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Top Girls: Theater Review

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Geoffrey Wade

The Bottom Line

A once-daring play has matured over 30 years into a genuine classic, as pertinent and piercing as ever.

Venue

The Antaeus Company, North Hollywood (runs through May 4)

Cast

Rebecca Mozo, Karianne Flaathen, Kimiko Gelman, Abigail Marks, Elizabeth Swain, Shannon Lee Clair, Julia Davis

Playwright

Caryl Churchill

Director

Cameron Watson

Caryl Churchill's seminal play about breaking the glass ceiling in Thatcher-era Britain is staged in North Hollywood.

The 1982 *Top Girls* starts with a loopily sustained tour de force: a dinner party to celebrate the elevation of Marlene (**Rebecca Mozo**) to a top management post at her London job placement firm at which the guests are all legendary prototypical women of centuries past. From the mythical 9th-century Pope Joan (**Elizabeth Swain**) to Lady Nijo (**Kimiko Gelman**), the 13th century concubine to the Japanese Emperor (and later itinerant Buddhist nun), to Griselda (**Shannon Lee Clair**), the prototypical obedient wife from Boccaccio, Petrarch, Chaucer and numerous operas, to Dull Gret (aka Mad Meg) (**Abigail Marks**), a folkloric Flemish peasant immortalized in the painting by Bruegel the Elder in 1562, and finally celebrity Victorian naturalist and explorer Isabella Bird (**Karianne Flaathen**), they comprise one helluva guest list. The past gathered, as it were, to salute the glorious future of smashed glass ceilings.

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New York Theater Industry Saddened by Loss of James

Each sublimely self-absorbed and ravenous, they raucously compete with one another to dominate the discussion with the accounts of their own remarkable experiences, while the confidently composed Marlene presides, keeping the Fascati flowing. They may speak of sisterly issues but behave like incorrigible alpha males. It seems in some sense to parody the then newly-celebrated Judy Chicago artwork, propounding a panoply of themes from still nascent women's studies departments with righteously sympathetic irony and no little self-satire.

Yet this flamboyantly confident, antic masterstroke turns out to be but a brilliant prelude to an incredibly insightful exploration of the state of women on the cusp of breaking down some barriers in the business world while remaining woefully marginalized and condescended to from every direction in society. It's a snapshot of the ideological crisis circa 1982, the start of the Thatcher era, and as **Caryl Churchill** narrows her

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compass and sharpens her focus on Marlene, her coworkers, clients and estranged sister and niece (no men appear), the writer adroitly advances a multitude of arguments and examples of sexism and its relation to class struggle without the least rhetorical didacticism. The pain residing in these rooms at the top and those at the bottom are not confined to this now-distant past, but relevant and powerful in the theatrical and political now.

This was an extraordinary accomplishment when the play was much more so to retain its less significance that

bespeaks a work of art that now surpasses its so specific setting and situation? Nothing about its messages or complex construction feels dated in the least, no matter how preoccupied the play may be about the exact details of its own moment.

What once might have been perceived as brazenly feminist now seems far more the product of a compulsively inquisitive consciousness than any doctrinal deconstruction. Churchill operates from a deep well of empathy but is even so sparing in her compassion: in short strokes, she suggests a universe of diverse women, all frustrated by heedless yet aggressive sexism at every turn. Still, she can be almost pitiless in her depiction of women's human failings and self-imposed limitations, perpetrators with will as much as victims, a comprehensive vision that embodies the most respectful manifestation of a truly committed egalitarian sensibility.

Now 75, Churchill has ranged over such a wide variety of subjects and styles for so long that the magnitude of her achievements at the pinnacle of contemporary British theater has been too readily unperceived. In the last few years, Southern California has seen a first-rate production of her Romanian saga *Mad Forest* and two superb renditions of her more recent *A Number*. Too many remain unknown here beyond *Cloud Nine*, *Fen* and *Serious Money*: there is a lot of exciting work to be tackled and revealed.

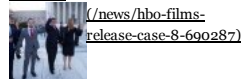
The Antaeus company double casts all its shows. Although the one I caught boasted an unsurpassable ensemble, the laser-sharp coherence of the production under the most-precise direction of **Cameron Watson** and the consistent depth of the Antaeus players reassures that any combination of the casting would produce equally gratifying results. Mozo, who on the evidence of my experience must be the hardest working actor in Los Angeles theater, shows exceptional range within an iron lady poise whose assertiveness can simultaneously be felt both as self-assured and insecure doubt. But Churchill's roles are so deftly imagined and the double casting within the play so intricately interwoven that everyone not only has the opportunity to shine but also to bring deeply individual interpretations to the parts without jeopardizing the balance and grace of the piece.

This relatively modest mounting in a tiny house scants no strand of profundity despite the challenging ambitions of tone and intention, representing the virtues of local small theater at its very finest. I had not seen the show since the first U.K. company brought it to the Public Theatre around New Year's 1983 with an ensemble that included **Lindsay Duncan** and **Lesley Manville**. It was transcendent then, and perhaps this go-around, informed by the historical experience of three more decades of progress both rapid and glacial, may be even more so now.

Venue: *The Antaeus Company, North Hollywood (runs through May 4)*

Cast Reviewed ("The Ballbreakers"): *Rebecca Mozo, Karianne Flaathen, Kimiko Gelman, Abigail Marks, Elizabeth Swain,*

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Shannon Lee Clair, Julia Davis

Parallel Casting ("The High Flyers"): Sally Hughes, Linda Park, Etta Devine, Rhonda Aldrich, Jeanne Syquia, Alexandra Goodman

Director: Cameron Watson

Set designer: Stephen Gifford

Costume designer: Terri A. Lewis

Lighting designer: Jared A. Sayeg

Music & sound designers: Jeff Thomas Gardner & Ellen Mandel

Dialect Coach: Nike Doukas

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