



Theater Review

## We Review Both Casts of *Top Girls*, at the Antaeus Company (GO!)

By Deborah Klugman

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### The "High Flyers" cast of *Top Girls*

In the famous first scene of *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill's 1982 play about gender and class, a group of celebrated women from history and literature gather at a restaurant for food, drink and convivial conversation. They arrive at the behest of Marlene (Sally Hughes and Rebecca Mozo, alternating in this double-cast production at Antaeus Company), the steely up-and-coming manager of a top-notch London employment agency and an enthusiastic supporter of Thatcherism, with its twin notions of free market and personal responsibility.

The distinguished guest list is comprised of Isabella Bird (Karianne Flaathen), a 19th-century English explorer and naturalist; Pope Joan (Rhonda Aldrich/Elizabeth Swain), a 13th-century mythological cleric; Lady Nijo (Linda Park/Kimiko Gelman), a 13th-century Japanese concubine; Dull Gret (Etta Devine/Abigail Marks); a pillaging peasant depicted by Brueghel; and Patient Griselda (Jean Syquia/Shannon Lee Clair), the long-suffering wife from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Because these ladies love to talk but hate to listen, their narratives frequently overlap. Listening to their long-winded conversation can be likened to attending a crowded party and struggling to make out what the person next to you is saying through the cacophonous din around you.

That first fantastical sequence can be trying for many theatergoers (admittedly myself included), though it furnishes the narrative's historical and ideological framework to the contemporary nuts-and-bolts of the story. That shift begins in the second scene: The imaginary falls away and we are in Marlene's 9-to-5 workplace, with some of the same performers from the dining scene now portraying either condescending employment counselors or hopeful job seekers. Later, the scenario turns darker and more intimate after we meet Angie (Devine/Marks), who appears to be Marlene's troubled niece - in reality her daughter - and Joyce (Flaathen), Marlene's embittered sister, who has raised Angie as her own in a small suburban community. The drama climaxes in a face-off and final parting of the ways of these two equally intense intelligent siblings, who have both paid a price for their choices. For Joyce it's been loss of opportunity; for Marlene it's loss of love and family.

As with all Antaeus Company productions, this one is realized by two different ensembles, here dubbed the High Flyers and the Ballbreakers. I observed both, and in both a certain crispness is missing in the office scenes, a British sensibility even skilled American performers find difficult to achieve.

Still, overall, the work, under Cameron Watson's direction, is uniformly fine; there's not a subpar performance in the lot. Alone among her fellow performers in not sharing a role, Flaathen comes through with a keenly etched portrayal; her Joyce is a sad, resentful woman who may envy her uncaring and egotistical sister but is too principled to want to be her. In the end it is Joyce, not Marlene, who is the playwright's Everywoman.

Both versions of the opening scene went down pretty much the same - rather like an interesting salad with the same vegetables but a different dressing.

And yet, the second of the two performances I attended (the Ballbreakers), with Mozo as Marlene and Marks as Angie, was far more affecting, with Marks imparting an unmistakable air of menace to the disturbed Angie and Mozo layering her chilly, bootstrapping businesswoman with intricate shades of guilt and regret. As Marlene's co-worker Nell, Shannon Lee Clair added to the mix with a brisk and frosty persona.

One puzzling aspect of the production is designer Stephen Gifford's set, with its bulky, blue, mobile set-pieces, which are way too big for the small proscenium and are both detracting and distracting. An intriguing scene between Angie and her gal pal (Alexandra Goodman/Julia Davis) takes place in such shadow (lighting design by Jared Sayeg) that some of the performers' nuances go unappreciated.

*The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. N. Hlywd. Through May 4. (818) 506-1983, [antaeus.org](http://antaeus.org).*

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