

NOTES on Caryl Churchill's  
*TOP GIRLS*



From left to right: Ana Reeder, Jennifer Ikeda, Elizabeth Marvel, Marisa Tomei, Mary Catherine Garrison, Mary Beth Hurt and Martha Plimpton. Photo by Joan Marcus, 2008.

### About Act I

Marlene, a hard-driving career woman, has just been promoted to managing director of Top Girls Employment Agency. To celebrate, she hosts a dinner party where the guests are five women from history and legend. The women share stories of their lives, their achievements, and ultimately their losses and sacrifices. Their conversations are written as a series of sometimes overlapping dialogues.

A Who's Who of the dinner guests:

**Isabella Bird** (1831–1904) was the daughter of a clergyman from Yorkshire, England. After recovering from a tumor that had left her bedridden at age 18, she embarked on a series of travels all over the world. Although fighting illness throughout her life she wrote prolifically about her adventures, religious topics, and social issues.

**Dull Gret** is based on the painting *Dulle Griet* by the Flemish painter, Peter Brueghel. In the painting, Gret, dressed in armor and an apron and wielding a sword, is shown leading a crowd of other women in an assault on Hell — fighting off devils while filling her apron with gold cups.

**Patient Griselda** is based on a character from Boccaccio's "Decameron," Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," and other sources. In these stories, Griselda is a peasant woman who marries a wealthy nobleman and endures a variety of indignities and losses with patient obedience, until she is ultimately rewarded.

**Pope Joan** was a legendary female Pope, who supposedly reigned for less than three years in the 850's. Born in Germany, she disguised herself as a man in order to study religion and fled with her lover, a Benedictine monk, to Athens. After his death, still in the guise of a man, she became a priest, then a cardinal, and was thought to have succeeded Pope Leo IV.

**Lady Nijo** (1258–1306) grew up in the Imperial Court of Japan and became consort to the Emperor, bearing him one child and three other children to other lovers (only one without the Emperor's knowledge). When because of jealousies and intrigues she was expelled from Court, she became a Buddhist nun and walked throughout Japan, writing about her experiences in *Confessions of Lady Nijo*.

## Overview of the Action of *Top Girls*

Set in Margaret Thatcher's England of the 1980s but moving freely in time and space and between fantasy and realism, *Top Girls* focuses on Marlene, a career woman who has just been promoted to managing director of Top Girls Employment Agency. We see her first at a celebratory dinner with an assemblage of extraordinary women from history and legend; we then move to Suffolk, Marlene's hometown, where we meet a teenager, Angie, whose quest for an emotional safe haven becomes central to the play. The action then shifts to the employment agency, where we learn how Marlene's interactions with colleagues and clients are affected by her recent promotion. The play's final act, set again in Suffolk, depicts Marlene's encounter with members of the family she left behind.

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## Caryl Churchill and Her Work

Generally recognized as one of the world's leading dramatists, Caryl Churchill's work reflects a clear social consciousness – she frequently writes about gender and politics, as in *Top Girls*. Influenced by the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and other theatrical innovators, particularly in her later work, her dramaturgy is characterized by nonlinear storytelling and a departure from the conventions of realism.

In *Owners*, *Vinegar Tom*, and *Top Girls* as well as numerous other Churchill works . . . stage conventions about time and character portrayal are manipulated to highlight the social and economic conditions which govern and restrict human possibility. Sometimes a character is written so as to be portrayed by multiple actors (as in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *Cloud Nine*), or the same actor is expected to play several different roles (as in *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*). Churchill has also written parts to be portrayed by performers of a gender different from that of their character, thus leading to the notion of gender identification as a socially constructed role as well as a theatrical one. . . . In Churchill's work there are no easy, reformist solutions. The conditions she depicts, whether in a broad historical panorama, or in the domestic arena, or in the bourgeois work world, cannot be overcome either through individual will or personal relationships. In fact, the very conditions which frame the characters and their relationships limit them before the curtain is ever raised.

Lisa Merrill, "Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill's Women," *Caryl Churchill: A Casebook*, 1989

Churchill deals with some of the most difficult questions of contemporary life – and typically concludes with these questions resolutely unanswered. Her manner of approaching even the most intractable issues, however, tends to be playful, startling, and subversively comic rather than authoritative and confrontational. Churchill's plays are, above all, theatrical. Their theatricality energizes the process of open-ended questioning that empowers audiences to ask further questions and seek satisfactory answers in the world outside the theater. Churchill's continual, imaginative challenges to the conventions of the theater she inherited distinguishes her work as much as does her overt, thematically based questioning of societal conventions. A dual fascination with ideas and theatrical forms is evident throughout her plays.

Amelia Howe Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill*, 1991