

# British Theatre Guide

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## Escaped Alone

Caryl Churchill

The Royal Court

The Royal Court, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs

25 January–11 February 2017

Caryl Churchill depicts a very disturbing world in *Escaped Alone* which takes its name from a line in the Biblical story of Job. Like the messenger to Job, a character in the play brings terrible news. But that is not the way the play begins.

There could be little that is more disarming than the opening to the show. The character Mrs Jarrett (Linda Bassett) peers through the partially open door in a brown wooden fence to a garden that stretches the width of the stage and rises about six feet obscuring our view of what is inside.

Invited into the garden beyond the door, she sits with three other older women beneath a dirty grey sky, and there is something so real about that sky I did wonder a number of times how it had been achieved.

The women talk about relatives, the making of a table, jobs they once did and for one of them the dentist she needed to visit. There is an ease and familiarity which each other. Often they are able to finish each other's sentences.

However the conversation is interspersed with seven sudden moments of complete darkness followed by the appearance of Mrs Jarrett between two square frames of pulsing red light. On each occasion she makes a short apocalyptic speech.

Each details a surreal and brutal disaster created and made worse by inequality. In the first we are told that senior executives paid for rocks which crush children and result in many people having to live underground. The second describes the terrible impact of floods which began as a campaign to waste water to punish the thirsty. The third is an account of a dangerous chemical leak and the three-month NHS waiting list for gas masks in contrast to their availability "privately in a range of colours".

The fourth details the famine caused by diverting eighty percent of food to TV cookery programmes. As a consequence, people who were "obese sold slices of themselves until hunger drove them to eat their own rashers". A lucky Lottery winner's prize was the entire food supply of Newcastle.

In the fifth, property developers created a deadly wind, and the sixth records a fatal illness that is the product of experiments on monkeys. Finally, there is the devastation of fire made worse by a response that involves fighting fire with fire.

Even the garden conversation becomes more unsettling as each woman speaks of an anxiety in a short monologue that the other three do not hear.

Sally (Deborah Findlay) thinks her fear of cats may be extending to other animals. Lena (Kika Markham) is agoraphobic. Vi (June Watson) "can't love kitchens anymore" after having years before in a kitchen killed her husband for which she spent six years in gaol.

Mrs Jarrett's garden monologue consists of the two words "terrible rage" repeated with increasing anger twenty-five times.

The grim content of the play is lightened by plenty of humour both in the gentle central conversation of the women in the garden and some of the weird descriptions of Mrs J's messages of doom. There is also a moment when the women sing unaccompanied in close harmony the upbeat fun of "Da Doo Ron Ron".

This could be any garden of older women with their particular worries who are enjoying each other's company. But beyond that garden, as the messenger reminds us, there is a world threatened by the very people who run it.

**Reviewer:** [Keith Mckenna](#)