

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Top Girls

Caryl Churchill

Library Theatre, Manchester

(2003)

This classic play of the 1980s will be familiar to most people who have studied drama over the past ten years or so from GCSE level upwards and will no doubt attract a steady stream of school and college parties to its performances. The Library has a recent tradition of good productions of classic plays, particularly those from Britain and the US, and in this season it has sandwiched *Top Girls* between last month's *Translations* by Brian Friel and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* after the Christmas season.

For those who don't know this play, it appears really to be two plays that share a character and theme. Act one is a celebration in a restaurant of Marlene's promotion to managing director of an employment agency, but the guests are famous women from different periods in history. Act two briefly shows us Marlene's sister Joyce's difficult relationship with her moody teenage daughter Angie, who runs away to London and turns up at Aunt Marlene's office expecting to be welcomed with open arms. The final act takes us back a year to a rare visit by Marlene to her sister, where revelations are made about their family history. We also see that the two sisters have irreconcilable opinions on politics, family and society (Marlene is an admirer of Margaret Thatcher and her sister despises her). The play debates various issues to do with women and their place in society, but the disagreements are all between women, not between men and women.

This play makes great demands on its all-female cast, and the actors in Chris Honer's production rise to the challenge admirably. These seven actors had to play sixteen very different characters, and the characterisations were so complete that it was sometimes difficult to work out who was playing what. Leah Muller put in some wonderfully real touches as the moody teenage Angie, but in the first act she was the refined Japanese Lady Nijo. The confident and jolly Pope Joan (Morag Siller) became a nervous interviewee in the office and the bitter wife of the man Marlene (Kate Williamson) beat to the executive job. The other actors, Lindsey Fawcett, Sophie James, Diane Beck and Isabel Pollen, create some equally impressive characters.

Sarah Williamson's design integrates well with the production. The opening act is set around a large dinner table against an abstract backdrop that seems to suggest the Brueghel painting that Dull Gret appeared in. The table is set on a revolve, presumably so that the audience isn't always staring at the same person's back, but it isn't really necessary and adds nothing to the scene. The rest of the play is set against a large box that unfolds and turns different ways to create the office and the outside and inside of Joyce's house which works well, although there is one particularly long scene change. There are some wonderfully subtle atmospheric sound effects from sound designer Paul Gregory that are barely audible but set the scene well. However the use of pop songs from the era between scenes has become a bit of a cliché, now used by every populist TV documentary.

This is an important modern play, and one that debates important issues of feminism and the place of women in society which are still current. Chris Honer has directed a very entertaining production that brings out the issues in the play with great humour and with some wonderful acting that can switch instantly from making its audience laugh to horrifying them to making them think.

*"Top Girls" runs until 15th November*

**Reviewer:** [David Chadderton](#)