

Pith and Vinegar

LILLIAN by William Luce

Lillian Hellman will be remembered for her plays *The Little Foxes* and *Toys in the Attic*. But she seemed to yearn to be remembered for her defiance of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952, when it asked her to testify about her Stalinist ties and those of her associates. Throughout her 79 years, especially in the memoirs she wrote during her final two decades, Hellman delighted in presenting herself as tough, combative and above all principled. Many critics, among them former friends, accused her of having a higher regard for her reputation than for the literal truth: revisionists have presented detailed arguments that Hellman distorted or invented stories in her autobiographies, most notably in the section of *Pentimento* that was adapted as the movie *Julia*. Political enemies regarded her as an all but unrepentant Communist, although she denied having formally belonged to the party; to the end (she died in 1984), she prided herself on having been branded a "premature anti-Fascist" and sniped at those she felt had been faithless to the left's cause.

Lillian, William Luce's one-woman play that opened on Broadway last week, is not about this actual Lillian Hellman. Luce, who celebrated Emily Dickinson in *The Belle of Amherst*, culled Hellman's memoirs to put onstage something approximating the way she saw herself. The result is far from objective history. But it works absorbingly as ribald, poignant entertainment. One of the world's great actresses,



Impeccable impersonation: Caldwell's Hellman finding soft spots beneath the armor.

Zoe Caldwell, enacts the writer's conversations and confessions in a blend of eerily precise impersonation (down to wearing Tea Rose, Hellman's favorite perfume) and voluble, free-spirited performance.

The narrative frame of *Lillian* is the day in 1961 when Hellman sat in death-watch near the bedside of her longtime

lover, Novelist Dashiell Hammett. Luce's choice of moment is shrewd. Unlike the sequestered Emily Dickinson, Hellman was one of life's winners, blessed with fame, money, affection and what she seemed to seek most, a measure of power. Her childhood disillusioned her. But whose childhood does not? Her adult life was not marred by more than the normal share of grief. Only the ordeal of Hammett's last illness makes her vulnerable enough for an audience to like, despite the verbal savagery that she hurled at almost everyone she knew. The decision to present Hellman in a two-hour monologue provides a further emotional advantage: because her targets are not visible, spectators can savor the pith and vinegar of her language rather than cringe at its impact on the victims.

Caldwell's impeccable timing allows her to glory in the one-liners: "Tallulah [Bankhead] was sitting in a group of people, giving the monologue she always thought was conversation." The actress's voice, which was a surging river in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and a twanging Oriental lyre in *Medea*, performances that won her Tony Awards in 1968 and 1982, strikes impressively varied notes in *Lillian*: Caldwell is by turns the childhood Hellman, her mother, her father, her nanny, Hammett and the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Each evocation has a distinctive timbre, inflection and rhythm; each manages to seem independent of Hellman's shaping remembrance. The paramount strength of Caldwell's performance is her capacity to find soft spots in a woman who seemed armed and armored. This Lillian always longs for control but ends, fluttering and mute, knowing that finally she has none.

—By William A. Henry III

Milestones

BORN. To Jessica Lange, 36, Oscar-winning actress (for 1982's *Tootsie*) whose latest film is *Sweet Dreams*; and her companion of four years, Sam Shepard, 42, Pulitzer-prizewinning playwright (for 1978's *Buried Child*) whose latest play is the critically acclaimed *A Lie of the Mind*: a daughter, their first child; in Santa Fe. Name: Hannah Jane. Weight: 7 lbs. 4 oz.

BORN. To Olivia Newton-John, 37, pop singer who has shed her perky PG image in recent albums (*Physical*, *Soul Kiss*); and her husband of a year, Matt Lattanzi, 27, teen-hunk actor (*Grease 2*): a daughter, their first child; in Los Angeles. Name: Chloe. Weight: 6 lbs. 8 oz.

HOSPITALIZED. Yelena Bonner, 62, wife of Soviet Dissident Andrei Sakharov, who had campaigned for 18 months with repeated hunger strikes so that she would be allowed to visit the West for medical treatment; in good condition, after surgery to bypass six of her coronary arteries; in Boston.

DIED. Thierry Sabine, 36, French racing-car driver and adventurer who in 1978 dreamed up the annual 22-day Paris-Dakar rally, a grueling 8,700-mile road race through the French countryside and across six African states; when his helicopter crashed while he was searching for stranded competitors; near Timbuktu, Mali. The race has attracted top commercial sponsors and big-name participants, including Grand Prix Racer Jacky Ickx and Monaco's Prince Albert, but of 487 vehicles starting this year's event on New Year's Day, only 119 were still in the race at week's end.

DIED. Donna Reed, 64, hazel-eyed, sweetly pretty actress who came to symbolize the heartland virtues of American womanhood in films like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) but who won a supporting-actress Oscar when she played against type as a prostitute in 1953's *From Here to Eternity*; of cancer; in Beverly Hills. Best known as the warmhearted wife and

mother in her weekly comedy television series, *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-66), she once insisted that "the public really does want to see a healthy woman, not a girl, not a neurotic, not a sexpot." Her last role was the long-suffering Miss Ellie on *Dallas*.

DIED. Herbert W. Armstrong, 93, autocratic founder-leader of the 75,000-member Worldwide Church of God; in Pasadena, Calif. Forsaking an advertising career in 1934 to become a radio preacher and self-proclaimed "Chosen Apostle" of God, Armstrong taught that Christians should deny the Trinity, shun medical care (though he used it as his own health deteriorated) and that remarried members should divorce their second spouses and rejoin their first (though he repealed that dictum in 1976 and a year later married a divorcee). Fanatically loyal members, many of them poor, nevertheless tithed to his church as much as \$75 million a year.