

LOS ANGELES

Top Girls

The Antaeus Company

Top Girls, by Caryl Churchill, is a play considered a modern classic, but for some unknown reason it doesn't seem to get produced very often. One would think there would be quite a lot of theatre companies looking for a play with plenty of interesting roles for women, but I've been reviewing theatre in L.A. since 1997, and this is the first time I've seen it done. In that regard, the Antaeus Company is doing the community a great favor in reviving the play—it's still smart and moving and funny, and the cast is terrific (the show is double-cast—this review is of the "Ball Breakers" cast). And yet other aspects of the production, such as the bland set and uninspired staging, kept this review from being a rave.



Karianne Flaathen and Rebecca Mozo

The play begins at a dinner party where various women from different times, cultures, and some even from fiction and painting, are discussing the difficulties of their lives. Patient Griselda (Shannon Lee Clair), the subject of one of "The Canterbury Tales," speaks of her husband taking her children from her to prove her love for him, while Lady Nijo (Kimiko Gelman), a 13th-century courtesan to the Emperor of Japan, mourns that her children were all taken from her at birth. Pope Joan (Elizabeth Swain), a woman who spent her life disguised as a man, was so ignorant of her own body that she didn't know she was pregnant until she gave birth on horseback during a public parade and was promptly stoned to death. Marlene (Rebecca Mozo), an early '80s Thatcherite recently promoted to managing director of an employment agency, gave her daughter to her sister Joyce (Karianne Flaathen) to raise as her own so as not to affect Marlene's career. But now teenaged Angie (Abigail Marks) wants to know who her true mother is, and Marlene is wondering about the price she's paid for her lifestyle.

Churchill created an interesting puzzle with the character of Marlene, who on one level represents a successful modern woman but on another is a somewhat reprehensible specimen of the "I've got mine, greed is good" eighties generation—she's got the self-determination her sisters lacked, but at what cost? Mozo provides a sharp performance that delivers on this dichotomy, displaying a charming and commanding exterior yet revealing vulnerability and self-doubt. Flaathen is wearily great as Joyce, the

keeper of Marlene's secret, and their confrontation at the play's conclusion draws blood. Marks is heartbreaking as the troubled Angie, petulant and nakedly needy, a character her own mother dismissively describes as someone "who isn't going to make it."

Gelman is likeable and amusing as Marlene's coworker Win, but she's quietly memorable as Lady Nijo, who infuses the line about one of her dead children—"It was only a girl, but I was sorry to lose it"—with the muted sorrow of a woman whose whole life was about keeping up polite appearances. Swain has fun as Joan, but her scene as middle-aged job seeker Louise effectively conveys the frustration of an experienced older woman trying to get the deserved success her male colleagues have already enjoyed. Clair is good as the endlessly forgiving Griselda, but she's even better as the acerbic Nell, who's always on the lookout for tough women such as herself. Finally, Julia Davis excels as both Angie's young friend Kit and as prevaricating job applicant Shona.

Director Cameron Watson gets strong performances from all of his actors, but his directorial choices in terms of opening the play up either visually or through staging seem unnecessarily limiting. Part of the problem is Stephen Gifford's bland, bulky set of slanted walls and doorways, which adds nothing to the play but manages to take up enough of the stage that it blocks the actors from having much movement. One of the difficulties of the famous first scene is that various characters talk over each other a lot, so perhaps more visualization via lighting or projections might have helped keep each character's story clear and distinct, because I believe as the scene is now directed a lot of that detail is lost in a muddle.

Overall, this is a show worth seeing for the still-relevant writing and superb acting, regardless of an imperfect production.

Top Girls runs at the Antaeus Theater through May 4, 2014. For tickets and information, see www.Antaeus.org.

The Antaeus Company presents *Top Girls*, written by Caryl Churchill. Directed by Cameron Watson. Scenic Design Stephen Gifford; Costume Design Terri A. Lewis; Sound Design & Original Compositions Jeff Thomas Gardner & Ellen Mandel; Lighting Design Jared A. Sayeg; Dialect Coach Nike Doukas.

Cast:

Marlene: Rebecca Mozo

Isabella/Joyce/Mrs. Kidd: Karianne Flaathen

Lady Nijo/Win: Kimiko Gelman

Dull Gret/Angie: Abigail Marks

Pope Joan/Louise: Elizabeth Swain

Patient Griselda/Jeanine/Nell: Shannon Lee Clair

Waitress/Kit/Shona: Julia Davis

Photo: Geoffrey Wade

- Terry Morgan