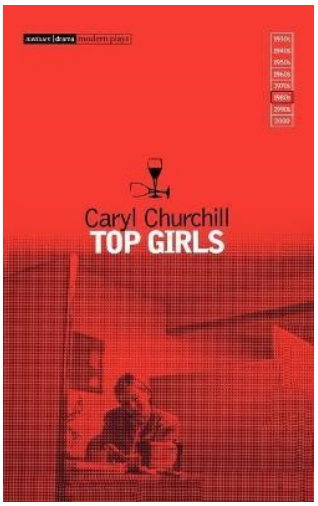
Top Girls

Caryl Churchill



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THE KIND OF QUESTIONS THAT CHURCHILL ASKS THROUGH HER THEATER REFLECT HER FEMINIST AND SOCIALIST VIEWPOINTS, BUT ALLIED TO HER INTERROGATIVE, POLITICAL MODE OF WRITING IS HER EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO DRAMATIC AND THEATRICAL FORM. CHURCHILL'S THEATER IS NOT JUST A QUESTION OF POLITICS, BUT A POLITICS OF STYLE.

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[https://web.archive.org/web/20151229045147/http://www.guthrietheater.org/sites/default/files/topgirls.pdf]

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Caryl Churchill: brief author biography

Caryl Churchill, (born September 3, 1938, London, England), British playwright whose work frequently dealt with feminist issues, the abuses of power, and sexual politics.

When Churchill was 10, she immigrated with her family to Canada. She attended Lady Margaret Hall, a women's college of the University of Oxford, and remained in England after receiving a B.A. in 1960. Her three earliest plays, ***Downstairs*** (produced 1958), ***Having a Wonderful Time*** (produced 1960), and ***Easy Death*** (produced 1962), were performed by Oxford-based theatrical ensembles.

During the 1960s and '70s, while raising a family, Churchill wrote radio dramas and then television plays for British television. ***Owners***, a two-act, 14 -scene play about obsession with power, was her first major theatrical endeavour and was produced in London in 1972. During her tenure as resident dramatist at London's Royal Court Theatre, Churchill wrote ***Objections to Sex and Violence*** (1974), which, though not well-reviewed, led to her successful association with David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark's Joint Stock Company and with Monstrous Regiment, a feminist group. ***Cloud 9*** (1979), a farce about sexual politics, was successful in the United States as well as in Britain, winning an Obie Award in 1982 for playwriting. The next year she won another Obie with ***Top Girls*** (1982), which deals with women's losing their humanity in order to attain power in a male-dominated environment. ***Softcops*** (produced 1984), a surreal play set in 19th-century France about government attempts to depoliticize illegal acts, was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. ***Serious Money*** (1987) is a comedy about excesses in the financial world, and ***Icecream*** (1989) investigates Anglo-American stereotypes. The former received an Obie for best new American play.

The prolific Churchill continued to push boundaries. In 1997 she collaborated with the composer Orlando Gough to create ***Hotel***, a choreographed opera or sung ballet set in a hotel room. Also that year her surrealistic short play This ***Is a Chair*** was produced. She later explored issues of identity in ***A Number*** (2002), about a father and his cloned sons. For the drama, Churchill won her third Obie for playwriting. Also in 2002 she won an Obie for sustained achievement. Her subsequent works included ***Love and Information*** (2012) and ***Escaped Alone*** (2016).

[https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caryl-Churchill]

Caryl Churchill, by the people who know her best

Since the death of JD Salinger, one of my biggest regrets as an interviewer is that Caryl Churchill declines to speak publicly about her work. It's a resolution she has stuck to through the quarter century in which she has established herself as one of theatre's most innovative and provocative dramatists. Tantalisingly, there have now been two new plays within a month that journalists can't ask her about: today, the Royal Court in London premieres ***Ding Dong the Wicked***, a half-hour drama that will run alongside ***Love and Information***, the enthusiastically reviewed full-length play that opened there three weeks ago.

In the light of Churchill's silence, I talked to a number of people who have worked with her instead. Flexibility, it rapidly emerges, is a key quality for her collaborators. The plays about which the writer won't speak tend to emerge out of silence themselves. Nick Hern, who has published Churchill's plays for 40 years, first at Methuen and now at his own company, NHB, says: "The plays just turn up, without warning. I think she's one of those shamanistic writers, in the way Harold Pinter was. A play isn't planned or premeditated; it's scratching an itch. They come to me – originally in the post, now by email – and I sit down to read them, having absolutely no idea what the length or subject matter or form will be."

John Tydeman, the former head of BBC radio drama, has directed half a dozen Churchill radio plays, starting with ***Lovesick*** in 1966; he also staged her play ***Objections to Sex and Violence***, at the Royal Court in 1975. Even as a young writer, he remembers, Churchill was unusual in not seeking payment or contracts in advance. "We never commissioned her. Even with a work that had taken a great deal of historical research, such as one called ***Schreber's Nervous Illness***, the play would just turn up in the post."

This is still the case, says Dominic Cooke, artistic director of the Royal Court. "The plays aren't usually formally commissioned. So, in that sense, they just turn up on my desk. I have no idea what I'm getting." The late addition to this autumn's repertoire of ***Ding Dong the Wicked*** marks the second time the author has turned up at rehearsal with a second new play. The actor Allan Corduner was rehearsing ***Ice-Cream*** at the Royal Court in 1989 when, he says, "Caryl came in and said: 'I've just written another new play. Are you up for it?" Called ***Hot Fudge***, an allusion to the other play, Corduner recalls that this unexpected extra was "rehearsed and staged in record time".

As well as challenging theatre schedules, Churchill's plays have a long record of testing production possibilities. "The exciting thing about Caryl," says Cooke, "is that she always tends to break new ground. The degree of innovation is extraordinary. Every play almost reinvents the form of theatre." And not just theatre: among her radio plays with Tydeman was ***Identical Twins*** (1968), in which the title characters were men who, the writer specified, should be played by one actor, Kenneth Haigh, whose speeches would

overlap. Decades before digital editing made such effects effortless, Tydeman needed to work with broadcasting's best technicians. "Kenneth had to record the second speech while we played the first one back, and it turned out that it was almost impossible to do that (keeping pace with your own voice) for more than 30 or 40 seconds at a time. So we had to put the play together in very small takes."

Churchill's interest in vocal counterpoint has continued, and tested Hern at Methuen. "We were sitting one day and Caryl said: 'I want to have overlapping dialogue.' And I said: 'Oh, my God, how are we going to do that?' And we worked it out, using a forward slash, and even put a little example of how it would work at the front of the script. And now it's an absolutely standard way of laying out a play."

Even before that, the writer had asked for a specific and unusual layout of her scripts (character names set to the left, with a uniform gap before the dialogue began). Hern's experience of her polite but precise insistence is echoed in stories from the rehearsal room. Cooke, who directs ***Ding Dong the Wicked***, says: "She is a very strong presence in rehearsals. And there is a combination of being very open to suggestion – she enjoys the process of collaboration – but also of being very specific about what she wants in some cases."

Tydeman agrees, finding the writer "diffident and quiet, willing to listen to advice but with firmly held views on certain aspects of the text or production". It's an experience shared by Michelene Wandor, a dramatist who worked with Churchill on the multi-author cabaret ***Floorshow*** (1977); she says that, "while friendly, Caryl kept herself very much to herself". Perhaps because of her public invisibility, Churchill is often described as shy, but Corduner, who also appeared in the economic comedy ***Serious Money*** (1987), has a different reading: "She is so confident about her work that she can discuss it without defensiveness. She's completely non-dogmatic. During rehearsal, she is absolutely clear-headed about what does and doesn't work, which is quite rare in writers. She is entirely without ego."

Tydeman hints at a private stability that underlies this quiet certainty. "One of the things that always strikes me about her is that I think she's the only person in my address book who is still living at the same house she was living in in the early 1960s." He has never met Churchill's husband, David Harter, a campaigning solicitor, but she would often refer, during their working years, to her three sons and "writing the plays at the kitchen table".

Churchill prefers to discuss form or effects in rehearsal, rather than meaning. "She talks more in general terms," says Corduner. "She trusts actors and doesn't want to tread on your territory." When he was having trouble finding a character in ***Serious Money***, she gently replied that she couldn't help. But when the actor's solution involved mimicking Churchill's own speech – "She has a slight soft-r sound" – she agreed at once. Tydeman says: "We never talked about feminism, for example. It was just there. Caryl's view was always that the plays would speak for themselves. Which, as you know, is also the attitude that she takes to interviews."

Ah, the interviews. As I can't put the question to Churchill herself, I asked her collaborators if they knew why she refused to talk about her work. "I've never discussed her refusal to do publicity," insists Cooke. "We just accept that that will be the situation with each play." Possibly because, as a publisher, he feels this refusal most keenly, Hern has had the conversation. "Oh, yes. Back at Methuen, I would come out of editorial meetings, having been asked if I could get Caryl to do this or that to promote the books. And I discussed it with her and she said: 'I really don't like talking about my work. It makes me self-conscious when I come to write the next thing.' She said that, if she became analytical about the plays, she was worried that whatever it is that produces them will go away. It was always about creative self-consciousness. It wasn't: 'I want to be alone.'"

Another thing Churchill's people agree on is that critics focus too much on her structural jumps. "I'm most impressed by dialogue, rather than the form," says Wandor, "which has, I think, always had uncertainties about it. The elliptical, quasi-poetic quality of the dialogue is the most interesting element." Cooke concurs: "I don't think she's been given enough credit for the quality of her dialogue – the way she captures a situation or a character in just a few lines."

In the unlikely event that Churchill ever agreed to an interview, one question that might come up would be the fact that – from Tydeman to Cooke, Stephen Daldry and James Macdonald at the Court – she has worked almost exclusively with male directors. "Mmm. Isn't that interesting?" says Tydeman. "I think at the start it was happenstance rather than choice, because the men were rather in the majority. But it is interesting that it continued." Wandor says: "I've never discussed it with her. But I think it is true that to have had major theatrical success, male directors still seem pretty pivotal, and the management/ directing by Max Stafford-Clark [her longterm collaborator at the Royal Court] was crucial to the successes of the earlier work."

Corduner admits the question has occurred to him. "I have been very conscious of that during rehearsals. But I've never discussed it with her. I think, although she's clearly a feminist and stands for many things feminism admires, she doesn't judge people by gender. I've never detected a yearning to have her work directed by women. Again, it's that confidence."

Has her diffidence when it comes to interviews had an effect on her reputation? The final word goes to Tydeman, who says, "I'm talking about working with [Caryl], but I was always struck by how little work was needed. Her plays – like those of Tom Stoppard, with whom I also worked – always arrived fully made. I'd put her up there with Stoppard, although her reputation may be lower than it should be – because she has chosen to stay in the background."

[https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/03/caryl-churchill-collaborators-interview]

An Introduction to *Top Girls*

Caryl Churchill's play **Top Girls** *premiered in 1982 at the Royal Court and instantly became a classic with its sly reflection of the nascent Reagan-Thatcher era of yuppie individualism and its coruscating take on class, sex and inequality.*

The women assemble:* Top Girl*'s dinner party scene

The play starts on a spectacular note, with a fantasy dinner party hosted by Marlene, one character who is a constant throughout the play. Marlene is an executive at the Top Girls recruitment agency, and to celebrate her success she has assembled a group of historical women whom she considers to be her symbolic peers. The setting is a restaurant – a public place, formerly the preserve of male executives, in which Marlene can order stereotypically masculine fare like rare steak, wine and brandy and boss around the waitress, who does not speak. Early on, we see the incisiveness of Churchill's take on sex, machismo and class: Marlene's success and apparent liberation have 'enabled' her to behave towards the anonymous, silent female serving staff exactly as a pompous and dominating man.

At the opening dinner party, the women get to know each other, tell their life stories, preen and bond. Marlene's guests have all achieved a certain iconic status in history or myth and are all, on the surface of it, from radically different times and cultures: the 19th century Scottish world traveller, Isabella Bird; Lady Nijo, a 13th century Japanese courtesan who was forced to become a nun after losing her master's favour and who then travelled all over Japan; and the 9th century Roman Pope, Joan, who disguised herself as a man and attained the highest ecclesiastical rank in the Empire.

There are also two very different fictional characters, archetypes who were both invented by male writers and artists: Griselda, the medieval good wife whose husband Walter subjects her to all kinds of tests including forced marriage, banishment and separation from her children, and who was written about approvingly by Chaucer, Boccaccio and Petrarch; and Dull Gret, a heroic folk figure painted by the Flemish artist Breughel as a woman who leads other peasant women to the mouth of hell to fight demons (symbolically resisting the constant wars and invasions in 16th century Holland) armed with pots and pans from the home.

Yet the obstacles, oppressions and challenges all the women have encountered are remarkably similar despite their differences of language, culture, country and century. So too is their range of response: some of the women, like Pope Joan and Isabella Bird, are determined from the outset to break beyond the limitations and expectations of sex and gender; others like Lady Nijo, from Imperial Japan, and Griselda, from feudal Europe, have internalised their submissiveness to male power. They make excuses for the men who abuse them and believe what they are told: that women need protection and definition by men and are nothing without them. All of the women, except Isabella (whose story is not coincidentally the happiest and most uncomplicated), are mothers whose children have been given up or taken away from them or whose babies have died. All the women suffer because of the same things: structural inequality caused by the lack of education and rewarding employment; male violence; the expectation of conformity to femininity (even modern Marlene says that she doesn't wear trousers in the office); female disempowerment and the absence of women's right to shape their own destiny and that of their children.

Yet each woman has a different personality and interprets her life's events and her own cultural context differently. For Isabella Bird, travel is a chosen escape, a source of inspiration and adventure; for Lady Nijo, it is the result of exile, banishment from the court and emotional desolation. Restless Isabella never felt at home in Scotland, even as a privileged and independent lady doing good works in society, while Lady Nijo felt settled at the Imperial court, enjoying her status and perks even though she was nothing more than men's sexual plaything. Lady Nijo (and Griselda) put their faith in male

father-husband-protectors and patriarchal systems, which ultimately used, humiliated and betrayed them, while Isabella answered to no-one but herself and consequently did better, assisted by her class privileges.

At the same time there are interesting echoes across the class divide: the educated and erudite Pope Joan is self-possessed, ambitious and tough, and so is Gret, an unlettered and mainly monosyllabic peasant woman. Neither of the two resorts to feminine wiles and fake delicacy or identifies with the performative fragility and modesty of Lady Nijo and Griselda. As Joan says, impatient with Lady Nijo's tears, 'I didn't live a woman's life. I don't understand it.' Gret does not have the luxury of dressing, beauty or courtly ennui, nor does she glory in service to others, marital or sexual masochism, fashion and social duty the way the privileged characters of Griselda and Lady Nijo do. And despite not living a woman's life, Joan is still punished – indeed, brutally murdered – by men for having stepped beyond and defied what is expected of her as a woman; the one who attempts to climb the highest, is brought down in the most brutal way.

As the party progresses and becomes more raucous, alcohol unlocks the women's pride, valour, hilarity and relish. Despite Isabella insisting on her gendered conventionality when sober ('I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion…that I was other than feminine') she suddenly declares 'I cannot and will not live the life of a lady' and her most joyful memory is of herself, liberated to wear 'full blue trousers and great brass spurs' abroad at 70 years old. Lady Nijo is obsessed with courtly protocol and fine gradations of class privilege within a suffocating system, yet she schemes with the other courtesans to fight back against male violence within the court and crows, 'We beat him with a stick!' Even timid Griselda admits, 'I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to [test me],' despite having been an apologist for his cruelty throughout.

All the women's potential is compromised by patriarchal society, across five different countries and 11 centuries (9th century Italy to 20th century England). Instead of finding any fulfilment or outlet, they have to strategise simply to survive; and even then, they don't always survive. Gret, Joan and Lady Nijo are all subject to overt male violence; Lady Nijo and Griselda are also caught up in wider systems of emotional control and domination, as well as in Lady Nijo's case sexual exploitation. Historically, the women who adopt patterns of stereotypically male dynamism, male authority, male mannerism and dress and male occupation of space achieve the most. Those who stay clear of personal entanglement (Marlene) or have emotionally undemanding lovers (Marlene, Joan) achieve the most and enjoy themselves the most, and only the 20th century character, Marlene, is openly critical of macho power systems and of specific men.

Misery, entrapment and fury: Joyce and Angie's first scene

Immediately following on from and contrasting with the grand spectacle of the dinner party, Act 2 Scene 1 is set in the garden of Marlene's sister Joyce's house in an anonymous, provincial Northern town with no prospects. Joyce's daughter Angie is with her friend Kit and is alternately dominating her and trying to impress her. Angie is poor, unhappy, frustrated and claustrophobic, nakedly (yet pathetically) trying to be shocking: 'I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch.' The characters' unhappiness expresses itself in suicidal, homicidal and nihilistic imaginings.

The young girls have absorbed the language of men's hatred of women and use it on each other, calling each other 'slag', 'silly c---' and 'stupid fucking cow'; Joyce calls Angie, her own daughter, a 'fucking rotten little c---… you make me sick'. Here, the female characters' world is one of misery, entrapment and fury, not restaurants or inspirational heroes. Angie's aunt (and Marlene's sister) Joyce is a tragic character whose frustration and despair lead her to insult and bully her daughter, yet her rage conceals an intelligence which

has nowhere to go and both Joyce and Angie have innate good qualities which have been soured by lack of opportunity.

Success in a man's world: the Top Girls agency

The central section of ***Top Girls*** shows the agency's employees interviewing prospective clients. These perceptive, almost wince-inducing exact scenes reveal that the women who have gained a position in the 'new' office culture of the 1980s have inherited a form of sexist power that cleaves narrowly to the macho values and shallow, misogynist judgements that went before. Judgements about women's marital status, motherhood, appearance and age have been absorbed by and are replicated by the new generation of women who are succeeding in a man's world by re-enacting men's prejudices. Life is still a daily grind for survival, in which grand ambitions are subjected to petty reasoning, rigid hierarchies and unjust expectations.

In one of the interview scenes we encounter Janine, who is caught between ambition, tradition, romanticism and female duty. She states, 'I wanted to go to work' and, 'I want a change…I do want prospects. I want more money….I'd like to travel.' At the same time she apologises for herself: 'I expect it's silly.' But she is apologising for wanting what many men want: to be married but 'now and then' leave London to travel for work and get away from family life. Just as it was for the historical characters, there is a deep ambivalence about babies and motherhood in the 1980s scenes. There is an unspoken assumption in all the interview scenes that motherhood kills a woman's career and that women must leave work when they have babies.

Another candidate, Louise, is told that her age – only 46 – is 'a handicap' and that she should hope that 'experience does count for something'. She is not encouraged to attempt to earn more than she already does; she should be happy with her station and not overreach herself. Both she and Janine are subtly pressured over their looks and clothing; the capitalist 'modern' world is not a meritocracy after all but a game in which women must look and act the part, strategise as objects in order to win.

The past and the future: Marlene, Joyce and Angie

Marlene's past and future come together when her niece Angie comes to visit her at Top Girls. Angie is everything Marlene has fled; this flight involves a wilful rejection of her heritage, so much so that Marlene doesn't recognise Angie at first. The class difference between aunt and niece is already pronounced: Marlene assumes Angie came up on the train (it was actually the bus, which is cheaper) while her casual offer of a day of lunch, shopping and sightseeing is seen by Angie as the height of indulgence. Angie idolises Marlene, but this appreciation is not reciprocated. Marlene's assessment of Angie is correct but cruel: behind the young girl's back, she says Angie is 'a bit thick' and is 'not going to make it'. For Marlene, Angie is tainted with failure and with her own shameful and deprived origins. Marlene's world is one of Darwinian survival of the fittest, but, as the play makes clear, there is no nobility or justice in this fight.

The play has been moving steadily backwards in time, providing a sort of origins story for Marlene, who gives little of herself away in speech. At the end of the play as we watch it – but in fact about a year or so before the dinner party that opens the play – Marlene goes back to her hometown to visit her sister Joyce and niece Angie, bringing stereotypically feminine gifts of a dress and perfume. While the female clients at Top Girls are anxious about how to use such things as tools to navigate corporate capitalism, to young Angie they are prized in themselves, giving an all-too-rare taste of luxury, beauty and pleasure.

Just as in the first scene of ***Top Girls***, alcohol unlocks the truth of women's lives as Joyce and Marlene have it out and the early themes are reprised: patriarchal control and domination; gendered expectation and stereotypes; class; motherhood and babies; entrapment and flight; male

violence.

Marlene is proud of her success, telling her sister with spiteful faux-modesty, 'I'm not clever, just pushy' – the implication being that Joyce's life is as it is because of a lack of pushiness. Marlene utters the ultimate capitalist, individualist exhortation: 'If you'd wanted to you'd have done it.' Like Isabella Bird, Marlene sees herself as a great adventurer going 'up up up' and 'on on into the sunset'; unlike her sister, 'I need adventures more'.

The last pages of ***Top Girls*** reveal the injustice, cruelty and ruthlessness behind Marlene's mantras. We learn that Joyce's husband was resentful, controlling of her attempts to better herself through evening classes, a bad father and unfaithful. Joyce's life is one of constant work, both physical and emotional. The physical work is underpaid and exhausting – she has four cleaning jobs. The emotional work of visiting their father's grave and visits to their mother once a week is unpaid.

Marlene's drive goes beyond mere career goals and is fuelled by a vehement trauma ('I still have dreams', she says – meaning nightmares) and repulsion, a rejection and horror of domestic life, of being turned into 'the little woman' as her sister and mother were. It is this understandable fear, hatred and anger, not just pushiness, which have propelled her away from her origins and towards an existence in which she chooses life. Life doesn't just happen to her. She is repelled by all weakness, including her own, and calls Joyce's legitimate grievances 'whining'. She loathes where she comes from culturally and the way it makes her feel emotionally. Marlene hates 'beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits' – the worst clichés of northern working class life. 'I hate the working class,' she says, characterising them as lazy and stupid, although Joyce works far harder than she does.

It becomes clear that Marlene's success has come at Joyce's expense. First – a nasty surprise but half-expected – is the revelation that Angie is actually Marlene's daughter, not Joyce's. Additionally, we learn that Joyce had also been pregnant but lost her baby due to the stress of caring for Angie. The myth Marlene has been creating around her own drive and vision is not true. It was Marlene, not Joyce, who got pregnant at 17; Marlene, not Joyce, who has been cowardly in avoiding facing their mother's old age or her daughter's needs.

Concluding scenes: the impact of 'success'?

In a rather nasty way the play actually supports the opinion of its most misogynistic characters: that women who succeed are monstrous, cold, unnatural, grotesquely selfish and pathological. Marlene is disgusted by Joyce's overt suffering and misery and in denial about the domestic mess she left behind. She calls Joyce's speculation about babies mere 'gynaecology' and 'messy talk about blood' as if she has absorbed some Pope Joan-era medieval misogyny regarding the rankness and corruption of the female body.

Top Girls shows that one woman's success does not elevate the fate of all women; money and status in the office do not make the world fairer or change the system, lessen women's emotional, sexual and practical exploitation or resolve the dilemmas they are in. 'Nothing's changed for most people, has it?' says Joyce.

The play has moved from the lavish, the celebratory and the international to the tawdry, the recriminatory, the doggedly local. As ***Top Girls*** ends, the battle lines are drawn – and they are lines of class, not just sex; culture, not just economics. Marlene and Joyce are emotionally not sisters, not friends and not ideological allies. Marlene's famous line, 'I think the eighties are going to be stupendous', which always gets a dark laugh, is less affecting now than the lines that follow. Joyce asks, 'Who for?' and Marlene says blithely, 'For me'. For Joyce and Angie, there will be no Marlene-like rise into a new age of being 'free in a free world.' Quite the opposite: when Angie is older, says Joyce presciently, history will repeat itself and 'her children will say what a wasted life she had.'

[https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-top-girls]

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