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Top Girls/The High Flyers Cast (Antaeus at the Deaf West)



Caryl Churchill's 1982 exploration of contemporary feminism was set in the early 1980s, and features an all-female cast. Flitting with time, she examines the notion of being a "successful" woman – just what does that mean today or, as in her opening scene, which is set around a table-for-six in an upscale London eatery, for women before the onset of feminism.

Marlene (Sally Hughes) has invited, and warmly greets, her five dinner guests –women from different eras and different cultures: Isabella Bird (Karianne Flaathen), a Victorian Brit world traveler; Lady Nijo (Kimiko Gelman), a 13th Century concubine of a Japanese Emperor, and after his death, a Buddhist nun; Dull Gret (Etta Devine), a coarse peasant, the subject of the Dutch artist, Pieter Breughel, in his painting, "Dulle Griet;" Pope Joan (Rhonda Aldrich), the quasi-historic female who became Pope in the 10th Century, only to be found out and stoned to death by the devout; and Patient Griselda (Jeanne Syquia), who was a character in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* ("The Clerk's Tale").

One of Churchill's issues with feminism is the different intellectual approaches that American feminists and British feminists took: to American women, celebrating the individual who could acquire power and wealth and British women, who took the position that collective group ("socialism") acts would support freedom better.

And, of course, this being the era of "Thatcherism," then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is a large part of the conversation. The party at the top of the show is to celebrate Marlene's successful transition to the top job at Top Girl's Employment Agency. She is chic, poised, witty and gracious, in spite of having to act much as male leaders did, in order to get ahead and stay on top. But we learn that Marlene has given up a family life; no husband and sacrificing her daughter by allowing her sister to raise her as her own. So, the eternal question: can women have it all? And if so, how?

Churchill's play doesn't answer, merely posing the build-in problems of successes of the day, which include denying oneself a family unit. Unfair? Oh, yeah, especially when she has to be mean to others in order to shore up her position. There are no bromides advanced here. As Churchill sees it, one makes one's choices and lives by the results.

Not quite a soulless and nihilistic as it sounds, the play is frequently funny and the issues are well-hashed-out. Director Cameron Watson has double-cast it, but I only saw *The High Flyers*. All the actors are adept at the various characterizations, although the fully-American cast hadn't yet mastered the various accents required. Nothing egregiously wrong, but most hadn't found comfortable rhythms for themselves.

But top of the list of technical achievements is Stephen Gifford's fine angular set in neon teals, blues and aquas. It moved in and out most cleanly for the various sets, which Jared A. Sayeg's fine lighting highlighted. Terry A. Lewis' costumes and wigs were imaginative and the music and sound design of Jeff Thomas Gardner and Ellen Mandel were welcome.

This is a peculiar play which has stood the test of 32 years since not enough has changed politically and social for women (although it *is* changing, indeed), it's not quite the historical piece it will be after our first female

president is elected.

If you don't know the play, you owe it to yourself to catch either cast, or the mix-and-match evenings. Powerful piece of theatre, well done here.

Top Girls plays through May 4th, 2014, at the Antaeus-at-the-Deaf-West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA, 91601. Tickets: 818.506.1983 or at www.Antaeus.org. Parking is weird – for \$7 you can park on the west side of Lankershim, just south of Magnolia. Or try and find street parking within hiking distance of the theatre.

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