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**THROUGH MAY 4, 2014 –
ANTAEUS COMPANY**

**THROUGH APRIL 13, 2014 –
PICO PLAYHOUSE**

Top Girls: Pauline Adamek

The Whipping Man: Paul Birchall



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Credit: Daniel G. Lam

Top Girls

During the 'greed is good' '80s and the tumultuous era of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, London-born playwright Caryl Churchill informed her scathing political satires with an examination of feminist themes — challenging and charting the evolving notions of gender and sexuality in the workplace. Her plays were bold, different, and felt thrillingly immediate. They were of their time, yet they still scorch.

Perhaps one reason Churchill's plays are seldom performed on our shores these days is that it takes a truly gifted actor to tackle the complexities and atypical demands of her biting works. Antaeus Company, specializing in classics, kicks off its 2014 season with a fully "partner-cast" production (two casts, each ready to go at any time, to cover the show in case any performer gets called away for TV work) of Churchill's most famous Obie Award-winning dramedy.

What follows is a review of the "High Flyers" cast.

In *Top Girls*' cast of seven women, all but one of the actors take on multiple roles. In the opening restaurant scene, we meet Marlene (Sally Hughes), a successful businesswoman whose career is on the rise. Garbed in a chic black dress teamed with oversized jewelry and firmly instructing a silent waitress (Alexandra Goodman), Marlene confidently takes charge. She has assembled a handful of notable women from history for a dinner to celebrate her recent promotion at 'Top Girls' employment agency. As the party devolves into a rowdy, boozy feast, the women share stories, and so gradually emerges a depiction of the changing role of women throughout the centuries. In this fashion, Churchill explores what being a successful woman means, and to what extent that perception has evolved.

What's interesting is which characters — archetypes of their respective eras — Churchill

has invited to her table: 13th century Japanese Emperor's concubine Lady Nijo (Kimiko Gelman), who tells a tale of the difficulties she faced being a mistress of the court. Particularly wrenching are the two episodes when her children were confiscated from her, yet Lady Nijo maintains her self-respect despite the subservient role that was her life's destiny.

A similar tale is that of Patient Griselda, a 14th century Italian peasant woman whose marriage to a nobleman was beset by 'tests' of her obedience, including, also, the confiscation of her offspring. (Her folkloric tale was immortalized by Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Charles Perrault.) The other three guests each have their own unique and intrepid sagas, with the experience of Pope Joan (Rhonda Aldrich) being the most astounding. The remainder of the two-act play concentrates on Marlene's story. By the play's emotionally devastating conclusion, we realize how these figures reflect on modern women's choices.

Churchill's dialogue overlaps in the first and final scenes. Unfortunately, this technique hinders and alienates during the initial scene, as we are trying to piece together each woman's story. Nor is there any sense of directorial orchestration of vocal modulation: No actor claims dominance or focus within competing dialogue. Perhaps clarity will emerge as the season progresses. Also confusing is the initial absence of any sense of timeline. The non-naturalistic elements are at odds with the realistic restaurant setting, which includes a procession of actual food and drink. Questions arise: Is this the present day? Are all these women spirits from the past? How does Marlene figure into this gathering? It's hard to decipher, at first, what's going on.

Once the play proceeds with its more naturalistic depiction of Marlene's present-day story, we find our footing. The final scene has Marlene arguing with her hostile sister Joyce (Karianne Flaathen), and here the overlapping dialogue works extremely well to build the tension and capture the passion and gut-punching irony of Marlene's lot.

Under Cameron Watson's direction, the actors all give beautifully nuanced performances, complementing each other extremely well.

Etta Devine's character of Dull Gret is a minor figure in the opening scene, but she convincingly portrays an angry and dim-witted teenager in later scenes. Flaathen shines in three different roles, each finely observed. Also playing three characters, Alexandra Goodman shape-shifts from one role to the next, impressing with her portrayal of Shona, a brash and alluring sales rep.

The costumes, designed by Terri A. Lewis, are superb, especially the fabulous 80's power suits, paisley dresses, flashy jewelry and purple satin and leather, as well as the period costumes seen in the opening scene. Stephen Gifford's highly versatile scenic design is brilliantly conceived for maximum mobility. —*Pauline Adamek*

Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankerhim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; in rep, call for schedule; through May 4.
(818) 506-1983, www.Antaeus.org

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