

# British Theatre Guide

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## Serious Money

Caryl Churchill  
Birmingham REP  
(2009)

When Caryl Churchill wrote *Serious Money* in 1987, it was during a time of boom which had followed a period of austerity at the start of the decade.

The play analyses the ruthless world of corporate finance which at that time was being taken over by the loathsome, foul-mouthed yuppies who exemplified all that was bad about the era.

More than 20 years later Churchill's work resonates in much the same way as the boom has given way to bust.

It's fascinating to hear lines like "greed is healthy", "the London market suits the speculator" and "if people lose confidence in us there could be a recession" which probably have more relevance now than when they were written.

There's even a scene in which Peruvian businesswoman Jacinta Condor flies to England "where my money is safe".

Despite the timeless references, you're reminded that this is a period piece towards the end when one character pleads "help us to counteract the effect of Tebbit" and the Tories celebrate five more "glorious" years of government.

However, Churchill gives us a complicated plot full of jargon; Jonathan Mumby's production is superbly acted and well staged but it's difficult to see your way through a minefield of arbitrage, greenmail, corporate raiders and white knights.

Twenty characters are played by only eight actors, some of whom have as many as four parts. Differentiating between the characters can be quite challenging.

*Serious Money* follows the story of hot-shot trader Billy Corman who aims to take over a company called Albion Products without the board's knowing. His plans go awry when trader Jake Todd is murdered and the Department of Trade and Industry is called in to investigate dodgy dealing.

Lex Shrapnel plays Corman as a ruthless, despicable wheeler-dealer who's hooked on closing a deal. The unfortunate thing is that Shrapnel doubles up as gilts dealer Grimes who's just as reprehensible; telling them apart can be tough.

Ian Gelder has to work extremely hard to portray American CEO Merrison, upper-class British stockbroker Greville Todd, northerner Duckett who's chairman of Albion, and Cabinet Minister Gleason. Occasionally there needs to be more than putting on a jacket and adopting a different accent to signify a change of character.

The real successes of *Serious Money* are Kirsty Bushell and Sara Stewart.

Bushell is outstanding as Scilla Todd, the dealer who has to fight to be accepted because of her gender and who'll do virtually anything to find out who killed her brother Jake. She's just as good as Ms Biddulph, the white knight who's got all the answers when Albion is facing a takeover.

Stewart has three roles and commendably produces plenty of variety. She transforms effortlessly from American entrepreneur Marylou Baines to English stockbroker Mrs Etherington and PR consultant Dolcie Starr with style and composure - occasionally with very little time between costume changes.

Wil Johnson catches the eye, first as Marylou Baines' camp personal assistant and later as elegant Ghanaian importer Nigel Ajibala.

There are a couple of sparkling scenes: actors pose as members of the aristocracy and show what a vacuous life they have as they prance around on imaginary horses; and there's a great interchange between Jacinta and American banker Zackerman (a spirited performance from Joseph May) when their attempts to arrange a romantic liaison are thwarted because they're both so busy.

On the whole, though, *Serious Money* is just too involved and too stodgy for its stock to rise any further.

*"Serious Money" continues until March 23rd*

**Reviewer:** [Steve Orme](#)