

Clare Boothe Luce's Rage for Fame

Clare Boothe Luce had a remarkable career. She was a journalist, war correspondent, editor of Vanity Fair magazine, Broadway playwright, member of the U.S. Congress, and Ambassador to Italy. In 1997, Sylvia Jukes Morris wrote a definitive biography of Clare Boothe Luce, Rage for Fame: The Ascent of Clare Boothe Luce, chronicling the early part of her career. The following excerpts from Rage for Fame trace the origin and development of The Women.

THE IDEA

The first idea for *The Women* had come from a conversation she overheard in the ladies room of the Morocco Club. Familiar voices at the washbasins were “dishing the dirt” about some married friends of hers. At the Greenbrier, venomous new lines took shape in her head. The lines grew into scenes, pouring out with phenomenal speed.

THE BUZZ

Awareness of the play's worth spread quickly through the Broadway community. An MGM script scout predicted that it would cause “a mad scramble” among picture companies. It was “flashy, hokey material and not too expertly written, but it is an unusually good set-up for the screen ... The author, a New York society woman, has written of her sex with a knowing and cynical pen.”

THE REHEARSALS

Casting and rehearsals for *The Women* began in early fall. There were the usual frustrations inherent in any major Broadway production. But none seemed to faze Clare, who was generally willing to jettison her old lines for new ones. Soon everyone concerned with the play was in awe of her. She was always perfectly dressed, coiffed, manicured, ready to turn on her charm and show her cleverness. [Playwright] Moss Hart would never forget the sight of her revising her script in the most feminine of boudoirs, sporting a blue ribbon in her hair and an ermine bed jacket fastened with a diamond pin.

[Actress] Ilka Chase remembered her sweeping in late one night, when the cast, “in varying attitudes of despondency,” was sitting on the bare and grubby stage. She was “on her way to a satin soirée ... gowned by Hattie Carnegie, sabled by Jaeckel, and from her finger flashed one of Flato's larger ice cubes.



IMAGES OF CLARE BOOTHE LUCE.

THE OPENING

Outside the Barrymore [Theatre], Sidney Whipple of the *World-Telegram* lingered to eavesdrop as patrons departed. He was particularly interested in the comments of Clare's own sex. "So true, so faithful, so delightful!" "Why, I know a woman — you know her, my dear — exactly like—"

"The most amazing thing about it," Whipple would write, "is the cheerful feminine reaction to a comedy that ought actually to blister the ladies in their tenderest regions . . . They applauded the most brazenly cynical utterance. They delight in dissection. They may even take notes for their personal use."

THE SUCCESS

When *The Women* broke its attendance record, Clare's intimates celebrated in various ways. Condé Nast gave a party at his Park Avenue penthouse and invited his customary A list of actors, journalists, artists, and socialites. Bernard Baruch boasted about getting Max Gordon to produce the play and went to see it at least a dozen times. He bought scores of tickets to keep up the numbers, giving them away to everyone from politicians to elevator boys, and pointed out a tiny gold typewriter on his watch chain that Clare had given him.

Controversy about the play's unprincipled characters and brittle dialogue continued. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her syndicated column "My Day" that she left a performance "longing for a little honest clean talk without any sham or pretense." John Billings [editor of *Life* magazine] reacted predictably. "I thought it was pretty unpleasant . . . Harry [Luce, Clare's husband], I suspect, is very proud . . . If I were in his place I would be ashamed to have a wife who wrote so autobiographically."



PHOTO FROM 1936 BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF *THE WOMEN*.
(MIELZINER: MASTER OF MODERN STAGE DESIGN BY MARY HENDERSON.)



PHOTO FROM 1939 FILM *THE WOMEN*.

Though Moss Hart [who had given Clare advice during the rehearsal period] was pleased with the play's financial success, he expressed scant praise at the time. Thirteen years later, when *The Women* had become a perennial draw in theaters all over the world, he read it again, and wrote Clare a belated compliment:

"I was filled with an admiration for it that I must confess I didn't have at the time it was produced. It's a first rate job, and to my mind a highly under-rated play. It's a great deal more than just a slick, well-constructed play — it's a highly civilized and biting comment on the social manners and morals of our society, and women's place in it. I had no idea it was so good . . . I don't think you ever got the credit you deserved for it, and I thought I'd write and tell you so."

From the Foreword to The Women

By Clare Boothe Luce

The Women is a satirical play about a numerically small group of ladies native to the Park Avenues of America. It was clearly so conceived and patently so executed. The title, which embraces half the human species, is therefore rather too roomy. It was chosen, ungenerously it may seem, from a host of more generic titles — “Park Avenue,” “The Girls,” “The Ladies” — simply because it was laconic, original and not altogether too remote. Moreover, its very generality seemed to hold a wide audience appeal, a consideration which few commercial dramatists are required to ignore. This having been frankly stated, I am sure that few readers will be distracted by the width of the title from the narrowness of the play’s aim: a clinical study of a more or less isolated group, projected, perhaps in bad temper, but in good faith.



Now, whether or not this play is a good play is any man’s business to say. But whether or not it is a true portrait of such women is a matter which no man can adequately judge, for the good reason that all their actions and emotions are shown forth in places and times which no man has ever witnessed. “Was you there, Charlie?” The patriotic Daughters of the American Revolution were notoriously harsh judges of soldiery, as demonstrated in *What Price Glory?*. The fact that their fathers were soldiers did not make them good judges of life on the Western Front. So all sentimental gentlemen, young and old, who read this book, are here warned that the fact that their mothers were women does not constitute them, ipso facto, able critics of Life in *The Women’s* No-Man’s Land.



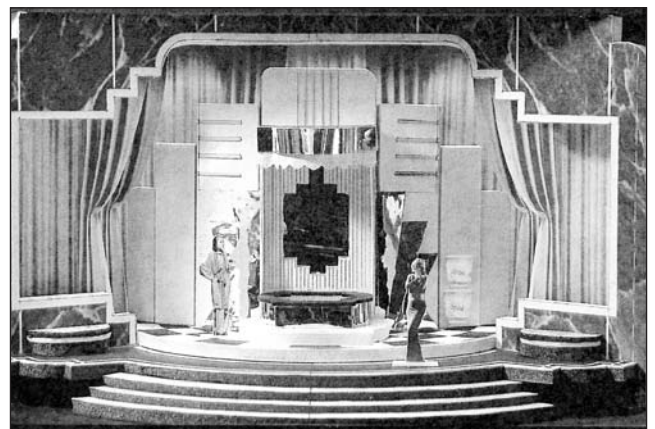
But that the antics of these women do strike most audiences as funny, instead of dull or nauseating, as they might quite reasonably have done, is a very happy accident for me at the box-office. I am immensely gratified by the play’s success, and properly appreciative of whom I have to thank — the women who are its staunchest advocates and best customers — the women who do not think “all women are like that.”



PHOTO FROM 1936 BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF *THE WOMEN*.
(MIELZINER: MASTER OF MODERN STAGE DESIGN BY MARY HENDERSON)



PICTURED FROM 1939 FILM: VIRGINIA WEILDER AND JOAN CRAWFORD.



OLD GLOBE SKETCH OF CRYSTAL'S BATHROOM.
SCENIC DESIGN BY DAVID P. GORDON.

The Almighty Clare Boothe Luce

By Helen Lawrenson

When I first knew her I didn't like her. Few women do. I can think of no one who has aroused so much venom in members of her own sex. Much of it is envy. But not all. Other more talented and successful women have disliked her intensely. Some years ago, when a magazine published an article about her entitled *The Many Faces of Clare Boothe Luce*, the most frequent comment by her peers was, "I thought she had only two."

As I grew to know her better and as I learned from various personal sources something of her early life and background, I became, if not unreservedly fond of her, at least sympathetic. She made real friendship impossible, perhaps because she seemed to trust no one, love no one, remaining inaccessible deep in the malistic concept that rankled under her shield of opaque, steely self-assurance. Oddly, I was sorry for her, because I believe that despite the stunning and ineluctable procession of her triumphs,

she was basically an unhappy woman, never satisfied, never content. Yet she was the glittering lodestar of a generation, or of those parts of it susceptible to the skittish canons of publicity. As such, she became a target for a certain amount of hyperdulia, with attendant accolades, some less awesome than others. In 1947 she came second to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt in a national poll to determine "the American woman you most admire"; in 1953, according to a Gallup Poll, she was one of "the ten most admired women in the world," surpassed by Mrs. Roosevelt, Queen Elizabeth II, Mamie Eisenhower; during her tenure as our ambassador in Italy, freshman girls at Italian universities voted her "the ideal woman." (Gina Lollobrigida came second.) From a skimpily educated but clever girl, so ambitious that it hurt, to her

present dwindling status as Elder Stateswoman Emeritus (in which guise she issues apologies for Nixon and serves on some sort of civilian advisory board tangential to the State Department), she parlayed a nimble, mousetrap mind, apodictic nerve and a will as tough as lignum vitae beneath an exquisitely angelic facade into one of the most strategically calculated and fascinating success sagas of the century. Her technique was simple: aim for the top.

...

Many years ago, in 1937, a friend wrote me: "I saw *The Women* and I think Mrs. Luce is wonderful to have thought it up. But then, I think God is wonderful to have thought up Mrs. Luce."

Excerpts from an article in the August 1974 edition of Esquire magazine. The cover featured a picture of Clare Boothe Luce, with the caption "Woman of the Century." Helen Lawrenson was an editor at Vanity Fair working with, and eventually for, Clare Boothe Luce, who became editor of the magazine.



AMBASSADOR LUCE AND SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1955.



CLARE BOOTHE LUCE AT HOME, 1942.

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