father left his money to his sons, thus making them titular heads of the clan. But there can only be one head, and it becomes the cunning and deceptively good-natured Ben. When the brothers decide they want something, such as the plantation Lionnet, it was a simple operation. Lionnet was virtually ruined after the Civil War. As Ben boasts in the presence of his sister-in-law, Birdie, Oscar's wife, "Twenty years ago, we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter" (141). One is to assume that Ben also arranged the marriage between Regina and Horace Giddens. Interestingly, Ben is unmarried. He didn't have to marry. His siblings and their children are his family. Hence, the next step is to marry off Alexandra, Regina and Horace's daughter, to Oscar's dolt of a son, Leo, even if they're first cousins. When Oscar remarks that their grandparents were first cousins, Regina laughs and says, "And look at us" (151). That is a laugh line. Davis delivered it as if it had to produce a laugh. But why not a smile, or a buzz of laughter rather than burst of it? The stage directions call for Regina to "giggle," suggesting an almost childlike delivery of the line—slyly innocent but fully aware of its implications.

In *Another Part of the Forest*, Ben, learning of his father's implication in a massacre of Confederate troops, deposes him and dons the mantle of patriarch. Ben is now able to determine Regina's destiny, informing her that he will be bringing her to Mobile to see Horace Giddens: "You'll get engaged to him by next week, or sooner, and you'll get married in the first church we bump into. Giddens isn't bad off, and if you're lucky it will be years before he hears about you and the Brazilian general. I don't say that it's a brilliant future, but I don't say it's bad" (Hellman, *Collected Plays* 401). The Brazilian general is Birdie's cousin, John Bagtry, Regina's one and only love—a rabid anti-abolitionist who only knew happiness fighting for the Confederacy and is now setting out for Brazil to preserve the institution of slavery. Of course, in both 1939 and 1941, the specific events that shaped Regina—particularly, Ben's empowerment and her lack of it—were unknown to both audiences and Hellman, who seven years later felt that some family background was necessary to explain why Regina developed into a female Machiavel. Hence, *Another Part of the Forest*, which Hellman planned as the second of a trilogy that would have concluded with Alexandra as an embittered social worker. The third play was never written, but it would have been a fascinating chronicle of the Hubbards' evolution from whelps to foxes—a worthy successor to Eugene O'Neill's own trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). But there is enough in *The Little Foxes* to suggest why Regina is what she is. Her father's inheritance went to her brothers; all she got was Horace Giddens. In the third act of *The Little Foxes*, she explains why she married him: "I was lonely when I was young....Not the way people usually mean. Lonely for all the things I wasn't going to get. Everybody in this house was so busy and there was so little time for what I wanted. I wanted the world. Then, and then—Papa died and left the money to Ben and Oscar" (188). Why shouldn't Regina resent her brothers and look for an opportunity to live up to her name, which, in Latin, means "queen?"

In the play—but not in the film, which was made at a time that the Production Code was strongly enforced—it is clear that Horace had his share of "fancy women." In fact, Hellman originally planned to make him syphilitic but then changed her mind and turned him into a cardiac invalid. One is to assume that he frequented brothels, which may have motivated Regina to tell him that she could no longer have sex because "there was something the matter with me" (188). Physically, there was nothing the matter with Regina, except that, like Ben, power had replaced passion as her driving force. But one should not be too sympathetic to Horace, who himself is one of the foxes. The Hubbards excel at oneupmanship, but so does Horace, who tells Regina that he will draw up a new will, leaving her the bonds worth \$88,000, which, however, her brothers have "borrowed." Whether she will get them

back or not depends on their largesse. Ben and Oscar may replace the bonds when the cotton mill is fully operational, but then again they may not. He also informs Regina that he plans to do nothing about the theft—in effect, sanctioning it. But Horace’s death, facilitated by Regina, preludes a new will, and Regina has every intention of using her knowledge of Leo’s theft to demand her share, now raised to 75 percent. And she is now the one to deliver ultimatums: “You’ll do no more bargaining in this house” (197).

The role of Regina places a burden on any actress, who must play it with steely determination, humor, maybe even a bit of self-mockery, but at the same time making the audience understand how dependent she was on her brothers, who not only arrange marriages but also lives. At the end of the play, Alexandra tells Regina that she will be leaving her. This is the only time Regina and Alexandra have anything even remotely resembling a mother-daughter talk. Regina explains herself as best she can to Alexandra: “Somewhere there has to be what I want, too. Life goes too fast. Do what you want...go where you want. Too many people used to make me do too many things. No, I won’t make you stay” (199). “Too many people” may be a bit of an exaggeration. But certainly two people did: her brothers. And perhaps a third: her husband.

Hellman has created a foolproof role for an actress who can combine Regina’s sardonic wit, her longing for a better life, her desperation at not being able to achieve it, and her loveless marriage to a man who apparently did not conceal his infidelities from her, into a fully realized characterization.

Since most people know *The Little Foxes* from the movie version, they will associate Regina with Bette Davis. Although Wyler wanted a more subtle performance, Hellman’s screen adaptation gave any actress enough to work with. But Bette Davis was not any actress.

For Davis, it was, admittedly, a tour de force, but her Regina was not a woman of the South, as Bankhead’s obviously was. And that is important. Regina has to be a woman of considerable charm, who used her wiles to compensate for her lesser role in the patriarchy. She knows how to flirt, which is immediately evident when she makes her first entrance with the industrialist Marshall, who will back the cotton mill project. She tells him about her dream of living in Chicago: “I should like crowds of people, and theaters, and lovely women—Very lovely women, Mr. Marshall?” (137). That’s a question, not a statement. Regina was fishing for a compliment that she gets: “I’ve never dined there with three such lovely ladies,” Marshall replies, referring to Regina, Alexandra, and Birdie.

There was nothing Southern about Davis’s portrayal. In fact, Davis was more of a Southern woman in *Jezebel* (1938) than she was in *The Little Foxes*. Her makeup was mask like; her lips pursed and painted into a pucker. She did not so much wear her costumes as look trapped in them, as if they were constraints waiting to be burst. They were among the most sexless that the actress ever wore, and, as such, unsexed her. Regina has an edge that has to be planed down, without becoming completely smooth. But in Davis’s performance the edge was still rough, at times jagged.

Her costar was Herbert Marshall, who played Horace. The two had appeared a year earlier in *The Letter* (1940), which was, in many ways, a better film and one more suited to Davis’s style of acting. It’s impossible to forget her anguished admission of murder: “With all my heart, I still love the man I killed.” But Marshall, a fine actor, was British; in his attempt to affect the air of a Southern gentleman, he succeeded only in being a gentleman without a country. If he were in Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* or *The Cherry Orchard*, it would not have been any different. The others, particularly those who were recreating their stage roles, seemed more like actual Southerners than actors, while Davis looked as if she belonged somewhere in New England, yearning to leave not for Chicago, like Regina, but for New York.

And yet, it would be difficult to think of another movie actress in 1941 who could have done justice to the role. Goldwyn did not want Bankhead, who threw a temper tantrum, in addition to throwing whatever was within reach when he broke the news to her (Berg 325). He had already decided on Davis.

However, there was another star about to leave her home studio, MGM, and free lance, who could easily have achieved what Hellman wanted: Rosalind Russell. Not Auntie Mame Russell, although Mame is, for better or worse, her signature role. But the Russell who, after only two years in Hollywood, gave a memorable performance as the controlling wife in *Craig's Wife* (1936), playing a woman whom Regina would have understood and who also would have understood Regina. Harriet Craig, like Regina, ends up alone in an empty house, after everyone leaves her, including her husband. But, in Russell's interpretation, Harriet was also vulnerable, particularly at the end, when she receives news that her sister has died, thus leaving her without any family at all. Russell had a strong comedic sense (indeed, it was a comedienne that the public perceived her), but she also knew how to program herself into the dramatic mode, as she revealed in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1947), in which she played Lavinia Mannon, who, like the mythological Electra, induces her brother to kill their mother's lover to avenge their mother's murder of their father. One can easily imagine the wonderful conversations Lavinia and Regina would have had about methods of punishing errant spouses. Russell was expected to win the Best Actress Oscar for *Electra*, but lost to her good friend, Loretta Young, for *The Farmer's Daughter*.

If, as Hellman insisted, there was humor in *The Little Foxes*, Bankhead obviously brought it out; Davis didn't. I saw Bankhead only once on the stage—and it was in a comedy, *Dear Charles*, in 1954. She played the mother of three sons, each by a different father, who decides she should marry at least one of her former lovers so she can spend the rest of her life as a respectable woman. Speaking of her sons, she said in that baritonally throaty voice of hers: “Three shots in the dark and none of them blank.” I will never forget the way she delivered that line. You laughed at the metaphor, her delicious sense of innuendo, and, most of all, at the delight Bankhead expressed in saying a line that clearly struck her as funny—Bankhead *and* the character. Bankhead had superb technique. She would speak a line as she crossed the stage, finishing it at the exact spot that she was supposed to reach, and then pivot around gracefully, so that it seemed as if she had waltzed or glided across the stage, not merely walked across it. As Brooks Atkinson wrote in his review of *Dear Charles*: “She presides over the play as if she were a fabulous hostess who is also the life of the party” (37). And that is how one imagines Regina. I suspect Bankhead revealed traces of Regina's vulnerability, which she manages to conceal except when she recalls the way her brothers have prospered, while she is trapped in a marriage to an invalid and looks for every opportunity not to balance but to tip the scales of retribution in her favor. One would have preferred a more vulnerable Regina than Davis. After all, Regina must spend the night in the same house where her husband's corpse lies in the upstairs bedroom. In the movie, which ends quite differently from the play, Alexandra goes off with David Hewitt, a newspaper editor, who does not appear in the original. Hellman created him as a romantic interest for Alexandra, so that the two could rush off in the rain, while Regina stands at the window, having achieved what she wanted but at the expense of a daughter's love. Hellman—who transformed *The Children's Hour* (1934) into *These Three* (1936) for Samuel Goldwyn, by reworking the plot so that it was not about one woman in love with another but about two women in love with the same man—knew how to get around the Production Code Administration, which wanted Regina to pay for her “crime.” However, the film's final scene cannot compare with the play's, in which Alexandra ignores her mother's pitiful yet sincere request that Alexandra spend the night in her bedroom—Horace's being occupied. Alexandra only says, “Are you afraid, Mama?” There is no response from Regina, who according to Hellman's stage directions, “moves up the stairs and out of sight”(200). At least she gets to the top, which is more than Horace managed to do. And one suspects Regina will look ravishing in widow's weeds.

The Little Foxes would make a perfect libretto for an opera, which is exactly what composer Marc Blitzstein thought. Initially, Hellman was skeptical, although she was familiar with Blitzstein's musical style, since he composed the incidental music for *Another Part of the Forest* and did so again for her last Broadway success, *Toys in the Attic* (1960). In 1949, the opera version, *Regina*, opened on Broadway, lasting a mere 56 performances. Regardless, Hellman was not only pleased with the work but also “grateful for it beyond the words I have to tell you” (Gordon 325).

A decade later, *Regina* entered the repertoire of the now defunct New York City Opera; it is occasionally revived regionally, along with another bona fide opera, Kurt Weill's *Street Scene* (1946), which was also

done first on Broadway. Both *Regina* and *Street Scene*—the latter, as faithful a recreation of Elmer Rice’s play as was *Regina* of Hellman’s—have fared better in opera houses. In the 1950s, the only operas that proved successful on Broadway were Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Consul* (1950) and Frank Loesser’s *The Most Happy Fella* (1956), which qualifies as opera, since the text was mostly sung and the spoken dialogue kept to a minimum.

Blitzstein, who also wrote the libretto, understood *Regina*, perhaps even better than Hellman. While he was even more of a radical than Hellman and at the time was a Communist, he felt audiences should at least understand *Regina*’s seemingly innate materialism, without necessarily endorsing it.

“How do you do it, *Regina*?” Ben asks in the opera. “It” refers to *Regina*’s decision to send Alexandra to Baltimore to bring Horace home, not because she wants to see him but because she and her brothers need his money. Alexandra is the bait; *Regina* knows that Horace would not let his daughter return by herself. Ben’s question is the cue for *Regina*’s first-act aria, “The Best Thing of All”:

You know, if you want—if you want—
if you want something that’s over the wall,
don’t wait—and don’t hope—
and don’t beg—and don’t crawl.
Oh, no, you must take it in your hand like a ball.
To want and to take is the best thing of all.

.....

the best thing of all is to want—
is to want something with all of your heart;
to aim, with no shame,
with a true aim at the start.
And if you are good, very good,
when the moment’s nearly upon you—
take that moment, and you’ve got
the best thing of all (*Regina* libretto 43-44).

The key word is “want,” repeated eight times in the course of the aria. It is hard to criticize *Regina* for wanting, when her brothers got what they wanted—and far more easily. At least they did not have to precipitate another’s premature death. Of course, *Regina* could salve her conscience by admitting to herself that Horace knew he was dying and that it was only a matter of time before his heart gave out.

To flesh out *Regina*’s character, Blitzstein went to *Another Part of the Forest* to bring her old beau, John Bagtry into the action, however briefly. An idealist, Bagtry is shocked at the change in *Regina*. In a musical idiom that is lushly romantic, even sensual, *Regina* contrasts the dewy-eyed girl that Bagtry once knew with the money-obsessed manipulator that she has become: “Money means things, and the things I can do with things (libretto 70).” Here, Hellman and Blitzstein, two left-wingers who enjoyed the fruits of capitalism while at the same time criticizing its excesses and aberrations, were clearly on the same page. *Regina* is the result of their ambivalence. She is rapacious, lethal, and unrepentant. Yet there was a time when, as Blitzstein notes, *Regina* was a “schoolgirl...with romantic notions” (libretto 70). But the girl became a woman, and romantic ardor gave way to pragmatism; And through it all, *Regina* managed to survive by customizing her image to suit the age, as if she were an actress understudying a star, knowing that it is only a matter of time before the spotlight is hers. In *Regina*, Hellman created an extraordinary character. In the original production, Bankhead made her entrance in black velvet. When an actress enters in black, she must work harder to convince the audience that her costume does not match the color of her soul. While *Regina*’s soul was by no means washed in the blood of the lamb, it also did not enter her body by way of hell.

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