

had been allowed to follow the early stages of friction that appears to be building between always-in-command Charles and softly resentful Vin. Instead, Whitmore thrusts the four into the background as the rest of play is completely taken over by a dazed Humphrey Biddulph (Ron Bottitta), who stumbles onto the veranda after smashing his car into a tree at the entrance to the farmhouse.

Once it is haltingly established that obviously paranoid Humphrey is a British scholar, recently employed by the Vatican, and that he has come into possession of a document showing that the biblical account of the resurrection of Christ was a hoax and Humphrey now fears for his life, all semblance of an ensemble play disappears. It is now the Humphrey show, disseminating reams of historical information for most of the play, occasionally swatting away any attempts at refutation by his four-member captive audience. Bottitta's pitifully life-beaten Biddulph commands this work, as certain of his atheism as he is that the powers of religious orthodoxy will never allow him to survive. He appears more sad than self-righteous as he deals with the ignorant prattling of his hosts.

McClendon fails to capitalize on the inherent humor of the situation. It is established that the vacationers are well-educated and have distinct personalities, yet they embody deer-in-the-headlights catatonia for most of the play, further anaesthetized by endless pourings of wine. Even when the second act turns into a pseudo debate on the existence of God—pitting Humphrey's raging atheism against assertions of the four about salvation—it is reduced to personality-less academic bantering.

Under McClendon's guidance, this would have been a perfect situation for the members of the quartet to enliven the proceedings. Yet they are ultimately defeated. The most moving moment comes when Radford's Kate timidly asks, "Doesn't it frighten you: nothingness?"

The show's ending underscores the mystery aspect of this one-sided affair. After all, the whole exercise is based on the premise that Humphrey is who he claims to be and that his life is truly in danger from powerful people who can't afford to have him reveal what he knows. Mercifully, the production's ending provides an answer to that mystery.

March 24, 2014

March 20-April 20. 241 S. Moreno

The current, handsome revival at A Noise Within, directed by Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, captures the fripperies of the household well enough (in large measure thanks to Angela Balogh Calin's divinely over-the-top costumes). And in Freddy Douglas's *Tartuffe* they have an eminently sinister Rasputin, who teeters tantalizingly on the edge between saint and charlatan. But with an Orgon (Geoff Elliott) tippy-toeing around in a huge Groucho mustache and metallic eyeglasses that might've belonged to Rue McClanahan during the *Golden Girls* years, and farcical biz that keeps sending the characters tripping over each other, the guts are excised from the drama, pure and simple.

A Noise Within's *Tartuffe* is far from the first to interpret Orgon as a blithering idiot and to litter the stage with pratfalls. But that fact doesn't make it any easier to witness.

March 24, 2014

Feb. 15-May 24. 3352 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. See ANW website for repertory schedule. \$54-66. (626) 356-3100.

www.ANoiseWithin.org

goo.gl/maps/9PqT5

Top Girls

Antaeus Theatre Company

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder



Kimiko Gelman and Karianne Flaathen
Photo by Geoffrey Wade

Written in 1982 when the concerns of the feminist movement and the role of women in society were often at their most controversial—and, at times, the most overstated and sometimes even abrasive—Caryl Churchill's absurdist theatrical polemic might seem a tad shopworn three decades later. In less-skilled hands than those of director Cameron Watson and the venerable members of Antaeus Theatre Company, today *Top Girls* might have stayed on the bottom. Instead, however, the production is vital, sometimes disturbing, and totally smashing.

Churchill bursts through the issues of women's right by presenting women through the ages dealing with all the standard topics facing those

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A Man of No Importance

Torrance Theatre Company

Reviewed by Dany Margolies



David McGee and Mark Torreso
Photo by Brad LaVerne

“A movie is cold comfort for a man who loves the theater,” says Alfie Byrne, this musical’s hero. That pretty much sets the tone for the character and for this show. Its major themes will be the making of art and admitting who we are. And the art here will be made by actors who, from star to supporting player, could be working in Hollywood but chose to be onstage in Torrance.

With book by Terrence McNally (based on the 1964 film written by Barry Devlin), music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, this show shares a pedigree with the expansive *Ragtime*. *Importance* is more of a chamber piece than its sister is, telling a smaller story with fewer characters. However, it packs no less of a punch.

In it, Alfie (Mark Torreso) is a middle-aged bus conductor in 1960s Dublin. He may have no importance, but he has poetry in his heart and a passion for the writing of Oscar Wilde. What he really wants to do, though, is direct. He puts on Wilde’s plays in the social hall of St. Imelda’s Church, his troupe composed of the bus riders he tends to every day.

Alfie lives with his sister Lily (Amy Glinskas), who regrets having sacrificed

ambitious enough to want equal footing in our still male-dominated society. These include ageism and an equal place in the workplace somewhere below a shattered glass ceiling, the expectations of motherhood versus the desire for career, and what are perceived as the standard opportunities afforded that half of our society, who only over the last 95 years have been able to vote.

The first attention-grabbing farcical scene in Churchill’s classic begins in a posh London restaurant, where Marlene (Sally Hughes), the one consistent character throughout the play and a woman who has abandoned her child for a career in business, has invited several time-traveling historical women to sup and get plastered enough to tell the sorrowful stories of their individual struggles in a man’s world.

Gathered are Pope Joan (Elizabeth Swain) who, disguised as a man, is said to have been pontiff from 854 to 856 AD before her unplanned pregnancy outed her deception; Lady Nijo (Kimiko Gelman), grossly mistreated 13th-century mistress to the emperor of Japan and later a Buddhist nun; 19th-century English explorer and strong-willed naturalist Isabela Bird (Karianne Flaathen); Dull Gret (Abigail Marks), a Brunhilde-like peasant from Flemish folklore, said to have led an army of women to pillage Hell; and the long-enduring Patient Griselda (Shannon Lee Clair) from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, whose husband tests her loyalty in a series of bizarre torments based upon the *Book of Job*.

Although Hughes plays Marlene throughout, each other actor plays several characters, including the employees and clients of Top Girls, an old-style 1980s employment agency managed by Marlene. These include Swain as Louise, an older applicant who wants a change after many years of being ignored for her loyalty on one job; Flaathen as Mrs. Kidd, the pleading wife of a man overlooked for promotion; and Alexandra Goodman as Shona, a job seeker whose impressive résumé proves to be a fraud. Yet it is the intertwining story of Marlene’s dimwitted abandoned daughter Angie (Marks) and her badly defeated estranged sister Joyce (Flaathen), who raised the troubled child as her own, that tugs the hardest at our heartstrings.

This Magnificent Seven of exquisitely determined actors (all double-cast with what surely in Antaeus tradition are seven magnificent others) makes Churchill’s old warhorse come to life without a glitch. Flaathen is particularly memorable as Joyce, who, fulfilling what is surely one bravely risky directorial decision, is at one point left alone onstage, sitting quietly at a table, silently contemplating how her life sucks for a far longer time than anyone else would deem comfortable. Still, the truly indelible performance is by Marks as the sweetly lost and desperately needy Angie, falling somewhere between Chaplin’s Tramp and Bette Davis as Baby Jane, bringing to haunting fruition a character you want to climb onstage and comfort.

Still, the most apparent contributor to the success of this production and the guy who clearly encouraged this exceptional ensemble cast to soar is Watson, whose sturdy yet diaphanous,

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Talhotblond

Ruskin Group Theatre

Reviewed by Julio Martinez



Julia Arian, Kathleen O’Grady,
and Mark Rimer

Photo by Ed Krieger

Playwright Kathrine Bates bases this world premiere on the true story of middle-aged factory worker Thomas Montgomery’s deranged, murderous Internet chatroom obsession with a supposed teenage girl—as chronicled in Barbara Schroeder’s 2009 film documentary, *talhotblond*. Since all the tawdry, cold-blooded facts of this case have been well-chronicled, it is expected that Bates would imbue her play with insights that go beyond the mere events leading up to the 2006 murder of Montgomery’s 22-year-old co-worker and Internet rival for this provocative teen’s online affections. As realized by helmer Beverly Olevin and a struggling ensemble, Bates’s straight-ahead dramatic throughline offers no intriguing, revelatory twists or turns; it simply gets there.

The 90-minute intermissionless piece establishes that 47-year-old Thomas (Mark Rimer) and factory office-mate/part-time college student Alan (John-Paul Lavoisier, alternating with Lane Compton) enjoy an amiable workplace relationship, sharing a mutual attraction to online gaming and casual Internet chatroom distractions to relieve the boredom of the job. Interjecting himself into mix is sarcastic young office clerk Pete (Oscar Cain Rodriguez). When online hottie Jennie (Erin Elizabeth Patrick), AKA talhotblond, insinuates her presence onto his screen and eventually into his psyche, emotionally fragile Thomas’s civil façade begins to crumble.

Rimer works hard at bringing to life