

## THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

In 1934, Lillian Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour* based on a true story of two Scottish schoolteachers accused of having a lesbian affair in 1807. The mention of homosexuality on stage was illegal in New York, but authorities looked the other way when the play received favorable reviews. The Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC), however, would not overlook the story's reference to lesbianism and, in 1936, when director William Wyler adapted the play for the screen, the accusation of lesbianism was changed to an accusation that one schoolteacher slept with the other's fiancé. The lesbian topic so offended the MPPC that the film could not use the title of the play, which was changed to *These Three*.

In 1961, after the MPPC lightened, Wyler remade the film, with both the lesbian subject and original title. This is the only film remade by Wyler (*Jezebel*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Little Foxes*, *Mrs. Miniver*, *The Heiress*, *Roman Holiday* ... too many more to list, he's the most nominated director). Starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine as schoolteachers Karen and Martha whose lives are destroyed when malevolent student Mary (Karen Balkin) tells her grandmother (Faye Bainter) that her teachers are having an affair—a rumor so taboo that it must be whispered. The rumor spreads fast, each student is withdrawn, and when the schoolteachers sue the grandmother for libel, they lose mainly due to the absence of Martha's frivolous aunt (Miriam Hopkins, who played Martha in *These Three*) refuses to appear at the trial. Just when things couldn't get worse, they do.

The film's performances are excellent as is its script (most of Hellman's dialogue was kept), its direction, and its cinematography. A simple story that's been revived several times for the stage—even though its topic is arguably dated. The film provides a perfect commentary of the unspeakable taboo of homosexuality in our culture.