

## It Was a Dark and Stormy Night...

By Jan Lisa Huttner

An exceptionally dry summer ended abruptly on Wednesday, September 28, the night of Linda Ben-Zvi's visit to Chicago. The temperature dropped thirty degrees in a matter of hours, the heavens opened, and traffic all across the metro area slowed to a crawl. So the crowd that greeted Tel Aviv University Professor Ben-Zvi was small, but as Spencer Tracy once said about Katherine Hepburn, every bit was "choice." Two of the three college sponsors were represented, DePaul University and Roosevelt University, as were all three of the WITASWAN partners, AAUW-Illinois (the American Association of University Women), CAWHC (the Chicago Area Women's History Council), and, of course, IWPA. Unfortunately the sponsor from Columbia College Chicago had to send her regrets at the last minute.



Professor  
Linda Ben-Zvi

After all the umbrellas were safely stashed, Professor Ben-Zvi began a fascinating overview of Susan Glaspell's long career, punctuated by dramatic readings from three of her plays. Glaspell was born into one of the pioneering families that founded Davenport, Iowa, in the early 1800s, and though she traveled widely throughout her life, she never lost her Midwestern values. In one of her final plays, *The Inheritors*, she returns to her grandmother's kitchen, circa 1879, in search of the moral authority to challenge the deportation of immigrants after World War I.

Dean Corrin, Chair of the Theatre Studies Department at The Theatre School of DePaul University, brought four of his students to read from texts provided by Professor Ben-Zvi. In addition to three scenes from *The Inheritors*, they also performed scenes from *Suppressed Desires*, one of Glaspell's earliest plays, and from *Trifles*, the play for which she is best-known today.

*Suppressed Desires* is set in Greenwich Village when it was the Mecca for American artists who wanted to be known as "avant garde." (Anyone who's seen Warren Beatty's film *Reds* will immediately connect to this time and place.) In her introduction, Professor Ben-Zvi reminded us that Sigmund Freud made his first trip to America in 1911, so the concepts in *Suppressed Desires* were very new and controversial. I had the good fortune of listening to an early rehearsal during which the four DePaul students were clearly confused about the material.

Professor Ben-Zvi provided the clue with great gentleness: "It's meant to be a comedy." Thus liberated, the students played for laughs and were well rewarded. Looking back, it's amazing now that Glaspell could have been so astute about psychoanalysis so early in Freud's own career.

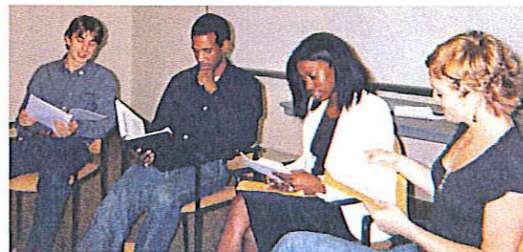
*Trifles*, on the other hand, is a serious and sober work. Glaspell wrote it as a stage play first, then rewrote it a few years later as a novella called *A Jury of Her Peers*. For those of us who know *A Jury of Her Peers* either in print form or through Sally Heckel's Oscar-nominated film version, the evolution of certain key scenes is fascinating.

Sincere thanks to Dean Corrin, as well as Shannon Altland, Joe Goldammer, Vergia Siovhan Norris, and Austin Talley, the four DePaul students, for making

September 28th such a memorable evening. And best wishes always to Professor Linda Ben-Zvi as she continues her book tour.



The conversation continues over coffee. Left to right: DePaul professor Lenora Brown, Joe Goldammer, Linda Ben-Zvi, Dean Corrin (Chair of the DePaul Theatre Studies Department) and Shannon Altland



Four theater students from DePaul read a scene from Susan Glaspell's first play *Suppressed Desires*. Left to right: Joe Goldammer, Austin Talley, Siovahn Norris and Shannon Altland

Jan Lisa Huttner, IWPA's Program Vice President, is the managing editor of FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples ([www.films42.com](http://www.films42.com)). She has given presentations all across Illinois on Sally Heckel's 1980 film adaptation of *A Jury of Her Peers*.