Watch on the Rhine

by LILLIAN HELLMAN

directed by LISA PETERSON

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The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.
Lillian Hellman wrote the first draft of *Watch on the Rhine* in August of 1939, before Britain and France had entered the war with Germany and long before the United States would. The play premiered in April 1941, still before the U.S. was directly involved. By the time of its premiere, a great deal more was known about the move of Hitler’s Germany toward global domination as well as the atrocities, committed by the Nazis.

The Title

The play’s title comes from a German patriotic poem and anthem written in the mid-19th century: Max Schneckenburger (1819-1849) wrote the poem *Die Wacht am Rhein* [The Watch on the Rhine] during the Rhine crisis of 1840, when France renewed its claim to the Rhine River as France’s natural border. Germany feared that France was planning to annex the left bank of the Rhine. Thus, we read: “The Rhine, the Rhine, go to our Rhine, / Who’ll guard our River, hold the line?” Like many other songs and poems, “The Watch on the Rhine” called for rivalries between various German kingdoms and principalities to be set aside and for Germans to establish a unified state. In 1854, five years after Schneckenburger’s death, his poem was set to music by Karl Wilhelm (1815-1873). “The Watch on the Rhine” was the rousing tune sung by German soldiers as they headed into battle during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. It was also particularly popular in Germany during the First World War.

The anthem may be most familiar to American audiences who have seen the film *Casablanca*, in which “Die Wacht am Rhein” is juxtaposed against the singing of “La Marseillaise” in Rick’s café.

Audio of the anthem courtesy of the Library of Congress: [https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox.157/](https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox.157/)

From World War I through 1945, the “Watch on the Rhine” was one of the most popular songs in Germany, again rivaling the “Deutschlandlied” as the de facto national anthem. In World War II, the daily Wehrmachtbericht radio report began with the tune, until it was replaced by the fanfare from Liszt’s “Les preludes” in 1941. The song’s title was also used as the codename for the German offensive in 1944 known today as the Battle of the Bulge.

(source: germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org)
The play begins in spring of 1940 at the Farrelly home outside of Washington, D.C. Fanny Farrelly is anxiously awaiting the return of her daughter, Sara, from Europe, along with her husband and three children whom Fanny has never met. Her son, David, who lives with her in the house, is having flirtations with the married Marthe. Marthe and her husband, Teck de Brancovis, are staying with the Farrellys having fled Europe as well. Their marriage is on the rocks, their unpaid bills are piling up, and Fanny feels they have stayed far past their welcome.

Sara and her husband, Kurt Muller, arrive unexpectedly early to the house along with their three children: Joshua, Babette and Bodo. The children are wiser than their years, eccentric and multilingual. Kurt tells the Farrellys that he is an ant-fascist and that they have been moving a great deal for his work and have come now to the U.S. for a holiday. After living simply and jumping from place to place, Sara is overwhelmed at being back in her childhood home surrounded by wealth. Teck is suspicious of the Mullers and snoops through their luggage, much to the shock of Marthe. Suspecting that Marthe is having an affair with David, Teck threatens Marthe to not interfere or try and stop him.

Eight days later, the extended family is gathered together relaxing. Teck announces he will be leaving soon and suspects the Mullers will be as well. Fanny says that isn’t the case and plans a celebration for Babette’s birthday.

While gossiping, Fanny reveals that Teck has been playing poker at the German Embassy with an arms dealer and German Nazis. The discussion turns to politics, and Kurt plays a song on the piano that was sung during the Spanish Civil War when the anti-fascists resisted Franco. Teck begins to pry at the Muller children, trying to find out more information about their lives and about their father. Meanwhile, Marthe returns from a trip to town to pick up dresses Fanny has ordered for Babette, Sara and Marthe. A long distance call comes for Kurt and he leaves to take it. Teck gets David to admit he bought a sapphire bracelet for Marthe and Marthe confesses she loves David. Marthe officially separates from Teck, saying she won’t leave with him and plans to move to Washington, D.C.

Kurt returns and tells the family that he must go away. Teck then reveals he has read a news story in the paper about a man named Max Friedank who has been captured in Europe. He is part of an anti-fascist resistance group, and Teck believes that Kurt has been working with him. Teck blackmails Kurt to keep his identity secret. Kurt tells the Farrellys that he is a part of this resistance and that he is on a wanted list. As the play drives towards a suspenseful end, Kurt must choose whether to make a great sacrifice or lose all he has fought for.
Two of the characters in *Watch on the Rhine* are based on public figures whom Lillian Hellman knew: Teck de Brancovis (and by association Marthe) and Kurt Muller. The character Sara Muller was based on Hellman’s acquaintance Muriel Gardiner Buttinger.

**TECK DE BRANCOVIS: THE HISTORICAL LINK**

Lillian Hellman based the character of Teck de Brancovis on Prince Antoine Bibesco, a Romanian aristocrat, diplomat and lawyer, as well as a notorious cardshark who fleeced her of some six hundred dollars at the London home of Lady Margot Asquith in 1936. Bibesco served in the Romanian legations in Paris and Petrograd, and later married Elizabeth Asquith, a woman 20 years his junior. Asquith’s mother thought Bibesco would be a steadying influence on her daughter. “What a gentleman he is. None of my family are gentlemen like that; no breeding you know,” she wrote.

Bibesco, like Teck, was an opportunist, but not a Nazi. In 1936, the Romanian Prime Minister recalled nearly all of Romania’s diplomats, and Prince Bibesco had the unenviable responsibility of reassuring England that Romania was not slipping into the grip of fascism. In reality, Romania was losing its grip on neutrality and independence.

*KURT MULLER: THE HISTORICAL LINK*

In the play, Kurt Muller is Sara’s husband and a former engineer who worked for Dornier Air Craft. Leaving his work behind, he joined an anti-fascist resistance group, first fighting in Spain, then resisting Nazis in his own country of Germany. There is a complex relationship between the play and the film *Casablanca* that stems not only from their addressing the same question of American involvement in the war, but also because the characters of Kurt Muller and Victor Laszlo were most likely based on the same person — a Moscow trained agent named Otto Katz. Katz operated out of pre-Hitler Germany and then France. He had at least 21 aliases. He also insisted that he was briefly Marlene Dietrich’s husband in 1920s Berlin, which was probably not so, though he was possibly her lover. He was undeniably the model for the lead character in *Watch on the Rhine*.

Katz was a charming, handsome, high-rolling man, and it is possible to identify him as an exemplary figure of 20th century life — an individual more or less self-cast in a role that did not exist until the vast tragedies of that era began to play themselves out after the rise of Hitler and Stalin. Katz was not a “spy” in the usual meaning of the word. Very occasionally, he carried some purloined documents from this place to that place, but that was not his primary duty. He was, rather, a sort of cultural courier — founding and editing more political magazines, in more places, than one can conveniently count; writing and editing passionate books; organizing conferences and mass meetings on major topics like the Reichstag Fire and long-forgotten ones like a plebiscite in the Saar. The screenwriter-playwright-communist Hy Kraft once called him “the Scarlet Pimpernel of the anti-Nazi underground,” and that’s about as good a summary of his life as you can make in a half-sentence.
How Katz came to be a far-darting provocateur is fairly easy to explain. The son of a prosperous Czechoslovakian manufacturer, Katz, who was Jewish, was drawn to the theatrical (and cabaret) life of Berlin, where he aspired to playwriting. What politicized him was the rise of Nazism in the 1920s, in particular its vicious anti-Semitism. He gravitated toward the Soviet Union, which seemed to him — not incorrectly at the time — the only nation mounting any sort of effective opposition to Hitler. In his accurate view, all the other major European states were, albeit somewhat more politely, anti-Semitic as well. A spell in Moscow, where he was schooled in spy craft (and Stalinism), sealed his fate. Indeed, he would later say that what happiness he had achieved was the result of his services to international communism.

It’s possible that Katz achieved his apotheosis in prewar Hollywood. He loved life in the celebrity fast lane, and the rich and guilty stars, in turn, loved his somewhat exaggerated tales of derring-do in shadowy Europe. Who can say how many ambulances (at $1,000 a pop) made their way to Spain as a result of the celebrity fundraisers he staged — even as Stalin murderously sold out the Republican cause in Iberia and, incidentally, stole its wealth? What we can say is that Katz was instrumental in setting up the precursor organization to the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, membership in which would so greatly inconvenience Hollywood’s liberal community when the investigators came calling a decade later.

Lillian Hellman was friendly with him when he produced *The Spanish Earth* in support of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War and when he raised money for the anti-fascist cause in Hollywood in the late 1930s. Hellman’s play preceded the screen adaptation of *Casablanca* (written by Dashiell Hammett, Hellman’s partner), while the release of *Casablanca* preceded the film adaption of *Watch on the Rhine*, also written by Hammett with some additional material by Hellman. Without overstating the similarities, it is interesting to consider *Watch on the Rhine* as the story of Victor Laszlo after he leaves Casablanca for the United States.

(*biographical material on Otto Katz from: *The Dangerous Otto Katz: the many lives of a Soviet Spy*, Jonathan Miles, 2010*)
Austrian resistance to the Nazis, and her eight-year-old daughter out of Europe to the safety of America. Although she didn’t know it for forty-three years, her life would make a deep and lasting impression on Lillian Hellman. The woman, who celebrated her thirty-eighth birthday on the voyage, had been born in Chicago as Muriel Morris. ... She got her B.A. from Wellesley in 1922, then spent the following two years at Oxford doing graduate work in English literature.

In 1926, Muriel went to Vienna in the hope of studying psychiatry with Sigmund Freud. When she learned Freud was not accepting additional students, she enrolled in the University of Vienna to become a psychiatrist. She was married briefly to an Englishman, Julian Gardiner, by whom she had a daughter. ... and she became involved with the antifascist movement; as the Nazis spread their power in Austria, her involvement increased and her group went underground. Using the operational cover name “Mary,” Muriel Gardiner ran dangerous errands for the underground, permitted the use of her two Vienna apartments for meetings, and put her considerable wealth at the service of the underground efforts.

In the course of her work with the underground, she met and fell in love with Joe Buttinger, a fellow socialist who was in effect the leader of the Austrian resistance. They eventually married. As the political situation worsened, the Buttingers’ efforts increasingly involved helping Jews and others to leave Austria. Both Joe and Muriel stayed in Europe until the last possible minute; then, when war broke out with Hitler’s invasion of Poland, they managed to obtain passage on the ‘Manhattan,’ which was the last American ship to leave France. Once safely in America, Muriel needed a home for herself and her family. Her lawyer in New York, a man named Wolf Schwabacher, was at the time trying to find someone to buy his brother’s half of a double house the two men shared on a large farm in Pennington, New Jersey. ... Muriel offered to buy the brother’s half, and was quickly settled into her lawyer’s house. Schwabacher had many friends in the theater, among them Lillian Hellman. ... Years later Muriel Gardiner Buttinger said that those first days back in America, still numb from the grimness of Europe on the brink of war, she was cheered by the stories her friend Wolf told about his glamorous friends in the New York theater. Since Muriel was now herself a figure of considerable glamour, an American heiress who had risked her life defying the Nazis, her story would surely been of interest to some of Schwabacher’s American friends, especially those most concerned about Nazism.”

(from Lillian Hellman: the image, the woman, William Wright, 1986)
Character Chronology

1877
Fanny is born

1895 (approx.)
Kurt Muller is born in the German town of Fürth (Fürth) — a city located in northern Bavaria. It is now contiguous with the larger city of Nuremberg, the centers of the two cities being only a little over four miles apart. Count Teck de Brancovis is born in Romania

1898 (approx.)
Fanny marries Joshua Farrelly

1899
Sara Farrelly is born in the family home outside of Washington, D.C.

1901
David Farrelly is born

1908
Marthe Randolph de Brancovis is born

1914 – 1918
At some point in this period Kurt serves in the German army in World War I

1920
Sara Farrelly marries Kurt Muller in Germany. Kurt goes to work as an engineer for Dornier Flugzeugwerke, a German aircraft manufacturer founded in Friedrichshafen, Germany in 1914 by Claude Dornier

1925
Marthe Randolph marries Teck de Brancovis

1926
Joshua Muller is born

1928
Babette Muller is born

1931
Bodo Muller is born (August). Kurt sees 27 men murdered in a Nazi street fight in his hometown

1932
Kurt begins his work with the anti-fascist resistance

1933
January 30 – Adolph Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany by President Hindenburg; the Nazi Party gains control. Kurt and his family leave Germany; Kurt continues his anti-fascist work in surrounding European countries

1936 – 1939
1936, Kurt travels to Spain as part of the anti-fascist German battalion — The Thälmann Battalion of the International Brigades – named after Ernst Thälmann, the imprisoned former leader of the German Communist Party

1940
(May 10) Germany begins invasion of Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France (later in the month). The Muller family arrives in the United States and then at Sara’s family home.
Lillian Hellman: Witness, Activist, Artist

by Jo Holcomb
Production Dramaturg

Lillian Hellman was born in 1905 in New Orleans, La., to Max Hellman and Julia Newhouse Hellman, who were both descendants of German Jews. When Hellman was 6 years old, the family relocated to New York City, and throughout her childhood she traveled between New Orleans and New York.

It was a chaotic upbringing, visiting her father’s poorer boardinghouse relatives in the South and then having to adapt to the refined circumstances of her mother’s family in New York. Hellman later spent time at both New York University and Columbia University, but her college career ended when she went to work in a publishing house at the age of 19.

She traveled widely at this time with her then-husband Arthur Kober, and decided in 1929 to study at the university in Bonn, Germany. At her boardinghouse in Bonn, Hellman was recruited by a Nazi student group and briefly considered joining, mistakenly thinking it was a socialist organization. When she discovered the true nature of the group, she promptly left Germany, recalling in her memoirs that “for the first time in my life I thought about being a Jew.” This experience later influenced the writing of two of her plays, Watch on the Rhine (1941) and The Searching Wind (1944).

In 1930, not long after her divorce from Kober, Hellman met detective fiction writer Dashiell Hammett, with whom she began a sometimes loving, but more often than not tempestuous relationship that would last for 30 years. Encouraged by Hammett, Hellman continued her global travels. Hammett, in turn, took a deep interest in Hellman’s writing career, which he fully supported. In fact, it was Hammett who came across the real life boarding school scandal that would inspire Hellman’s first play, The Children’s Hour, which premiered in November 1934, and would become Hellman’s longest-running production.

Her second play (Days to Come), however, was a commercial failure and motivated Hellman to take a hiatus from playwriting. During her self-imposed sabbatical, the threat of fascism had a stranglehold on Europe. The civil war had begun in Spain (1936-1939); Hitler had been chancellor in Germany since 1933; racial purity laws had been established; and the first concentration camps had been built and were receiving prisoners who were Jewish, Roma (gypsy), homosexual and Communist.

During her travels throughout the European continent, Lillian Hellman often found herself face-to-face with Hitler’s regime. In 1938, while in Spain, she also bore witness to the ongoing fight between the Republicans (anti-fascists) and the Nationalists led by Francisco Franco (the Fascists).

Hellman was captured by the idea of a play that incorporated her experiences in Europe and set out to write a script that would reflect the political climate of the day. By this time she had also joined the Communist Party, and her strident anti-fascist sentiments were a major influence on her creative process. By the summer of 1939, Hitler had annexed Austria and the Sudetenland and was moving toward Poland. Hellman was ready to take a stand. In her memoir Pentimento, she writes:

Watch on the Rhine is the only play I have ever written that
came out in one piece, as if I had seen a landscape and never altered the trees or the seasons of their colors ... here, for the first and last time, the work I did, the actors, the rehearsals, the success of the play, even the troubles that I have forgotten, make a pleasant oneness and have been lost to the past. It is possible that because the war so drastically changed the world, the small, less observed things changed without being recognized. (Pentimento, 1973.)

Watch on the Rhine opened in April 1941, eight months before the United States would enter World War II. The play would go on to win a New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Hellman and propel her successful playwriting career for another two decades.

Toward the latter part of her life, Hellman also penned three memoirs: An Unfinished Woman (1969, winner of the National Book Award), Pentimento: A Book of Portraits (1973) and Scoundrel Time (1976). It is in Scoundrel Time that Hellman relates the story of her experience as an unwilling witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to whom she uttered her now famous quote: “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.”

Lillian Hellman died on Martha’s Vineyard on June 30, 1984. Her plays, screenplays and memoirs place her at the pinnacle of the canon of American writers of the 20th century.
What was said about the play?

In *Watch on the Rhine*, which was put on at the Martin Beck Theatre last night, Lillian Hellman has brought the awful truth close to home. She has translated the death struggle between ideas in familiar terms we are bound to respect and understand. Curious how much better she has done it than anybody else by forgetting the headlines and by avoiding the obvious approaches to the great news subject of today. ... What it says is that the death of fascism is more desirable than the lives and well-being of the people who hate it. Miss Hellman makes that familiar point without political argument and without producing in miniature form the struggle between fascism and democracy.


During the last seven years Lillian Hellman has been using her head to good advantage. It is an excellent head, equipped with eyes that see clearly and a cold mind that works with precision and logic. ... *Watch on the Rhine* shows that Miss Hellman cannot fairly be typed on the basis of two plays of calculated workmanship. For her drama about a German who has dedicated his life to overthrowing fascism is quite unlike her previous work. It includes a great variety of characters, most of whom are immediately likeable. It is humorous, witty and affectionate in many scenes. It is pleasantly discursive; ... it is creative, which is the only thing that matters, and it is moving in its attitude toward human beings. For Miss Hellman is writing with the fullness, spontaneity and enjoyment of a person who has mastered the craft and is now released, perhaps by the nobility of the subject, from the bondage of making things fit and working according to pattern. ... *Watch on the Rhine* is incomparably her best work. ...


*Lillian Hellman on Watch on the Rhine*

... “The evolution of *Watch on the Rhine,*” said Miss Hellman, “is quite involved and, I’m afraid, not very interesting. When I was working on “The Little Foxes,” I hit on the idea — well, there’s a small, Midwestern American town, average or perhaps a little more isolated than average, and into that town Europe walks in in the form of a titled couple — a pair of titled Europeans — pausing on the way to the West Coast. I was quite excited, thought of shelving the foxes to work on it. But when I did get to it I couldn’t get it moving. It started all right — and then stuck.

Later I had another idea. What would be the reactions of some sensitive people who had spent much of their lives starving in Europe and then found themselves as house guests in the home of some very wealthy Americans? What would they make out of all the furious rushing around, the sleeping tablets taken when there is no time to sleep them off, the wonderful dinners ordered and then never eaten, and so on and so on? The contrasts of the two worlds, the ways of life. That play didn’t work either. I kept worrying at it, and the earlier people, the titled couple, returned continually. It would take a lot of afternoons and probably a lot of tomorrows to trail all the steps that made those two plays into *Watch on the Rhine*. The titled couple are still in, but as minor characters. The Americans are nice people, and so on. It all is changed, but the new play grew out of the other two.”


*Watch on the Rhine* is the only play I have ever written that came out in one piece, as if I had seen a landscape and never altered the trees or the seasons of their colors. All other work for me had been fragmented, hunting in an open field with shot from several guns, following the course but unable to see clearly, recovering the shot hands full, then hands empty from stumbling and spilling. But here, for the first and last time, the work I did, the actors, the rehearsals, the success of the play, even the troubles that I have forgotten, make a pleasant one-ness and have been lost to the past. It is possible that because the war so drastically changed the world, the small, less observed things changed without being recognized.

*Lillian Hellman, Pentimento, 1973.*
A Brief History of Fascism

Even scholars of fascism do not agree on what fascism means; nor, for that matter, do fascist scholars. The difficulty is twofold, and concerns both origins and actions.

Fascism originated in 1920s Europe, mostly among the radical collectivists of the left. But it developed by synthesizing command economics with the racism and nationalism of the radical collectivists of the right. Historians now discount the once-popular Marxist interpretation that fascism was the child of capitalism and imperialism. But they are not unanimous about whether the rivalry of fascism and communism was a sibling rivalry. Like the communists, the fascists were radically unprincipled opportunists, contemptuous of democratic norms. They sought to overthrow the right-left format of democratic politics, and their ideology combined elements of both.

The second problem, also related to fascism’s deliberate immoralism, lies in identifying the nature of fascist rule. Was Nazi Germany the quintessential fascist state, or a unique exception to the rule? The numerous fascist states of southern Europe and South America ended not in apocalypse, but repressive tedium. Most fascist economies followed Benito Mussolini’s definition of fascism as the corporatist control of private industry by government, but most fascist states also tended to annex areas of the economy to government control. And how much did fascist governments deliver on their promise to create autarkic, self-sufficient economies? Again, the historians are not in agreement.

Perhaps the best definition comes from Robert Paxton, professor emeritus at Columbia University and holder of the Legion d’Honneur. Paxton’s The Anatomy of Fascism analyzes the stages by which 20th century fascisms rose and fell.

Fascism, Paxton says, is a dynamic process, rather than a fixed ideology like socialism or communism. There are five steps on Paxton’s road to hell, and not all fascist parties made it past the second step:

1. Ideological formation and the creation of a party with quasi-military cadres. Talk of national humiliation, lost vigor, and the failures of liberalism and democracy.
2. Entry of the party into national politics. Intimidation of rivals, and planned acts of “redemptive violence” against suspect minorities and radical rivals.
3. Arrival in government, often in alliance with conservatives.
4. Exercise of power, in concert with institutions and business. The regime expands its control at home: restricting the press and democratic processes, corporatizing business, and collectivizing the people. Abroad, it asserts itself militarily.
5. Radicalization or entropy: Some fascists go down in a Götterdämmerung, but most die of boredom.

Elements of Paxton’s early stages appear in the angry populism that is gaining ground in modern Western democracies, especially in hostility toward Muslim immigrants and the austerity measures of the post-2008 eurozone. There are politicians whose parties are of fascist extraction, like the National Front in France, whose Catholic-tinged identity politics can be traced back to proto-fascists like the early 20th century Action Française. Some of these politicians and parties, like Norbert Hofer’s Freedom Party in Austria, remain closer to their roots than others, and might merit the name neofascist. Others are doing their best to shed the worst of these associations as they enter mainstream politics; the National Front’s Marine Le Pen did, no longer on speaking terms with her father Jean-Marie, the National Front’s founding ideologue. But only one Western democracy, Greece, has a fascist party like Golden Dawn, which possesses both uniformed street fighters and members of the national parliament.

Adapted from “The Elusive Definition of ‘Fascist’”, Dominic Green The Atlantic, Dec. 18, 2016
A Problematic Journalism

Lillian Hellman originally planned to set Watch on the Rhine in a small Ohio town, but decided to move the location to outside of Washington, D.C., so that her protagonists, the Farrellys, would be situated closer to a center of government. That creative choice meant the fictional family would have access to firsthand news about world events. In a time before social media, when news traveled slower and had fewer outlets of expression, newspapers were the main source of information. Had Hellman set the play in Ohio, chances are the Farrellys, like much of the rest of the country, would have been kept in the dark as newspapers weren’t regularly producing stories that focused on persecution of European Jews.

During World War II, major newspapers like The New York Times were slow to carry stories about Holocaust atrocities. When American journalists finally began to give credence and coverage to the events in Europe, those articles were placed deep on inside pages. The Times, which was regarded as “the gatekeeper of the American press,” published 1,186 stories about what was happening to the Jews in Europe from September 1939 - May 1945 (an average of about 17 stories a month), which may sound like a lot. However, in that same timeframe, Holocaust reporting made the front page only 26 times. A mere six of those articles identified Jews as the primary victims, the rest rather vaguely describing them as refugees or immigrants instead.

This tendency to bury the lede developed in part from a sense of general disbelief in the U.S. concerning the horrific news trickling over the Atlantic. Moreover, false atrocity stories that had come out of World War I caused newspaper editors in the 1940s to doubt these new accounts of mass murder. Though reliable sources in Europe were sending news of concentration camps, American journalists feared that the news was propaganda. American publications were particularly distrustful of British news sources, as England was already involved in the war and may have been trying to jolt the U.S. out of its neutrality.

This problematic coverage directly influenced how the U.S. government was responding to the war and left most Americans unaware of the genocide being perpetrated in Nazi-occupied areas of Europe. But it inspired voices like Lillian Hellman’s to rise up and make sure that action would be taken. Interestingly, reviews of Watch on the Rhine were mixed, with several publications — including The New York Times — praising the work, while others felt it did not go far enough to condemn fascism. Nevertheless, by having characters Sarah and Kurt Muller walk into the Farrellys living room with first-person accounts, Hellman was able to bring the war to the doorstep of many other American homes.

Gina Musto, Literary Intern

Carley Clover (Babette Muller), Hal Weilandgruber (Bodo Muller), Elijah Alexander (Kurt Muller), Silas Sellnow (Joshua Muller) and Sarah Agnew (Sara Muller). Photo by Dan Norman.
I knew of Lillian Hellman through her play *Little Foxes* and from reading *Pentimento*, one of her three memoirs. But I didn’t know *Watch on the Rhine*.

So when Joe Haj mentioned it to me, and I finally read it, I was more than pleasantly surprised; I was really taken with it.

Obviously, this is an incredibly timely play. At this moment in our history, I think people are looking to the past to figure out what artists were thinking and talking about before it was really clear what was happening in Germany and in Eastern Europe prior to World War II. It was an amorphous time. In retrospect, we of course know that Nazis are bad. We know in retrospect that something unwatched can result in the loss of tens of millions of people. And so, I think part of our job as we work on this play is to put our minds back before we knew, because *Watch on the Rhine* is really a play about engagement and waking up.

When I describe the play, I describe Eastern European politics that are wafting into an American house. What you see is a slice of well-off, progressive America at a moment when a trouble we think is far away actually comes home to roost. And I think that’s a good thing. It means we can’t pretend that we don’t know what’s going on. And I get excited about doing a play that’s about paying attention and getting active.

The other thing I want to share is that I’ve been lately reading Lillian Hellman’s first memoir, *An Unfinished Woman*, and what shocked me was that Hellman’s memoir voice is so frank and really messy. She just seems unedited to me. The idea of a woman in the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s allowing herself to write exactly what she thinks and feels, and not couching it ... I love that about Hellman, and I had a really great time getting to know her voice."
For Further Reading and Understanding

**BOOKS**


Griffin, Alice, and Geraldine Thorsten, *Understanding Lillian Hellman*, University of South Carolina Press, 1998.


