

# UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY • OCTOBER 2001

UNDERSTANDING

## **THE WOMEN**

AND

## **CLARE BOOTHE LUCE**

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A  
CULTURAL ICON





# The Man Behind The Women

A DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by Scott Elliott

**M**any years ago, when I was doing *Three Sisters* at the Roundabout, Todd Haimes said, "Well, what do you want to do next?" and I said, "How about *The Women*?" I had seen the movie some years earlier and I realized it was based on a stage play, so I just picked it up to see what it was like. Well, it was quite different. The film is very stereotypical, which was Hollywood in the day, but the play was more complex. That's what really drew me in: how different it was. That's the moment I thought, "Oh, I'd love to do this play."

I think this play is kind of prime now, ready for people to see it. By consisting entirely of interior scenes, it shows the women's world in the day--the hairdresser, the clothes shop, exercise studio. This is what these women were doing back then, they created their own world, almost like a job. Sylvia's the boss, and the others are the workers, even though the only one with an actual career is Nancy.

Today, if you went to lunch at Le Cirque, or shopping at Bergdorf's at eleven in the morning, you would still see women like this. There are still debutante balls. There are still women who just want to get married and have children, and there's nothing wrong with that. So, I'm going to try and reveal the characters in a modern way and not lie.

The design will all be period, however. All the clothes are off the pages of *Vogue* from the 1930's: Isaac Mizrahi's vision of what that's all about, which is brilliant, and Derek McLane, the set designer, has come up with a set that's inventive. In the old days, you had a whole set for every scene. They would bring the curtain down and change the set, then bring the curtain up. Audiences now don't have that kind of patience; you need to move it along faster. I think he's come up with a sexy, sleek New York backdrop, with this set that moves in such a way that the locations reveal themselves as the scenes go on. It's fun, and that's what I wanted--I wanted it to look fun and delightful; and bubbly, like champagne because to depict the ugliness underneath that world, you first need that glitter and gloss.

**...to depict  
the ugliness  
underneath  
that world,  
you first need  
that glitter  
and gloss.**

The brilliance of the way Clare Boothe Luce wrote is that she created archetypes with her

## UPSTAGE CONTRIBUTORS

**MARGARET  
SALVANTE McCANN**  
Education Director

**PHILIP A. ALEXANDER**  
Education Program Manager

**RENEÉ FLEMINGS**  
Curriculum Coordinator

**MEGAN WALTZ**  
Education Assistant

**MELODY JOHNSON  
JASON TYNE**  
Education Intern

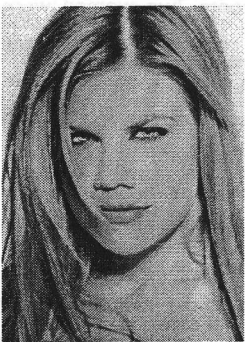
**TIM McCANNA**  
Design

**COVER:**  
Clare Boothe Luce  
from *Clare Boothe Luce*  
Copyright © 1982 by Wilfrid Sheed

**ROUNABOUT  
THEATRE COMPANY**  
231 West 39th Street  
Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018  
telephone: 212.719.9393  
fax: 212.869.8817  
www.roundabouttheatre.org

Copyright © 2001  
Roundabout Theatre Company, Inc.  
All rights reserved.

# THE WOMEN



**Party of Five.** Starring in *The Women*, left to right: Kristen Johnston, Rue McClanahan, Cynthia Nixon, Jennifer Tilly, and Mary Louise Wilson.

*Continued from page 1*

characters, but then went back and rewrote it so they're more complex, especially Mary Haines. In the play you imagine her as a Park Avenue girl, like you would read about in the society columns today. She's living her life the way she thinks she's supposed to, she's got everything compartmentalized. That changes, obviously--I think that's what the play is about--the divorce, and what the impact of the divorce on this woman is. She goes through phases. She's a kind of chilly, 35 year-old party girl in the beginning. She was a debutante like the girls in the last scene. She got married to the "perfect" man and had the "perfect" family, and she went along with blinders on. What happens when she gets divorced is that her veneer cracks and she becomes a richer, more modern woman as a result of it. It's delightful that way.

Ultimately the strength of this play is that underneath it all is the writer, Clare Boothe Luce, a woman who took control of her life. She was a living example of the women's movement going on at the time. Women were breaking out, and there is a strong sense of that in the play; people were outraged by this when it premiered. Some people (mostly men) thought it was morally disgusting, but I think we have seen that there's a movement going on within this play, and you see that in the way Mary changes. Mary is really in the middle of what this play is really about. ■



Luce arrives in Rome with her husband Henry in 1953. (N.Y. Public Library Picture Collection)



# The Woman

A BIOGRAPHY OF CLARE BOOTHE LUCE

by Catharine Sheehy

**A** biography of Clare Boothe Luce reads like a nineteenth-century melodrama. Not only did she live to a ripe old age, but her fortunes continued on a giddy trajectory from improbably humble beginnings to a place in the House of Representatives, an ambassadorship to Italy and as consultant to several administrations, with a stop off at a try-out for the 1920 US Olympic swim team, the managing editorship at *Vanity Fair* and boffo Broadway success to boot.

Ann Clare Boothe was born in 1903, the second illegitimate child of Anna Clara Schneider, a poor girl from a respectable Harlem family, and William Franklin Boothe, a piano manufacturer turned itinerant violinist. Because he had been sued by his first wife for divorce on the grounds of infidelity, Billy Boothe was legally forbidden to marry Clare's mother in New York State. In 1912, tired of moving around the country, Ann Snyder (her new name) took her children and returned to New York. Once back in the city and settled in modest digs, she landed a benefactor in Joel Jacobs, who would attend to her and her children's needs throughout the rest of her life.

It's not difficult to understand the horror of poverty and dependence Clare would have for the rest of her life. Her mother made of matrimony a military campaign with respectable wealth the only acceptable prize. Dutifully, Clare married George Tuttle Brokaw, a weak-willed, middle-aged, alcoholic playboy. Clare once confided to her diary that, she "was endowed with a masculine perception, a half-masculine

mentality, and a thoroughly feminine method of living." It didn't take Clare long to tire of George's lack of ambition and constant drunkenness. When he made a public record of his drinking problem and checked himself into a sanatorium, she had the grounds for divorce. Leaving her daughter Ann behind with a governess, Clare Boothe took a fateful trip to Reno.

The idea of writing a play about the denizens of a Reno resort occurred to her as a take off on Grand Hotel. She began a fragment but put it aside in frustration when she'd written herself into a corner. On returning to New York she landed a position within Condé Nast's magazine empire. She started as a caption writer at *Vogue*, moved within the year to *Vanity Fair* and within three years she was managing editor. She was not yet thirty years old and had landed one of the plum positions among New York's literati. She began a relationship with Henry Robinson Luce, who, at his second random encounter with Clare, told her he had to have her and was leaving his wife of eleven years right then.

The newly married Clare Boothe Luce assumed that her career in journalism was about to enter a new ascendance. Henry, the publisher of *Time* magazine, had decided to publish a pictorial weekly that would be called *Life*, and Clare waited patiently to be named editor. When a man was named to the post, Clare bitterly realized that even strategic marriage was no defense against the glass ceiling. She threw herself back into a playwriting career that had begun with a farcical melodrama, *Abide with Me*. She went

to a West Virginia resort and in three days penned the first draft of *The Women*.

The idea for the play came from a conversation she'd overheard in a tony Manhattan ladies room. Two women were discussing an affair one of them was having with a man Clare knew. Dusting off her Reno hotel fragment and coupling it with the powder room powder keg, she had a play. All the scenes would be laid in exclusively feminine domains, the cast of characters all women—a Broadway first. Though less popular in the provinces during trials, *The Women* was a bona fide hit in New York and a smash in London, too. A film version followed with a superb screenplay by Anita Loos, luscious haute-couture confections by Adrian, and George Cukor's masterful wrangling of all the female ego that Tinseltown had on offer in 1939. In fact, the film's two-word tagline—"Jungle Red"—is one of the most famous in Hollywood history. Even Gertrude Stein had to admit she "liked it, at least a little bit."

Though Clare would complain, "Women can't have an honest exchange in front of men without having it called a cat fight," her play certainly gives her lament the lie. *The Women* positively thrives on the energy of the cat fight, on the thrill of the bedroom as slaughter house, where the color of Elizabeth Arden's famous door is suggestive of more than the "Jungle red" of socialites' nail enamel. Bread and circuses be damned, give us cake and catwalks; here is blood sport in a pink, satin-tufted, perfumed arena, and Clare Boothe Luce its immortal empress. ■



# It's a Woman's World

Like all works of art, Clare Boothe Luce's *The Women* reflects the time and place from which it emerged: 1936, New York City. As a social satire, the play touches on several issues related to women and their roles: motherhood, marriage, divorce, careers, friendship, etc. Below is a timeline of Clare Boothe Luce's life, including important events in Women's History.

**1903** Clare Boothe is born.

**1909** Selma Lagerlöf is the first woman to win the Nobel prize for literature.

**1912** First minimum wage law (for women only) enacted in Massachusetts.

**1916** Margaret Sanger opens the first birth control clinic.

**1920** Women gain the right to vote (19th Amendment).

**1921** Zona Gale is the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Miss Lulu Bett*.

**1922** Rebecca Felton appointed as first woman senator.

**1929** The stock market crashes.

**1930** Clare Boothe becomes editor of *Vogue*.

**1931** New York families receiving aid from the city had to survive on \$2.39 per week.

**1932** Amelia Earhart flies solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

**1933** Unemployment soars to 25%, forcing 60,000 women in the U.S. on the road as migrant workers.

**1935** Clare Boothe marries her second husband, the publisher Henry R. Luce founder and publisher of *Time*, *Fortune* and *Life* magazines.



Selma Lagerlöf



Margaret Sanger



Zona Gale



Amelia Earhart



Clare Boothe Luce  
1943

**1936** Clare Boothe Luce writes *The Women*.

**1940** Clare Boothe Luce covers World War II battlefronts for *Life Magazine*.

**1942** Clare Boothe Luce becomes the 1st congresswoman from Connecticut.

**1946** A record number of babies are born heralding the beginning of the "Baby Boom."

**1953** President Dwight D. Eisenhower appoints Clare Boothe Luce ambassador to Italy.

**1959** The Barbie Doll is created.

**1960** The FDA approves Birth Control Pill.

**1963** Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* inaugurates the modern women's liberation movement.

**1967** Henry Luce dies.

**1972** Equal Rights Amendment is proposed.

**1973** Billie Jean King beats Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" tennis.

**1979** West Point's highest honor, the Stlvanus Thayer Award, is presented to Clare Boothe Luce, an award never before given to a woman.

**1983** Sally Ride is the first female U.S. astronaut.

**1990** Clare Boothe Luce dies.



Clare Boothe Luce  
1955



Barbie



Clare Boothe Luce  
1957



Billie Jean King



Clare Boothe Luce  
1972



# Women's Words

## THE PERFORMERS' PERSPECTIVE

Actresses from the play share some thoughts on their characters, comparing the world of the play with our world.



### **Ann Talman** (*Miss Trimmerback*)

Miss Trimmerback is a working girl, and longs for glamour. Being a notary is not glamorous. Making a living as a single woman is very hard now, but was harder in 1936. One thing that has not changed all that much since then is a woman's biological clock. Women who put off having a family are now having a terrible time getting pregnant. I think it is a huge price to pay for a career.



### **Cheryl Stern** (*Miss Shapiro*)

Miss Shapiro never married; her job is everything. In this play, married women of stature are defined by their husbands' wealth. They must hang on to it at all costs. Today, even wealthy women feel the need to have a career and continue to retain their own identity. We are, for the most part, less defined by our husbands today. We have progressed, but the women of *The Women* are still around and relevant to day. Women are still women: we compete.



### **Julie Halston** (*Lucy*)

Lucy is a can-do gal, not very sentimental. Today, qualities and experiences that women exhibit are not valued highly in our society. For example, ambitious hard-working women are still viewed suspiciously by too many men and women.



### **Rue McClanahan** (*Countess de Lage*)

The feeling of being unfulfilled without a husband, insecure unless a man is associated with her in an intimate way, is Flora's principal problem. Her choices are based on feeling "in love," getting her man, getting married and keeping the illusions going as long as possible. Each divorce only leads to the next conquest. She feels incomplete without a husband, but is truly stuck in adolescence. This is something we see everywhere in 2001.

As they perform jobs formerly forbidden to them, and earn money commensurate to that earned by men, and gain political power, women change society forever. Many careers are still almost totally filled by men, but eventually women will move into those fields, with determination and fortitude and the leadership of the courageous few. ■



# Activities

DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE

## Before you go

Investigate the lives of the women in your family, and find out their views of the world. Ask your mother, aunt, or grandmother or some other female relative to tell you about her home life, her job, her friends and neighbors. Maybe looking at some photographs from several years ago will help your discussion. Here are some sample questions you could ask:

- ◆What were the expectations for women then?
- ◆How do current expectations for women differ from those in the past?
- ◆How do you feel you conform with or challenge society's expectations?
- ◆Which women are your idols or role models? Why?

## At the theatre

Watch and listen to how the different characters feel about their roles in the world. Be sure to pay attention to what the characters say as well as what they do. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- ◆What do the characters say about each other? Do they gossip behind each others' backs? What do they say to each other's faces?
- ◆What do the different characters say women are supposed to do and say? Do the characters agree with or disagree with these expectations?
- ◆What are the characters' opinions of men and men's roles?
- ◆How do these characters' views compare with contemporary views? Are they similar or different?

## After the show

Create a piece of art that shows your view of the world of women in 2001. This can be a play, a comic strip, a poem, a collage, or any other form of art you feel comfortable with. As you're working on your piece, here are some issues to consider:

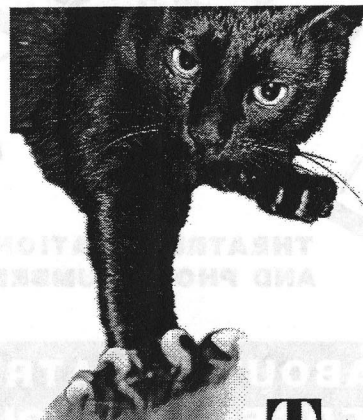
- ◆Will you choose a humorous and satirical approach, like Clare Boothe Luce, or are you interested in creating something more earnest and thoughtful?
- ◆How do your women characters respond to and interact with each other? Is it a supportive or a competitive environment?

- ◆How do the women in your piece express their thoughts about society's expectations of women? Do they accept their roles quietly, or do they voice objections to everyone?
- ◆How do the characters feel about the men in their lives, and how do they demonstrate their feelings?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the people who created *The Women*.

**Mail it to:** Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Company  
231 W. 39th St., Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018

**Or email to:** [Phila@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:Phila@roundabouttheatre.org)



# THE WOMEN

# When you get to the Theatre:

## Ticket Policy

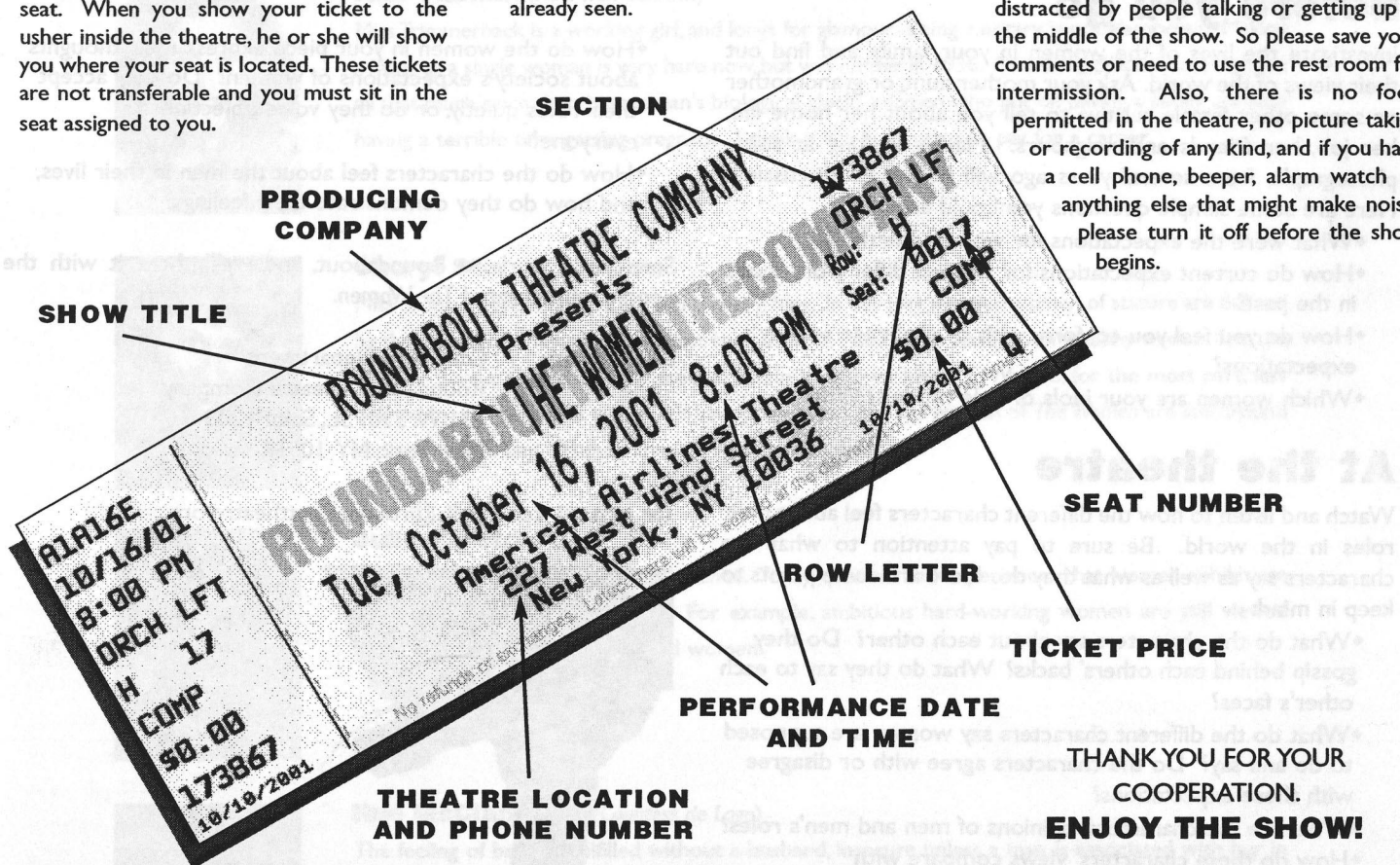
As a student participant in *Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

## Programs

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

## Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



## ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT OF OUR EDUCATION PROGRAM:

Axe-Houghton Foundation  
 Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation  
 Rose M. Badgeley Residuary Charitable Trust  
 The Louis Calder Foundation  
 Citigroup  
 Consolidated Edison Company of New York  
 The Samuel and Rae Eckman Charitable Foundation  
 City Councilwoman June M. Eisland  
 The Educational Foundation of America  
 The Heckscher Foundation for Children

HSBC Bank USA  
 IBM Corporation  
 JP Morgan Chase  
 The McGraw-Hill Companies  
 Mellam Family Foundation  
 Merrill Lynch & Co. Foundation, Inc.  
 National Endowment for the Arts  
 Newman's Own  
 New York City Department of Cultural Affairs  
 The New York Community Trust

New York State Council on the Arts  
 The New York Times Company Foundation  
 The Rudin Foundation  
 S.H. and Helen R. Scheuer Family Foundation  
 Spektor Family Foundation  
 The Starr Foundation  
 The Michael Tuch Foundation, Inc.  
 Verizon Foundation  
 Anonymous