

**PROSCENIUM**

# **Top Girls**

By Caryl Churchill

**Top Girls**

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> April to Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018  
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

# Top Girls

By Caryl Churchill

## The Cast

Marlene .....	Shirley Wootten
Waitress .....	Anne Gerrard
Isabella Bird .....	Angela Evans
Lady Nijo .....	Madeleine Clifford-Roper
Dull Gret .....	Susie Thornton
Pope Joan .....	Mary-Anne Anaradoh
Patient Griselda .....	Clare Wooster
Joyce .....	Hannah Lester
Angie .....	Clare Wooster
Kit .....	Madeleine Clifford-Roper
Nell .....	Mary-Anne Anaradoh
Win .....	Hannah Lester
Jeanine .....	Clare Wooster
Mrs Kidd .....	Angie Sutherland
Shona .....	Madeleine Clifford-Roper

Directed by .....	Crystal Anthony
Stage Manager .....	Duncan Sykes
Assisted By .....	Arnold Glickman & Meera Sarin
Assistant Stage Manager .....	Mark Sutherland
Stage Properties .....	Izzie Cartwright & Ben Morris
Costume Supervisors .....	Sheila Harvey & Anne Gerrard
Lighting and Sound Operation .....	Charles Anthony

## **Act I**

Restaurant, Saturday night

## **Act II**

Scene 1 – Joyce's back yard, Sunday afternoon

Scene 2 – "Top Girls" Employment Agency, Monday morning

## **Act III**

Joyce's kitchen, Sunday evening, a year earlier

There will be a short break between Act I and Act II, and a fifteen minute interval between Act II and Act III

## **Caryl Churchill**

Playwright Caryl Churchill was born on 3 September 1938 in London and grew up in the Lake District and in Montreal. She was educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she read English. *Downstairs*, her first play, was written while she was still at university, and was first staged in 1958, winning an award at the Sunday Times National Union of Students Drama Festival. She wrote a number of plays for BBC radio including *The Ants* (1962), *Lovesick* (1967) and *Abortive* (1971). The *Judge's Wife* was televised by the BBC in 1972 and *Owners*, her first professional stage production, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London in the same year.

She was Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court (1974-5) and spent much of the 1970s and 1980s working with the theatre groups 'Joint Stock' and 'Monstrous Regiment'. Her work during this period includes *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Fen* (1983) and *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), written with David Lan. *Three More Sleepless Nights* was first produced at the Soho Poly, London, in 1980.

*Top Girls* (1982) brings together five historical female characters at a dinner party in a London restaurant given by Marlene, the new managing director of 'Top Girls' employment agency. The play was first staged at the Royal Court in 1982, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, and transferred to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in New York later that year. *Serious Money* was first produced at the Royal Court in 1987 and won the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy of the Year and the Laurence Olivier/BBC Award for Best New Play. More recent plays include *Mad Forest* (1990), written after a visit to Romania, and *The Skriker* (1994). Her plays for television include *The After Dinner Joke* (1978) and *Crimes* (1982). *Far Away* premiered at the Royal Court in 2000, directed by Stephen Daldry. She has also published a new translation of *Seneca's Thyestes* (2001), and *A Number* (2002), which addresses the subject of human cloning. Her new version of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (2005), premiered at the National Theatre in 2005. Her plays since then have included *Seven Jewish Children - a play for Gaza* (2009), *Love and Information* (2012), *Ding Dong the Wicked* (2013), *Here We Go* (2015) and *Escaped Alone* (2016).

## The Characters

**Isabella Lucy Bird**, married name Bishop, (15<sup>th</sup> October 1831 - 7<sup>th</sup> October 1904) was a nineteenth-century English explorer, writer, photographer and naturalist. With Fanny Jane Butler she founded the John Bishop Memorial hospital in Srinagar. She was the first woman to be elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

**Lady Nijō** (1258 - after 1307) was a Japanese historical figure. She was a concubine of Emperor Go-Fukakusa from 1271 to 1283, and later became a Buddhist nun. After years of travelling, around 1304–07 she wrote a memoir, *Towazugatari* ("*An Unmasked-For Tale*", commonly translated into English as *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*), the work for which she is known today, and which is also the only substantial source of information on her life.

**Dulle Griet** (anglicized as **Dull Gret**), also known as Mad Meg, is a figure of Flemish folklore who is the subject of a 1563 oil-on-panel by Flemish renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The painting depicts Dulle Griet in an apron and armour, as she leads an army of women to pillage Hell, and is currently held and exhibited at the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp.

**Pope Joan** was, according to popular legend, a woman who reigned as pope for a few years in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Her story first appeared in chronicles in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently spread throughout Europe. The story was widely believed for centuries, but most modern scholars regard it as fictional. Most versions of her story describe her as a talented and learned woman who disguised herself as a man, often at the behest of a lover. In the most common accounts, due to her abilities, she rose through the church hierarchy and was eventually elected pope.

**Patient Griselda** is the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in "*The Clerk's Tale*" of *The Canterbury Tales*.

## On Caryl Churchill

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.

... 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."

... 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." ... Churchill's interest in vocal counterpoint 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."

... 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."...

... 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."

## Caryl Churchill on *Top Girls*

“The ideas for *Top Girls* came from all kinds of things. A lot of it went back a really long way ... There’d been the idea of a play about a lot of dead women having coffee with someone from the present. And an idea about women doing all kinds of jobs. It was also that Thatcher had just become PM; and also I had been to America ... and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well; they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I’d met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. I wanted it to set off, with all those historical women celebrating Marlene’s achievement, to look as if it were going to be a celebration of women achieving things, and then to put the other perspectives on it, to show that just to achieve the same things that men had achieved in a capitalist society wouldn’t be a good object.”

“I remember before I wrote *Top Girls* thinking about women barristers - and how they were in a minority and had to imitate men to succeed - and I was thinking of them as different from me. And then I thought, “Wait a minute, my whole concept of what plays might be is from plays written by men...” And I remember long before that thinking of the “maleness” of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax. But it’s not something I think about very often.”

“For *Top Girls* at the Royal Court I wasn’t thinking of doubling [the parts] at all. My original idea was to write a play for an enormous number of women, and I just wrote a play that had 16 women’s parts in it. When it came to doing it, partly because it was being directed by Max Stafford-Clark who ... is used to working and likes working in that way, partly financial considerations (I mean, no one’s going to want to do a play with 16 actors when they can economise and do it with 7) and partly because it is obviously much more enjoyable for the actors and just for the whole feel of a play for it to be done by a company – it did seem to make a lot of sense to do it that way”. (Churchill, interviewed by Lynne Truss in “A Fair Cop”, *Plays and Players* January 1984).

Quotes taken from “Commentary” in *Top Girls*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1991 (editors Bill Naismith and Nick Worrall)

## **Our Next Production**

# **Not About Heroes**

**By Stephen MacDonald**

To commemorate the centenary of the end of the First World War, Proscenium are proud to present Stephen MacDonald's *Not About Heroes*.

Told by means of letters and poetry, this is the story of the chance meeting and subsequent relationship between two of the finest Great War poets, at Craiglockhart Hospital in 1917: Wilfred Owen, who died in 1918 and Siegfried Sassoon, who survived the war. *Not About Heroes* not only paints a vivid picture of the war, but also explores a transformative friendship between two men.

Directed by Richard Kessel

27<sup>th</sup> June to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2018  
7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham  
Box Office : 01895 250 615

## **About Proscenium**

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Ben Morris

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at [www.proscenium.org.uk](http://www.proscenium.org.uk)