

An intimate evening with Lillian Hellman

Theater Review

By Sue Harrison

BANNER STAFF

"Tales of former children should seldom be trusted." So begins the Payomet Performing Arts production of "Lillian," the one-woman show based on the words of Lillian Hellman.

Having delivered that warning about the subjective nature of what is to come, the Hellman character unfolds 90 minutes of tales from her own past spanning childhood to the present moment, which in this play is Jan. 10, 1961.

"Lillian" is based on the autobiographical writings of Hellman. Her words are put together in a conversational ramble that leads down the roads of deep memory but always comes back to that January night when Hellman is sitting in a hospital waiting room, waiting for Dashiell Hammett to die.

Cait Langstaff delivers a compelling and likeable Lillian Hellman, probably more likeable than Hellman was in real life if rumors about her are to be believed. Perhaps it's that we know why she is in that room and what she is waiting for that softens some of the edges Hellman is reputed to have. Regardless,



Cait Langstaff as Lillian Hellman in the Payomet production of "Lillian."

the chain-smoking Langstaff (simulated only, the theater does not fill with smoke) presents a very accessible Hellman. We discover the hellion of a girl she was while growing up, always flying in the face of authority when it clashed with her sense of right and wrong. And we understand, because of coming to know the prickly writer from her earliest years, why she risked prison when she was called to testify in the McCarthy hearings.

If a single word had to be applied to the portrait that Langstaff creates of Hellman, it would be "humanizing." Langstaff creates a persona on stage that shifts between the erudite, adult Hellman to the youthful, brash Hellman

who lapses into a thick Southern accent as she recalls the words of her parents and, most especially, the black women who cared for her as she grew up. One servant in particular, Caroline Ducky, gets some of the best lines in the play. "Ain't a white child born to a woman that ain't crazy," Ducky tells the young Hellman at one point.

The stories waft off the Payomet stage like listening to an unexpectedly interesting and charming dinner guest — full of surprise with a dash of joy and sorrow.

Langstaff is at ease in the skin of Hellman. Her performance is measured and ultimately touching. Ted Kazanoff's direction is light-handed but solid. We never think

of what the director was trying to do, we just see it.

The stories fly by as Hellman talks about skipping school and hiding in a tree all day or the burning pain of uncovering adult infidelity. She talks about her plays, her McCarthy testimony and Hammett going to jail for his. Hellman's words as delivered by Langstaff create a world of living, breathing, careless, charming, clever and sometimes crazy people. The monologues are broken only by brief interludes when the Hellman character thinks she hears Hammett waking up and goes to stand in the doorway of his hospital room — a study in hope and resignation.

One-person plays based on real people are rarely riveting. They offer a quieter, less angst-ridden experience but one that can be well worth having. That is certainly the case here. You will walk out feeling that you just met Lillian Hellman and that in an unguarded moment of personal travail, she let you see the woman underneath the reputation.

Lillian, at 8 pm Thurs.-Sun. through July 29 at Payomet Performing Arts, located at the Highland Center, Truro. Tickets \$20 adults, \$5 kids up to 12, (508) 487-5400.

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