

**SYDNEY
THEATRE
CO**
EDUCATION



ON CUE

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Compiled by Lisa Mumford.

The activities and resources contained in this document are designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this production. Lisa Mumford is the Education Projects Officers for the Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Lisa on lmumford@sydneytheatre.com.au

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ABOUT *ON CUE* AND STC

ABOUT ON CUE

STC Ed has a suite of resources located on our website to enrich and strengthen teaching and learning surrounding the plays in the STC season.

Each school show will be accompanied by an *On Cue* e-publication which will feature essential information for teachers and students, such as curriculum links, information about the playwright, synopsis, character analysis, thematic analysis and suggested learning experiences.

For more in-depth digital resources surrounding productions, please visit the STC Ed page on our website.

Such resources include:

- Director documentaries
- Design sketchbooks

ABOUT SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY

In 1980, STC's first Artistic Director Richard Wherrett defined STC's mission as to provide "first class theatrical entertainment for the people of Sydney – theatre that is grand, vulgar, intelligent, challenging and fun."

Almost 40 years later, that ethos still rings true.

STC offers a diverse program of distinctive theatre of vision and scale at its harbourside home venue, The Wharf; Roslyn Packer Theatre at Walsh Bay; and Sydney Opera House, as its resident theatre company.

STC has a proud heritage as a creative hub and incubator for Australian theatre and theatre makers, developing and producing eclectic Australian works, interpretations of classic repertoire and great international writing. STC strives to create theatre experiences that reflect Sydney's distinctive personality and engage audiences.

Strongly committed to engagement in the community, STC's Education and Communities programs aim to inspire theatre appreciation and participation not only in theatres but also in schools, community halls; wherever people get together. STC offers an innovative School Drama™ program; partners with groups in metropolitan Sydney, regional centres and rural areas; and reaches beyond NSW with touring productions throughout Australia. Through these partnerships and initiatives, STC plays a part in ensuring a creative, forward-thinking and sociable future by engaging with young people, students and teachers.

The theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists have been launched and fostered at STC, including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne, Benedict Andrews and Cate Blanchett.

STC often collaborates with international artists and companies and, in recent years, the company's international profile has grown significantly with productions touring extensively to great acclaim.

STC is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, by its arts funding and advisory body, and by the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW.

sydneytheatre.com.au

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS



SUITABLE FOR

Students in Years 9 to 12

SUBJECTS

Drama and English Stages 5 and 6

2015–2018 HSC Drama Topic 8:
Significant Plays of the 20th Century

2019–2021 HSC Drama Topic 3: The Voice
of Women in Theatre

SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

TOP GIRLS

BY CARYL CHURCHILL

PATIENT GRISELDA/NELL/JEANINE
PAULA ARUNDELL

ISABELLA BIRD/JOYCE/MRS KIDD
KATE BOX

LADY NIJO/WIN
MICHELLE LIM DAVIDSON

WAITRESS/KIT/SHONA
CLAIRE LOVERING

POPE JOAN/LOUISE
HEATHER MITCHELL

MARLENE
HELEN THOMSON

DULL GRET/ANGIE
CONTESSA TREFFONE

DIRECTOR
IMARA SAVAGE

SET DESIGNER
DAVID FLEISCHER

COSTUME DESIGNER
RENÉE MULDER

LIGHTING DESIGNER
DAMIEN COOPER

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER
MAX LYANDVERT

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
MADELEINE HUMPHREYS

VOICE & TEXT COACH
CHARMIAN GRADWELL

PRODUCTION MANAGER
KATE CHAPMAN

STAGE MANAGER
SARAH SMITH

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
JENNIFER PARSONAGE

WIG, MAKEUP & WARDROBE
SUPERVISOR

LAUREN A. PROIETTI

DRESSER
CAROL CHOR KHIM TEE

HEAD MECHANIST
DAVID TONGS

REHEARSAL PHOTOGRAPHERS
NISHA AGIOSOTIS &
CHRISTINE MESSINESI

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHER
BRETT BOARDMAN

2 HOURS 30 MINUTES, INCLUDING
INTERVAL

THIS PRODUCTION PREMIERED AT
THE DRAMA THEATRE, SYDNEY OPERA
HOUSE, ON 16 FEBRUARY 2018

TOP GIRLS WAS FIRST PERFORMED AT THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE, LONDON ON 28 AUGUST 1982.

PRODUCTION PATRONS

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THE DIRECTOR IN CONVERSATION

IMARA SAVAGE

What excites you about *Top Girls*?

Caryl Churchill is a genius – a poet of ideas and politics. Her work is complicated and layered, so I keep discovering more in the play each day. It's like a grand tapestry that slowly reveals more of itself the more you look at it. That's really exciting to work on.

Also, when I was preparing to direct the play, the more I read it, the richer and more complex it seemed. It's not a play in which you can easily discern what arguments Churchill wants us to side with. Some plays and playwrights are quite transparent and straightforward in the point they want to make, but that's not the case here at all. You'd think given the title and the all-female cast that it'd be a feminist celebration of great women, but none of the characters offer us a model of fulfilment or happiness – they've all lived curtailed lives. And so it can also be read as a text that problematises certain feminist assumptions and asks, 'Would the world really be different if women, like Margaret Thatcher, ruled the world?'

Is the title ironic then?

I think it's totally ironic. The title of the play comes from the name of the employment agency where Marlene works. In a world of male-dominated employment agencies, you presume that the female job aspirants have chosen to go to *Top Girls* expecting the people there to understand them, that their shared gender will bind them together. But what you see is more like an echo of the first act around the dinner table – it's as though they're talking to someone from the ninth century, there's very limited commonality.

You've kept the play set in 1982, the year it was written. Why was that important?

Yes, aside from Churchill stipulating that timeframe, it was also a time when the feminism coming out of the USA was tied into an individualist, capitalist spirit. This was at odds with the more socialist kind of feminism that Britain had known. And the tension between these two strands of feminism was made manifest in the rise and reaction to Margaret Thatcher.

At that time, *Top Girls* was also remarkable for its use of overlapping dialogue and for the scenes not occurring in chronological order. How do those theatrical devices play out today?

The opening dinner scene, in which the dialogue often overlaps, is a lot like a piece of music. Churchill hasn't just written a text, she's written a score, in which the way something is said or the way another character doesn't listen to what is said carries as much meaning as the words themselves.

The other thing that I'd say, and I'm not entirely sure that it's true – I'm speculating – is that Churchill is deliberately writing a non-masculine narrative. What does that mean? It means that it's deliberately fractured. That fractured quality reflects the very same fractured nature of the women's experiences and life stories.

The overarching thread linking the various women in the dinner scene is the way in which their gender stopped them from being able to freely steer their lives. Even when they were steering, they were pioneers unsure of what would come next because no woman had ever gone down their path before. The road for them sometimes loops back on itself or disappears into the dark – the unknown is always just around the corner. So, the play mirrors this sensation.

The play, while moving forwards and then backwards in time, does progressively become more and more real. In a way, it's three plays in one. It starts off as a kind of dream with the dinner scene. It then moves to a more real place in the offices of *Top Girls*, but it still feels very stylised. Then it goes into a real kitchen-sink setting and conversation between Marlene and her sister.

At the same time, each of these steps also brings with it more apparent commonality between the characters. The characters in the dinner have never met before, they come from different eras of history, some are even fictional creations. The characters in the office are all women, living in London in 1982, yet they still have vastly different experiences and seem to speak different languages. Then, finally, we have two sisters, raised in the same house, by the same parents, yet they couldn't be more different. There's a chasm between them. I think that chasm is class.

SYNOPSIS

Top Girls opens at an impossible dinner party- women from different parts of history, literature, and myth meet to celebrate Marlene's promotion to Managing Director of the employment agency where she works. Each of these women have had an experience of adversity relating to their gender.

The following scene places Marlene at the agency, interviewing a young woman in order to help her pursue the career she wants. It is a naturalistic scene.

This is followed by Act 2, in which two girls, Angie and Kit are playing in Angie's backyard. Angie is older than Kit, but is immature for her years. Angie tells Kit she plans to kill her mother and go to London to visit her aunt.

Back at the employment agency, Marlene's female colleagues congratulate her on her promotion before Angie arrives unexpectedly to visit her aunt, Marlene. Marlene is surprised to see Angie who stays in the office for the rest of the day. Mrs Kidd arrives, she is the wife of the man Marlene was promoted above and has come to appeal to Marlene to step aside for her

husband Howard to have the job, as she sees a senior position as more appropriate for a man. Marlene is strong in her refusal.

In Act 3 the action moves back a year in time. Marlene is visiting her sister Joyce and her niece Angie in the country. Angie is excited to have her aunt visiting, but the differences between the sisters show through as they argue. Marlene promotes the political ideology of Margaret Thatcher and Joyce expresses the challenges faced by the working class. The play closes with Angie waking from a bad dream.



Contessa Treffone and Helen Thomson in Sydney Theatre Company's *Top Girls*. © Brett Boardman

CHARACTER ANALYSIS



MARLENE

Marlene is the central character of the play and it is her story around which the action takes place. She is a classic 1980s power-suit wearing career woman, relentless in her pursuit to be the top of her game. Marlene can be seen to be inspired by Margaret Thatcher and the kind of individualistic feminism she came to represent. Marlene is interested in working hard to elevate herself and is not particularly interested in using her power to help other women, even her own daughter and sister.



ALSO AVAILABLE ONLINE IS A COSTUME SKETCHBOOK
BY RENÉE MULDER

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

JOYCE

Joyce is Marlene's sister, and has led a very different life to Marlene. She has stayed in a regional town while Marlene moved to London, and has not pursued a career the way Marlene has. Joyce appears to be less educated and her time is dedicated to raising Angie. She represents the working class that Marlene has spent her life escaping.



Kate Box in Sydney Theatre Company's
Top Girls. © Brett Boardman

CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)

ANGIE

Angie is Marlene's daughter by birth, but was given to Joyce to raise. Angie has learning difficulties and through her conversation with her friend Kit, who is much younger than her, the audience understand that she is somewhat limited socially. Angie represents the women that are left behind when women like Marlene reinforce power structures established by patriarchy.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS (CONT.)



DINNER PARTY GUESTS

Isabella Bird was a Victorian era traveller who adventured extensively in spite of illness. She wrote nine books about her travels and was the first woman ever elected a 'Fellow' of the Royal Geographic Society, London.

Dull Gret is the subject of a painting by Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel (c. 1562). The painting depicts Gret in an apron and armour, leading a crowd of women charging through Hell, fighting the devils.

Pope Joan was a woman who posed as a man to become Pope around the 9th Century, and was only revealed as a woman after giving birth in the street.

Lady Nijo was a concubine to an Emperor, then became a buddhist nun and walked through Japan for twenty years. She is believed to be from the Edo period.

Patient Griselda was a character in the 14th century tales, including Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*. She was repeatedly tested by her husband for her loyalty and obedience.

THEMES AND IDEAS

THATCHERISM

Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England from 1979 to 1990, and *Top Girls* was written in 1982. Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and was a key figure in a particular style of feminism that the play critiques. Thatcher has been quoted as saying “I owe nothing to women’s lib” and is often criticised by feminists for not promoting more than one woman to cabinet during her time as Prime Minister. Thatcher is generally remembered as a woman who attempted to disregard her gender in relation to her position of power. There was an expectation that because Thatcher was a woman, her style of leadership would be caring and sympathetic, however when she was Education Minister, she famously cut the free distribution of milk to school children, an action which earned her the nickname ‘The Milk Snatcher’. She was described by Ronald Reagan as the best man in England.

Marlene can be seen to be inspired to some extent by Margaret Thatcher. She is ruthless in her pursuit of the position at the top of the employment agency and displays little concern for elevating her female colleagues. Marlene is portrayed as masculine because of her success, for example when she is promoted despite a male colleague expecting the promotion, Nell says: “Howard thinks because he’s a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard and that’s that.” (Act 2, scene 3). The metaphor of Marlene ‘having balls’ suggests her masculine attributes are the reason she was successfully promoted. Women were expected to leave the workforce at a certain age to get married and have children, and certainly were not expected to surpass their male colleagues. Women in the workforce were often relegated to low-level jobs while men were high-ranking executives, managers, and bosses.



THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

Churchill wrote *Top Girls* at a time in history when a woman was, for the first time, occupying one of the most powerful positions in the world, and *Top Girls* asks questions about what that means, and if it will lead to important social change. By giving her daughter Angie away to her sister to raise, Marlene is able to pursue her career. To choose a career over a family was at that time seen as unmaternal, and Churchill is portraying Marlene in this way as a parallel to Margaret Thatcher, whose ruthless style of leadership saw her dubbed the Iron Lady.

Marlene espouses the values of Margaret Thatcher, and her first name is phonetically similar, drawing the audience's attention to their similarities. Margaret Thatcher was not a feminist and Marlene is not a feminist, in spite of the fact that they are both successful and powerful women. Caryl Churchill is asking whether women with power can be any better or more progressive than men with power, if they are operating within the same oppressive power structures.

Marlene embodies a question central and unique to women's lives; 'can you have both a family and a successful career'? This question was prevalent when the play was written and continues to be an issue for women. Patriarchy dictates that while men progress their careers and provide for their families, women stay at home in the domestic role of caregiver, often stymieing their own career opportunities in the process. In Act two, scene three Louise is being interviewed at the agency and she explains: "I've seen young men who I trained go on, in my own company or elsewhere, to higher things." The 1980s were a time when this model was starting to be challenged and women were entering and progressing in fields traditionally dominated by men.

When it is revealed that Marlene has given up her daughter in order to pursue her career, the audience is left to decide if their opinion of Marlene has changed, based on the expectations they hold of how women should behave. The question raised when the play was written still remains: can women have both?

EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN

Top Girls presents and interrogates the expectations placed upon women by society. The play explores these expectations throughout history as well as within the context it was written in the 1980s. Presenting this play to an audience in 2018 questions what has changed for women, and what remains the same today.

The historical figures appearing in the opening scene span hundreds of years and come from all around the world. Some are fictitious and some are historical, each with an experience of hardship unique to their femaleness. While presented in a surreal, dreamlike way, this opening scene serves to present some of the main ideas of the play and invites the audience to draw parallels between the challenges and oppression faced by these women and the challenges and oppression women continue to face. Churchill is also pointing towards the diversity of the female experience here. These women have all had very different experiences and come from different class and cultural backgrounds, perhaps pre-empting intersectionality.

THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)



CLASS

Caryl Churchill is interested in class, having been described as a socialist feminist. There is a clear class difference between Marlene and her sister Joyce. Marlene is materially successful and Joyce much less so. This is shown through how they live, their costuming, how they speak and relate to each other. Born into the same family, Marlene has travelled out of her working class upbringing and found her place in an aspirational middle class. She has had elocution lessons so her accent is very different to that of her sister Joyce, who maintains a regional accent. The sisters are drawn in direct contrast by Churchill in order to ask a question about who gains and who is left behind by a feminist movement which focuses on the individual. If women are expected to work hard and find opportunities for their own equality and liberation, what does this mean for women who have had less education and less access to wealth, childcare, or cultural capital?

THEMES AND IDEAS (CONT.)

Angie is an interesting embodiment of this question. Marlene was her birth mother but has given her to her sister Joyce to raise in order to pursue her career. As a result of this, Angie has had, and will continue to have, less access to wealth and the kind of opportunities Marlene is pursuing for herself. These characters, Marlene, Joyce, and Angie, and their situation can be seen as allegorical for the wider experiences of women at that time. Angie has learning difficulties and is socio-economically disadvantaged and instead of being lifted up by Marlene and offered support and a better education, she is abandoned. At the end of Act two, Marlene says of Angie: “She’s a bit thick...She’s not going to make it.” Angie is left behind in the way that capitalist liberal feminism was at that time leaving disadvantaged women behind.

The popular individualist feminism of the time promoted an idea that women were able to move between classes through persistence and hard work but Churchill questions this idea, suggesting that such mobility doesn’t really exist and that if women are to achieve this kind of success it must be through existing social capital or ruthless sacrifices. And, more importantly, is this kind of success really worth the cost?



Contessa Treffone and Claire Lovering in Sydney Theatre Company's *Top Girls*. © Brett Boardman

STYLE

DREAM PLAY/MAGIC REALISM

Top Girls is written in an unconventional, non-linear way. After the opening dinner party scene, the action of the play occurs in such a way that each subsequent scene takes the audience back a year in Marlene's life, to the years preceding her promotion at the agency. This serves to build the backstory of Marlene's progression but the fragmented structure is also a deliberate experiment with form by Churchill. The scenes of the play are presented as snapshots and work together as a kind of collage rather than presenting a linear narrative. This can be seen as a protest against the masculine Aristotelian tradition of a conventional plot-driven structure. It is a fragmented, jarring experience which is reflexive of the female experience.

The opening scene, the dinner party featuring women from history and literature, is a dreamscape and not a real world event. It would not be possible for all of those characters to have ever been together at the same time, and some of them didn't even really exist! This imaginative scene serves to show the audience the challenges and triumphs women have experienced throughout history as a result of their gender. Perhaps this scene plays out in Marlene's mind, as the celebration she imagines for herself. This is open for the audience to interpret.

OVERLAPPING DIALOGUE

Churchill introduced a style of overlapping dialogue which is indicated on the page with a forward slash, which signifies the commencement of the next actor's dialogue, while the first speaking actor continues. This style of dialogue creates a frenetic and fast-paced energy on stage.

THE ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION



SET DESIGN

The set design in the opening scene features a simple dinner table setting, but it is below a smashed up glass ceiling, designated by silver tinsel. The Glass Ceiling is a term that refers to the invisible barrier that keeps women from progressing professionally regardless of their qualifications and experience. The tinsel which looks like shards of glass and mirror sit above the dinner party as a reference to the metaphorical glass ceiling, asking if Marlene has smashed the ceiling through her promotion. The set changes throughout the course of the play, from the dinner party, to the employment agency, to the final naturalistic setting of Joyce's house.

COSTUME DESIGN

The play was written in 1982 and is set firmly in that time, and the costumes reflect this. The opening scene however features women from history and literature, not just from 1982. The costumes are one of the key ways the characters in the opening dinner scene can be placed in their time period. Set against a simple dinner table scene, the costumes in the opening scene offer a visual feast for the audience. See the costume sketchbook for more detail!

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PROGRAM

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