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### Little Foxes

by Winnie McCroy  
EDGE Editor  
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Laura Linney as Regina and Cynthia Nixon as Birdie

For a nation currently enduring the capricious wills of a powerful family whose self-interests seem to trump both ethical and moral considerations, the political climate has never been better for a restaging of "The Little Foxes," Lillian Hellman's tale of family, fortune and how to secure one by sacrificing the other.

In a novel turn, actresses Laura Linney and Cynthia Nixon -- both powerhouse players -- have agreed to swap out playing the characters Regina and Birdie. At a recent matinee, Linney played the hard-nosed lead Regina, a caustic Southern belle who, being cut out of her father's will, married a local businessman because "I was lonely... lonely for all the things I

wasn't gonna get."

Nixon portrayed her brother's timid wife Birdie, the only character in the play who actually hails from Southern aristocracy. As such, she is lovely, guileless -- and completely unprepared to deal with the usurious, corruptive force of this dirty brood that took over her family's "land, their cotton, and their daughter."

The action opens as the family attempts to make a deal with Mr. Marshall (David Alford) from Chicago to build a cotton mill right where the cotton is harvested, so they can all get "high-tone rich." Two no-good brothers have come up with their part of the money, and are pressuring their sister Regina to get the other third from her husband Horace's ample savings, figuring that outside folk who are "rich enough to give will be smart enough to want. That means we'd be working for them."

Hellman's play is populated by the most wretched, self-serving characters ever assembled on one stage. And the actors have a field day with it! Director Daniel Sullivan has gathered together a winning team, with Darren Goldstein as Oscar Hubbard, Birdie's abusive, scheming husband, and Michael Benz as Leo, her even more awful son -- think a sniveling Eric Trump.

Oscar is always ready to belittle the woman he married solely to elevate his status, and it takes little more than a bit of excitement or crosstalk for him to raise his hand to her. To cope she drinks, and dreams of the old life she had at her familial plantation, Lionett.

Oscar is the kind of man who hunts every morning, kills for sport, and discards his trophies. In one scene, Regina's butler Cal (Charles Turner) intimates how nice it would be if he donated the animals, just this once so that the local black folks can enjoy a nice holiday dinner. But Oscar shuts him down with a few words, suggesting that if the poor get used to him providing free meat, they'll never work.

The action of the play is at Regina's home. And in a time when blank walls and en mufti actors seem to populate even Broadway stages, it is thrilling to be presented with such a lush set. Scenic designer Scott Pask gets kudos for designing a beautifully appointed front parlor, from which you can see the foyer with decorative lamps and a table clock, a formal dining room, a pantry with a crystal punch bowl on the shelf, and beyond that, a stately kitchen with copper pots and pans hanging from the ceiling. A circular staircase is set in the middle of the stage, with a piano to the side.

Also laudable are costumes, by Jane Greenwood. She has the opportunity here to adorn the characters in period-appropriate suits and frocks, and she goes for it, full gusto! The female characters wear lush satin dresses, frilly lace nightgowns, and tall, feathered hats. It is absolute perfection to witness.

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Richard Thomas, Michael McKean, Darren Goldstein, and Michael Benz (Source:Joan Marcus)

A woman who must use her wits to make up for what fortune has not, Regina wheels and deals to ensure her husband Horace (Richard Thomas) gets the lion's share of the profits, even willing to put her daughter up as a collateral 'fiancé' for Leo, so the fortune will stay "all in the family." Regina sends teenager Alexandra (Francesca Carpanini) to Baltimore's Johns Hopkins to fetch Horace from where he's recovering from heart troubles.

As Regina's older brother Ben Hubbard, Michael McKean is excellent. He is as hard-nosed and scheming as his sister, but even far more usurious, scheming aloud to "play them off against each other" so he can pay workers less, just as he has put the squeeze on them by lending money at astronomical

interest rates. As Regina quips, "You look like a cat that's been licking the cream."

He also delights in putting women in their place, reminding them often that, "It's unwise for a good-looking woman to frown. I told you softness and a smile will do more to the hearts of men."

But Horace, back from Johns Hopkins but hardly in the pink, refuses to fund Regina's latest escapade, saying, "I'm sick of your brothers and their dirty tricks to make a dime! There must be better ways of getting rich than building sweatshops and pounding the bones of the town..." So Leo and his father plot to steal Horace's Union Pacific railroad bonds, use them without his knowledge, and replace them without sharing the profits.

Horace gets wise to the scheme and seeks to embarrass his hateful wife Regina by telling her brothers that they can have the bonds as a gift -- one which they must repay to Regina, as her sole inheritance. The rest is to go to Alexandra so that she can make a new life. Horace also plans to leave an envelope of money for their faithful maid, Addie (Caroline Stefanie Clay). He goes as far as to call the lawyer over so he can rewrite the will.

But Horace is a sick man, and Regina's lambasting takes a toll on his weak heart. He reaches for his "special medicine," but spills it. Wickedly, Regina ignores his pleas for help and watches him die.

It's just the chance Regina needs to put her brothers in their place. She lords the stolen stock over their heads, threatening to tell the lawyers and Mr. Marshall about the untoward goings-on -- unless she gets 75 percent of the profits, that is.

In the end, Regina carps about, already planning her move to Chicago with her husband's corpse not even cold. Alexandra, who has sat mutely in the same seat that the silenced Birdie occupies during the bulk of the play, finally rises up against her mother, saying, "I'm beginning to understand about things." Regina just replies, "Why, you have spirit after all! I used to think you were all sugar water."

As Birdie's mother once warned, there are "people that eat up the whole Earth and all the people on it... like in the Bible with the locusts. Then there's people that stand around and watch them do it." The Hubbards are these locusts, and as they note smugly, there are "thousands of us, all over the world. We'll own this country some day."

*"Little Foxes" runs through July 2 at Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 West 47th Street. For information or tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit <http://littlefoxesbroadway.com/tickets/>*



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Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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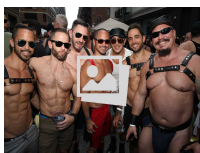
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