Trapped girls

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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 menopause.

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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 bullseye of Churchill's target. And, Nike Doukas demonstrates once more that she has a real gift for helping actors get native-sounding dialects.