Top Girls

Production Concept Package

Prepared for the Blackfriars of Agnes Scott College
and Department of Theatre and Dance
production of Top Girls by Caryl Churchill

Directed by
David S. Thompson

Scenic, Lighting, and Costume Design by
Dudley Sanders

Performance dates
February 19-21 & 26-28, 1999

Prepared by
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DIRECTORIAL CONCEPT AND PRODUCTION IMAGERY

With the variety of characters, setting and situations it presents, Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* would seem to have many themes and potential avenues of interpretation. The breadth of interpretive avenues, in turn, suggests the possibility of at least some level of appeal to a wide range of individual tastes. Yet a survey of production reviews and other critical reaction reveals a nearly exact split between those who love the play and those who loathe it. Similar divisions exist between those who consider the play dated and those who deem it timeless. In fact, Churchill herself originally thought that *Top Girls* would have a relatively short theatrical shelf life, that few companies would wish to produce it past the middle of the 1980s.

However, recent events clearly indicate that Churchill, along with several producers, directors and critics, have changed their minds about assigning the play the status of an early 80s relic. During the 1990s several key revivals have occurred in both the United States and Britain. Critical accounts, directorial positions, artistic statements, and interviews (including conversations with the playwright) all posit the notion that *Top Girls* remains as timely and vital now as was when in premiered. The consensus holds that many of the problems of the previous era—materialism over “maternalism,” business over benevolence, finance over friendship—plague us today.

For our production to succeed, we must strive to clarify the connections inherent with the script. The ideas that emerged as most important in earlier productions, those related to the sacrifice of humanity to commerce and women falling into the same traps as their male counterparts, must surface here as well. By showing history as pitfalls arranged into a cycle that women recognize and break, or ignore and doom themselves to a fate worthy of Sisyphus, we can shift the perception of *Top Girls* from a museum piece to a vital contemporary exploration.

Among the key themes which aid in universalizing *Top Girls* (and the list may possibly grow during the rehearsal process) I propose the following:

**Connections.** In a very real way, all of the characters are connected to one another. The connection grows stronger if we view Marlene as the central figure, or possibly a catalyst or touchstone. We should use concepts of reality as flexibly as possible in this regard. The fact that Marlene is not present in each scene, that the banquet violates time and space, that the final scene shifts the play’s chronology does not alter the view that the action progresses as a consequence of Marlene’s thoughts and experiences. Therefore, the banquet, for example, is not a fantasy but a vivid literalization of ideas and connections to given circumstances presented elsewhere in the play.

**Parallels.** As if to confirm the platitude that those who do not learn history are condemned to repeat it, the banquet presents in Act I, scene 1 presents a collection of women with ideas and experiences that could easily serve as guidelines or cautionary tales for Marlene and the women of her own time. Yet none of the characters later in the play, including (especially?) Marlene, learns from the past. The casting decisions will emphasize the connections between fictional/historical figures and contemporary counterparts. A possibility of expanding the parallels between Marlene and her co-workers also presents itself.

**Defining Space.** Each scene should have the sense of the women trying to find their own space to occupy. This may mean that they will not be able to have the range of motion they wish or that they are simply uncomfortable in their surroundings.

**Collapsing Worlds.** As with the image of space above, each scene should suggest a reduction of ideas, concepts and options. Successive scene should reduce the overall range of possibilities; mental, physical, social and psychological should all appear to diminish.

The sections which follow offer some concrete examples of the theoretical concepts.
VISUAL DESIGN (SET, PROPS, LIGHTS)

Whenever possible, a simple concept should guide the visuals in this production. The more personal or meaningful the moment, the smaller the space and sense of detail. The contrast we establish will hinge on emotions, which, while real and genuine, will appear as curiosities and remain distanced from the here and now. Thus, the moments of greatest impact and intensity in Marlene’s life (Act II, scene 2 in the kitchen) should take place in a narrowly defined light with as few properties as possible. By contrast the banquet (Act I, scene 1) ultimately has little impact on Marlene’s life, but should be filled with many objects and rich textures in the visuals.

SET. If possible, I would like the set to make the same kind of connections as the acting. Using a symbolically framed space with movable tables and chairs which might prove flexible enough to suggest each locale is the ideal. At no time should we attempt to create each of the locations naturally. If a flexible arrangement is impossible or impractical, suggestion should remain the watchword. The play is about connection of theme across situations, not about issues which arise from a given environment. Within this suggested space, different areas should designate each location to correspond with the notion of defining space in the production concept. Also, the furniture should be light enough for the cast to move pieces quickly and easily; having the cast define the space will help to reinforce the overall concept.

LIGHTING. The lighting should reinforce the concept of collapsing emotional worlds while providing the primary tool in the definition of space. Within this charge, the performance should open with a bright, broad wash which gradually diminishes in both size and intensity. By the last line the lighting should have narrowed to include an area only slightly larger than the chair Marlene occupies. The feeling should be one of “irising down” from the opening.

PROPS. In all scenes, as few props as possible should be used. The action should clearly define the space, so set dressing should prove unnecessary. The possible exception falls in the area of table settings/linens for the banquet in Act I, scene 1. The first scene should have a great deal of detail and since actors will use most of the objects, we preserve the notion of avoiding set dressing. The last scene should have only those objects mentioned within the dialogue, thus defining the kitchen by actions within it and attitudes toward it, not by overt visual reinforcement. If possible all objects should have an early 1980s (or even late 1970s) appearance to set the time.
SOUND

The production sound and musical concept should follow from the device Churchill uses in Act I, scene 1, the gathering of literary/historic women. Clearly, the playwright intends the audience to derive several layers of meaning from the scene. Most of these arise as a consequence of the intersection of similarities and differences, common versus unique traits.

Despite the wide range of circumstances explored among these figures they retain the common bond, not merely of their gender alone, but of the societal (male) view of their gender. Simultaneously, as Churchill explores themes common to the “expected” or “traditional” view of a woman’s life—relationships with men, the expectation of settling for domesticity, childbirth, loss—we witness a great range of strategies regarding coping, surviving, adapting, changing, and fighting.

The music, therefore, should strive to suggest connections and provide comments on these experiences or themes, while providing an opportunity for the full range of artistic expression. All music in the production should feature women as vocalist, whether solo or in groups and feature personal statements of life, love, family, or relationships. Music which opens or closes scenes should be carefully selected to create mood (including a consideration of tone, style, and lyric content). If at all possible such “scene change” selections should draw from material recorded in the early 1980s (years through 1982). By contrast, pre-show, intermission, and post-show music should serve as a montage to echo the statements of the first scene. The widest possible range of vocal styles should be featured including pop, rock, jazz, classical, blues, soul, swing, country, folk, etc. The songs and artists need not fall into a “greatest hits” category, but they should all possess a recognizable quality in order to emphasize the concept.

Research will probably include a survey of Billboard or other recording industry publications which chart sales and trends. Do not forget to take a look at artists from the early 1980s to today for inclusion in the montages; their presence reinforces the historical connection. Also make certain to blend artists of different levels of popular acceptance as we should include both mainstream and fringe, staid and avant garde artists.
COSTUMES

Arguably the costumes will do the most to establish the time and place of play as England in the early 1980s. Particularly in the office scenes, the styles must suggest the dress-for-success corporate culture, or the failure to properly emulate it. The job applicants, Joyce, Angie and Kit will not quite measure up to Win and Nell, and certainly not to Marlene.

As with the set and props, the historical costumes need only serve as suggestions of time and place. While in one sense this contradicts the concept that the banquet has the greatest detail, it reinforces the notion that materialism (the modern scenes) rules the day. Such power appears in the clothing as well. This does not mean that we should ignore the overall silhouette of the historical garb. Indeed the shape will sell the idea.

The only rapid change required for our purposes occurs at the end of Act I, scene 1. For the interview scene which follows, the Waitress must change into Jeanine in a matter of seconds. Obviously a full change is not possible nor practical. We should investigate the possibility of adding or subtracting key accessories such as a jacket, tie, scarf, apron, etc.

Please see attached pages for some examples of historical costume.
CAST/ACTING

One of the most fascinating aspects of the script lies in the opportunity to explore character parallels through casting and acting choices explored as a part of the total production concept. The following list outlines, very briefly, the connections I hope to highlight in the production. This list should not be taken as absolute, fixed, or exhaustive. Developments will take place as part of the rehearsal process.

Additionally, dialect work will take place during rehearsals. The decision to use stage dialects serves two purposes. First, it reinforces the British rhythms and vocabulary selections within the script, concept that would certainly sound false with an American or even Transatlantic pattern. Second, the vocal distinctions drawn between characters for actors cast in multiple roles will reinforce the emotional parallels and help draw attention away from more obvious vocal and physical similarities.

SINGLE CASTING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marlene</td>
<td>central figure who cannot, will not, or does not realize that all of her experiences are intertwined and that all of her decisions have led to neither happiness nor fulfillment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win &amp; Nell</td>
<td>although played by two different women, each represents aspects of Marlene’s office persona which she left behind—overly concerned with relationship above career, jumping to new jobs or concentrating on office frustrations rather than focusing on advancement.</td>
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MULTIPLE CASTING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Bird/Joyce</td>
<td>demonstrates the concerns and frustrations of family, particularly the difficult bond of sisters; even while exploring new destinations, family is important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nijo/Mrs. Kidd</td>
<td>fiercely loyal, yet decidedly outspoken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope Joan/Louise</td>
<td>the classic liberal feminist attempting to get ahead by working within the system of male hegemony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dull Gret/Angie</td>
<td>simple and slow; filled with dreams with no understanding of their implications or the means to accomplish them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waitress/Jeanine</td>
<td>desperate to improve; wants to advance without having enough experience to realize the rules of the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griselda/Kit/Shona</td>
<td>sweet, patient, dreaming; too smart/clever for her level of experience; out of place with surrounding, but still at the mercy of society/system</td>
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Isabella Bird

(see final page)

Dull Gret
Pope Joan

Griselda