

## Top Girls

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* is a mammoth play: it spans 10 centuries and runs two-and-a-half hours. Her message—that women make incredible sacrifices in our male-dominated world—is a powerful one, and easily broaches such a lengthy time span. But surely the playwright could have conveyed this message in a shorter script.

Churchill's plays often defy chronology as they impart a complex social message. She is both straightforward and implicit, feminist and anti-feminist. Audiences need strong, talented casts to help navigate Churchill's profound yet befuddling plays. *Top Girls* is no exception. Fortunately, Fountainhead Theatre's production, now playing at Theatre on the Run in Arlington, meets this prerequisite in the form of six gifted actresses.

In the first act we meet Marlene (Lynn Audrey Neal), a British career woman celebrating her promotion to managing director of an employment agency by hosting an imaginary dinner party. She has invited five women from history, art and literature who in her mind have achieved great success, just as she has. But each of her guests has suffered unfathomable hardships, many of them involving losing her children.

Lady Nijo (Regina Aquino), a popular but shunned consort in 13th-century Japan, saw her offspring only from afar as more privileged women raised them. After her father and lovers—including the emperor and a high priest—died, she became a traveling nun, roaming Japan on foot for 20 years.

**Fountainhead  
Theatre**

September 12, 2005  
By Janice Cane

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(left to right) Callie Kimball, Lynn Audrey Neal, and Kate Michelsen

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Lady Nijo, the childless mother, can relate to Patient Griselda (Charlotte Akin), a character who appears in the 14th-century literature of Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer. Patient Griselda blindly obeys her husband, even when he robs her of her children to test her love for him. “You really are exceptional, Griselda,” says the disbelieving Marlene, who becomes increasingly bewildered with each woman’s tale.

Pope Joan’s (Callie Kimball) story also is distressing: she masqueraded as a boy so successfully that her quest for learning led her to assume the papacy. “I thought God would speak to me,” she says, “but of course he knew I was a woman.” God might have known, but ninth-century Rome did not discover Joan’s true identity until she gave birth during a procession, after which she and the infant were stoned to death. The revelation that the pope had considered an abortion highlights the satirical criticism inherent in *Top Girls*.

Marlene is left sitting at the table at the end of the act, utterly horrified by what these women have endured to achieve love, knowledge and prestige—in a word, success. So much for her triumphant toast, in which she had proclaimed, “To our courage, and the way we changed our lives, and our extraordinary achievements.”

It is not until the end of the protracted second act that the audience learns of Marlene’s own lost child, whom she surrendered to her sister in order to live a better life herself. In Act Two, the action shifts to Marlene’s real life, but some things have not changed. Through her coworkers and sister, we learn that women are still resigned to keeping secrets, handicapped by age and considered “ball-breakers” when they succeed. The actresses may be playing different characters, but their plights are essentially the same.

The plights of these more modern women are less overtly dramatic than those of their historic and artistic counterparts of Act One, but they are complementary and, perhaps, sadder. The woman we once identified as the only known female pope—the woman whose legacy involves a pierced chair on which popes must prove their maleness—now consents to hiding in the backseat of a car so her married lover’s neighbors will not spot her. Akin, who formerly portrayed the pathetic Griselda, is in some ways no less pathetic as Joyce, Marlene’s sister. But Joyce is more aware of herself, and while she is lonely and disappointed (her husband left her for a younger woman, and the child she has raised is not exactly destined for greatness), she is also proud.

All of this is relevant to Churchill’s point, but as the play continues, this point becomes more overbearing than interesting, especially during the interludes

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that do not advance the plot. Churchill has placed the action in an employment agency to showcase women up against enormous odds: they are competing with men in the workplace. At the Top Girls agency we meet, among others, Louise, an older woman who has received no recognition for helping build up her company. She wants to quit merely to gain attention, but her advanced age will work against her in the job market. Director Dorothy Neumann should have quickened the pace of these purely symbolic interviews in order to keep the focus on our main character, Marlene, whose interactions with her sister and niece/daughter are far more enlightening.

Nevertheless, Neumann should be praised for her handling of such a challenging script. The dinner party is particularly problematic because it involves so little movement, but she has guided her performers to constantly, subtly shift positions. And what skilled performers she has found! Each remains in character, no matter whom she is portraying at the moment, and each executes a flawless British accent. It is difficult to choose a favorite from Act One, but Kimball is especially delightful in Act Two as Win, the flaky, schizophrenic mistress at Top Girls.

Even as the final scenes plod toward a finish, one has to marvel at Churchill's cleverness. The very title has multiple levels. More than the name of Marlene's agency, it also is condescending to the true feminist, for most of the "girls" in this play are grown women. In addition, the audience is left to wonder what "top" even means. Have these women—who have been beaten into silence and stoned to death, who have lost children they bore and jobs they earned to ungrateful men—truly made it to the top, and if so, was it worth the heavy prices they paid?

This unsettling notion is particularly provocative because Churchill, who wrote *Top Girls* in 1982, does not reveal a time frame (late '70s) until near the end. The theme, after all, is timeless, but it certainly rings clear in 21st-century Washington, D.C., where women in politics is an especially hot topic amid Supreme Court nominations and speculations about a female presidential candidate in 2008.

One also must marvel at the fine quality of this production, and not just because it seizes upon the ageless nature of *Top Girls*. Each actress is impeccably dressed, whether as a pope or a courtesan, thanks to costume designer Lynnie Raybuck, while George Lucas's set is simple yet highly detailed. To these contributors, to the performers and to Neumann, I echo Marlene's toast: To your extraordinary achievements.