

Top Girls draws no conclusions

Top Girls
Citadel Shochor Theatre
til March 30

review by Virginia Gillese

There are a lot of interesting themes being explored in the arts today: social inequality and women's struggles for identity and success being two of the major issues. *Top Girls*, by Caryl Churchill (author of *Cloud*) explores both of these subjects, unfortunately to no definite conclusion.

The play opens with an amusing and vibrant scene. Marlene is holding a dinner party to celebrate her appointment as managing director of an employment agency. Her female guests form a very interesting group. They include a 19th century Scottish traveller, a Japanese courtesan and later Buddhist nun, a character from a Brueghel painting, Griselda from Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, and Pope Joan of the 9th century. Their dialogue is fast and varied with character clashes creating a nice amount of tension while demanding of Marlene the utmost in diplomatic hosting.

The play moves backward through time. It depicts scenes preceding Marlene's promotion, thereby giving insight into her character, defining her "success", and demonstrating her relationships with other women in her modern world.

The characters link the historic dinner party to the following modern scenes through the actors duplicate roles. Griselda visits the employment agency as a typist looking for secretarial work, the Japanese courtesan is one of Marlene's co-workers. This threads the scenes nicely together and provokes the question, "Have women really progressed or have the circumstances just been altered slightly and the dividing lines been hidden more carefully?"

The "successful" women in this play are appalling. Success stories include abortions, failed love affairs, and bouts of insanity. "I'm never nice", is stated with pride and women become women's worst enemies.

All the relationships between the modern women in this play are antagonistic: mother/-daughter, sister/sister, friend/friend — none



Guess what happens when Griselda, Pope Joan, and a Buddhist nun sit down for supper?

are shown positively.

The music between set changes at this point in the play contains lyrics like, "It's a cat fight out there. Claw your way to the top." So much for success. There is, however, ambiguity in this message. These women appear no more or less happy than their "failed" sisters who've chosen marriage, children, and poverty.

Are all women's lives unhappy? It's an interesting idea to introduce, but since no conclusion seems to be reached it ultimately leaves one frustrated.

The same problem arises with the political and social issue. Thatcher's England meets the Labour party over a bottle and the debate begins... and never really ends. One woman goes to bed and the other stays up to drink the night away. And so? The statement that the poor pay for the gains of the rich is an old one, and here it is merely restated and

left undeveloped. This sort of superficiality in the theatre is like eating twenty pieces of chocolate cheesecake: one longs for a substantial meal.

The surrealistic sets compliment the shallow idea of success illustrated in the play. They are interesting at times, but they do nothing to help solve the problem of ambiguity which arises from the play's superficial and inconclusive dealings with its contents. You've brought up some interesting ideas Churchill, but would you mind developing them and making a point?

interview by Gilbert Bouchard

Larry Lillo, director of the Citadel Theatre's most recent play *Top Girls*, has trouble describing his latest project.

"It's not an easy play to describe," he says.

"It's a play that asks questions, it doesn't give answers."

Lillo does describe *Top Girls* as the story of women and their struggles throughout history. "It's about the historical struggles that have paved the way for modern women. It talks about modern women and power. Basically it should lead the audience to some kind of discussion about the feminist revolution and the socialist revolution."

"It's about current issues with a historical perspective."

Lillo, who says that *Top Girls* is "an extremely literate play", thinks that it will be a different kind of play and not your typical Citadel fare. "I hope that people who don't normally come to the Citadel will come to see this play."

Not that the political nature of *Top Girls* would in any way faze Lillo. He founded and worked with the Tamahnous theatre in B.C., a theatre group devoted to experimental and political works, and asserts that "a lot of my work is politically based - not all - but a lot."

"Artists are generally political people. Art itself is political, particularly in Canada. Public expression and communication, these are political acts. If you feel the need to communicate that strongly it's a political act, you're making your point of view heard above the others."

"Artists are having a difficult time and their very existence is political. To survive in this society is difficult, we're not a society that values art a whole lot. Art should be revered, I don't believe that I, as an artist, should be revered, but art should be."

Lillo believes that artists should be more politicized in Canada. "They have to get more political. They just have to."

"We still have a long way to go. We still have a lot of consciousness raising to do," he said. "Not that I have any objection to doing plays that are pure entertainment, after all people do need to be entertained and it's not an artistic cop-out to entertain. I want *Top Girls* to entertain. I don't always want to put my politics on stage, but when I get an opportunity to, I will."

VOTE

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