

“DIFFERENT...”

“Different” was the only ad line that appeared on the poster for *The Children’s Hour*. And different it was, with subject matter that was more than a little shocking for 1961. So, one can only imagine just how shocking the subject matter of Lillian Hellman’s play was when it premiered at the Maxine Elliot’s Theater on Broadway in 1934. The play was partly inspired by an actual case in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1810, “Miss Pirie and Miss Woods vs. Dame Cumming Gordon.” A pupil, Jane Gordon, falsely accused two schoolteachers, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, of having a lesbian affair. Under the influence of Jane’s grandmother, Dame Cumming Gordon, the school’s students were removed by their parents and the school was shut down. Pirie and Woods filed a libel suit against Dame Cumming Gordon, and won the case, but given the destruction of their lives and standing in the community, it was considered a hollow victory. The play, directed by Herman Shumlin, became an instant sensation and would have an astonishing run of close to seven hundred performances, which was, at the time, the longest-running production of a play in a single venue. It was banned in Chicago, Boston, and London. It scared off the Pulitzer Prize selection committee, who refused to attend one single performance of the play. Of course, the real theme of the play was not the lesbian angle at all, it was how gossip and innuendo and outright lies can bring tragedy into innocent lives, a theme which is probably more relevant today than it was then.

In 1936, *The Children’s Hour* was brought to the screen by Hellman and director William Wyler, starring Miriam Hopkins and Merle Oberon as the teachers and Bonita Granville as the evil and malicious child who spreads the vicious rumors and lies. Because of the Hays’ Office censorship, the film was titled *These Three*, and no mention of *The Children’s Hour* was allowed in any publicity or on the screen (Hellman is credited with the screenplay, but there is no “adapted from the play *The Children’s Hour*” anywhere to be found). Obviously all traces of the lesbian issues were removed from the screenplay and it became a standard love-triangle plot – but Hellman professed herself satisfied with the film because she felt that the central issue of the play was the malicious result of the gossip, rather than the gossip itself.

It’s very unusual for a director to revisit a film made twenty-five years prior – Hitchcock did it with his 1934 film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, which he remade in 1956 in VistaVision and Technicolor, and, in 1961, Wyler did it with *The Children’s Hour*, which he finally felt he could bring to the screen without having to dilute its subject matter. Interestingly, the screenplays for both the Hitchcock redo and the Wyler

redo were by the great John Michael Hayes. While Mr. Hayes did some rearranging of scenes and rewriting, it’s a matter of interesting debate as to which version is actually more faithful to the play. All we really know is that even though the “L” word is never mentioned, the homosexual aspect of the story is not shirked or ignored and is presented frankly. In fact, this film, along with *The Best Man, Advise and Consent*, and a handful of others with homosexual themes, caused the Production Code to finally be revamped – in fact, just a few short years later the Code would, at long last, be abandoned completely. It was replaced by the MPAA ratings system.

William Wyler apparently had an incredible ear for music, because his composer choices for his various films were always perfection. Alfred Newman (for *Wuthering Heights*), Hugo Friedhofer (for *The Best Years Of Our Lives*), David Raksin (for *Carrie*), Dimitri Tiomkin (for *Friendly Persuasion*), Jerome Moross (for *The Big Country*), Miklos Rozsa (for *Ben-Hur*), Maurice Jarre (for *The Collector*), Johnny Williams (for *How To Steal A Million*) – all wrote unique and brilliant scores for Wyler, frequently doing career-defining work for him.

For *The Children’s Hour*, Wyler turned to Alex North. Interestingly, both had just come off huge epic films – Wyler with *Ben-Hur* and North with *Spartacus*. So for both, *The Children’s Hour* could not have been more different; a drama filmed in black-and-white, with nary a toga, a chariot, a slave, or a cross in sight – just a compelling story with great actors – Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, James Garner, Fay Bainter (a brilliant performance, which garnered a well-deserved Academy Award nomination for supporting actress), and, in an interesting bit of casting, Miriam Hopkins, Martha in the original film, returning to play Mrs Mortar this time around. And Karen Balkin as the evil, malicious child Mary Tilford, gives Patty McCormick from *The Bad Seed* a run for her money. In addition to Fay Bainter’s Oscar nomination, the film also was nominated for Best Art Direction – Set Direction, Black-and-White (Fernando Carrere, Edward G. Boyle), Best Cinematography – Black-and-White (the great Franz Planer), Best Costume Design – Black-and-White (Dorothy Jeakins), and Best Sound (Gordon Sawyer).

North’s music for the film is astonishing and complex, with a memorable main theme that runs throughout the score. His original main title music is very interesting – it plays with children’s nursery rhyme tunes (especially “Skip To My Lou”) while we see images of children playing and their various activities. As the titles come to a close and the camera dollies in to the schoolhouse and then inside where a piano recital is taking place, the cue and the recital music blend seamlessly. However, at some point North was asked to rescore the main title using his main theme – why is anyone’s guess,

but the original works beautifully with what Wyler shot and times out perfectly right into the film proper. The rescored version ends considerably earlier. The end title was also rescored, presumably to give the film more of a musical resolution and button. The rest of the score is North at his best – underscoring the tensions and characters and drama in always unexpected and unique ways, along with his repeated use of the nursery rhyme tunes.

North’s music sounds like no other Hollywood composer of that era – there was just nobody like him. His influence on other composers was huge – and he could write any kind of score, from his classic jazz-imbued *A Streetcar Named Desire*, to the huge musical canvas that was *Spartacus*, to the baroquely beautiful *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf*, not to mention the tune that made him more money than all his scores put together – “Unchained Melody.”

Sometimes the most fun part of putting CDs together is the detective work. We weren’t the only label interested in *The Children’s Hour*. Others had inquired about it, but always with the same result – there were no tapes in the MGM vaults. Because I’d just had great good luck with finding tapes on *Pressure Point*, I called my pal Nick Redman and asked if North had other tapes in his archives (Nick had found the original soundtrack tapes for North’s discarded score to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the North archive). Nick suggested I call the AMPAS Margaret Herrick Library, as that was where North’s archives had gone. I called a nice gentleman named Warren Sherk who immediately ascertained that there were two tapes in the archive for *The Children’s Hour*. Needless to say, that was Northian music to my ears. As soon as Mr. Sherk knew that we’d properly licensed the score from MGM, he provided the tapes, and, for composer copies, they were in remarkably nice condition. He brought the tapes to the tape transfer place and we sat there as they were transferred, basking in the glory that was the music of Alex North. I can only tell you it was a wonderful way to spend an afternoon. One of the tapes was apparently prepared for a soundtrack release that never happened – it was sequenced by North, who also provided the somewhat terse cue titles. The other tape was the raw session masters of the printed takes. On that tape, we found some additional material, which we’ve included as bonus tracks. There can’t be enough Alex North releases, and we’re especially happy to bring *The Children’s Hour* to CD, at long last.

“Different...”

That was Alex North. His music is timeless in all the right ways – it never sounds dated or old – in fact, he was always the hippest guy in the room, right up to his passing.

— Bruce Kimmel