



Linda Park, Karianne Flaathen, Sally Hughes, Rhonda Aldrich, Etta Devine in *Top Girls* / *Daniel G. Lam*

Trapped girls

Wanting her 1982 play *Top Girls* to provide historical perspective on the challenges women face, Caryl Churchill had her modern-day main character invite five women from history to dinner. The result was an unforgettable opening scene that inspired a landmark play and, 30 years later, has inspired director Cameron Watson and 13 women to mount an historic revival for the Antaeus Theater Company (through May 4).

A play ostensibly promoting awareness of a career woman's struggles is a good fit at Antaeus, where respect for actors' career demands lead to a double-casting policy that gives actors alternate performances off to pursue additional work. Audiences will see one of two teams with a third, mixed cast option, which is reviewed here. Based on these performances, it can be assumed that whatever constellation appears on a given night will be brilliant.

To celebrate her promotion to Managing Director of Top Girls Employment Agency, Marlene (Rebecca Mozo, alternating with Sally Hughes) invites five acquaintances for dinner. Churchill refuses any cumbersome rationale for how Marlene and the restaurant's waitress (Julia Davis, alternating with Alexandra Goodman) can mingle with a Japanese concubine from the 13th Century, a mythic female pope, a 19th Century globetrotter, and characters from art and literature. She also avoids confirming any suspicious we may have that, in fact, Marlene does not have real friends close enough to be invited.

First to arrive is Isabella Bird (Karianne Flaathen at all performances), the independent traveler who became the first woman in the Royal Geographical Society, followed by Lady Nijo (Linda Park, alternating with Kimiko Gelman), the emperor's concubine who became a Buddhist nun and also traveled for years. Next is Pope Joan (Rhonda Aldrich, alternating with Elizabeth Swain), whom legend says posed so convincingly as a man of God that Vatican hierarchy, presumably among the most easily deceived, elevated her to Pontiff. Her true sex was revealed when she suddenly gave birth during a papal procession and was immediately stoned to death.

Dull Gret (Etta Devine, alternating with Abigail Marks) is another figure from legend, famously portrayed in a painting by Breugel. Dressed in the armor of a man, she leads an army of women through the gates of Hell to battle Satan. Last to arrive is Patient Griselda (Jeanne Syquia, alternating with Shannon Lee Clair), whose nobleman husband took each of their two babies to be destroyed before casting her out. Years later, he brings her back as a willing servant to a new wife and the reappearing children she had unnecessarily mourned.

The play moves from the opening scene's accounts of hardship and humiliation through a half-dozen scenes that sketch in Marlene's life. First we meet a slightly dull teenager named Angie (Devine) who is trying to impress her younger friend Kit (Davis) with intentions to kill her drab single mother and escape to London to be with a glamorous, successful aunt. Stephen Gifford's exceptional set design allows us to quickly move from restaurant to this backyard locale and on to the Top Girls Agency, where Marlene and co-workers Win (Park) and Nell (Syquia) are interviewing hard-to-place candidates. One is an older woman (Aldrich) who recently quit a career after men with less experience continued to be promoted instead of her. Others include young applicants with unrealistic expectations of working life (Davis, Syquia).

Angie arrives with hopes Aunt Marlene will take her in, which forces her to confront family responsibilities she chose to ignore. Her conflicted feelings cannot be easily resolved, but we will learn a great deal in the play-ending flashback to her visit with her sister, Joyce (Flaathen), and Angie.

Behind Marlene's unfolding story, themes shift from scene to scene like a rolling backdrop. Religion, with its patriarchal structure dominated by an unseen Father figure, resonates for all the historical women, but is replaced in the contemporary workplace and homes by patriarchal business and family structures also dominated by unseen, absentee father figures. When we arrive at Joyce's, the system that emerges as a backdrop is politics, with, ironically, Margaret Thatcher as the father figure. Marlene admires the Iron Lady for her rejection of caring (feminine) government outreach in favor of every-man-for-himself free-market systems.

Watson has done wonderful work here keeping the rhythms crisp, the resonances rich and clear, and the actors free to give their characters both heartbreak and backbone they deserve. Without a false or obvious note Mozo moves Marlene along a dramatic arc from ebullience to regret. Park's Lady Nijo, is clearly trapped by her circumstances and further tortured by having the insight and intelligence to know her personal sacrifice. Later, as one of Marlene's co-workers, ironically named Win, Park lets us see the extent of *her* sense of personal frustration.

Syquia's Griselda is beautifully and mystifyingly undisturbed by the system that fostered such cruelty. The actress makes it clear the woman is intelligent, which makes her enabling of the depravity even more chilling. Flaathen gives Isabella and Joyce solid grounding in their beliefs while Divine is a heartbreaking Angie and a force of nature in the reflected character of Gret. Aldrich gives Joan the right air of papal supremacy, and Davis shifts from the observant waitress to Angie's innocent friend and a dreamy jobseeker with care and detail.

TOP GIRLS

by CARYL CHURCHILL
directed by CAMERON WATSON

ANTAEUS THEATRE COMPANY

March 6-May 4, 2014
(Opened 3/13 & 14, Rev'd 3/21)

CAST Rhonda Aldrich, Julia Davis, Etta Devine, Karianne Flaathen, Rebecca Mozo, Linda Park, Jeanne Syquia (alternating cast: Shannon Lee Clair, Kimiko Gelman, Alexandra Goodman, Sally Hughes, Abigail Marks, Elizabeth Swain)



Rebecca Mozo / *Geoffrey Wade*

PRODUCTION Stephen Gifford, set; Terri A. Lewis, costumes; Jared A. Sayeg, lights; Jeff Thomas Gardner & Ellen Mandel, music/sound; Nike Doukas, dialects; Heno Fernandez/Kristin Weber, stage management

Gifford's set is a geometric marvel in carving up the space and always bringing the action close to the audience, while Terri A. Lewis creates beautiful period costumes for the dinner scene, flattering outfits for Marlene, and appropriate clothes for everyone else. Both designers tap the '80s palette of teal and maroon, giving the production a sly echo of that decade. Jared A. Sayeg's lights are beautifully integrated as is the music and sound design of Jeff Thomas Gardner and Ellen Mandel, although even a female version of Lennon's "Working Class Hero" for pre-show may be a few rings outside a bulls-eye of Churchill's target. And, Nike Doukas demonstrates once more that she has a real gift for helping actors get native-sounding dialects.

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