

Alton **F**ringe **T**heatre

TOP

GIRLS

Caryl Churchill

A timeless examination of women's choices and restrictions regarding career and family

**The Wessex Arts Centre,
Alton College**

July 28, 29, 30 7.30 pm

Synopsis

The structure of the play is non-linear, creating a dramatic collage.

ACT ONE

A restaurant, Saturday night: **Marlene** is celebrating her promotion to managing director of the *Top Girls Employment Agency*. She has invited a group of famous women from history, literature and art, all of them reveal something of their lives. The guests include ninth century **Pope Joan**, who legend has it, disguised herself as a man, the nineteenth century explorer **Isabella Bird**, **Dull Gret** (*Mad Meg*) of Flemish folklore and the subject of a sixteenth century painting by Pieter Bruegel, **Lady Nijo** a thirteenth century Japanese courtesan and **Patient Griselda**, the wife from Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*.

ACT TWO

Scene 1 Top Girls Employment Agency: **Marlene** interviews **Jeanine**.

Scene 2 Joyce's backyard: Two girls, **Angie** and **Kit** have built a shelter. Vicious **Angie** teases the younger **Kit**.

INTERVAL - FIFTEEN MINUTES

Scene 3 Top Girl's Employment Agency, Monday morning: **Win** and **Nell** arrive for work, they chat about men and their weekend.

Scene 4 **Win** interviews **Louise**. **Louise** is 46 and feels it's time to move on. The scene moves to another part of the office where **Angie** has come to see **Marlene**.

Scene 5 **Nell** interviews **Shona**, who makes extravagant claims about her abilities and experience.

ACT THREE

One year earlier. Sunday evening: Joyce's kitchen. We learn more about sisters **Joyce** and **Marlene**. A childhood shared, yet as adults their relationship could not be more distant as they row about family, marriage, **Angie**, work and politics.

Approximate running time, including interval, 2 hours 20 mins

Cast

Marlene
Isabella/Joyce
Nijo/Win
Pope Joan/Louise
Gret/Nell
Griselda/Shona
Waitress/Angie
Jeanine/Mrs. Kidd
Kit

Barbara Guilding
Sarah Castle-Smith
Jane Quicke
Jane Samways
Susie Gow
Louise Biddiss
Mx. Lou Moore
Jo Hopkins
K. Parrett

Production Team

Director
Stage Manager
Props/Backstage
Backstage assistants

FOH/Bar
Tickets/Publicity
Poster/Programme
Technician
Photography

Cath Gerlach
Lesley Willis
Sue Hubbard
Chris Chappell
Steve Gerlach
John Hubbard & friends
Steve Gerlach
James Willis
Alex Cheng
Ian Dumelow



The play:

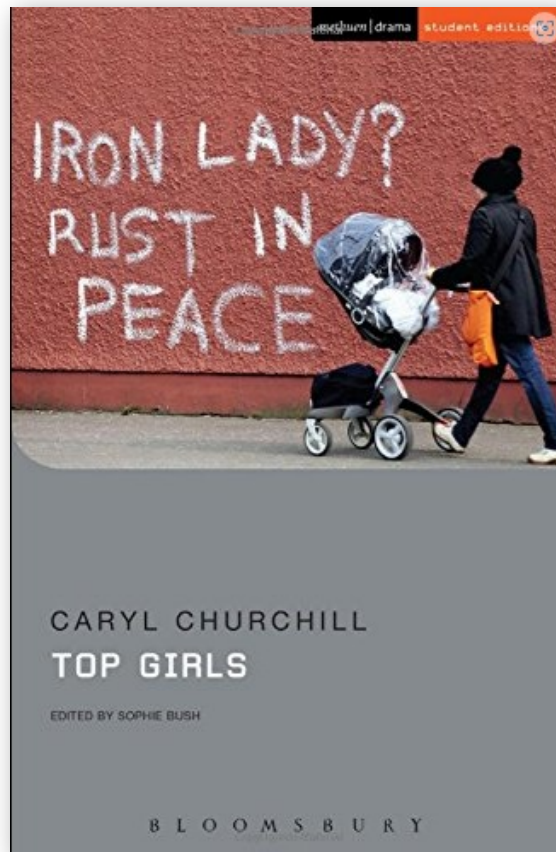
Background and Content

First performed in 1982, *Top Girls* is both a product of and comment on the 80's Britain with Margaret Thatcher as the 'Iron Lady' casting her shadow across the political and social landscape.

Thatcher's brand of monetarism, free market economics, deregulation and privatisation which has become known as *Thatcherism* provides the political and economic background. Thatcher's era defining phrase "There is no such thing as society" summed up the idea of the state having a shrinking role in terms of social and economic safeguards and put more emphasis on individual responsibility and action. This is the context for Churchill's writing, where she examines the experience of women in a changing society. A time where, on the face of it, a woman has got to the top of the political ladder, but where the policies and practice of that woman stand, in Churchill's view, in contradiction to the reality of most women's lived experience.

The play is pre-occupied with the politics of reproduction, child rearing, the rights of women and children, the meaning of success and the dark side of capitalism. A

second wave feminist, Churchill is a socialist, anti-war and anti-colonial. Since the 90's the views espoused by Churchill and others have been crudely and alarmingly debased as some sort of aggressive historical phenomenon. Yet continuing inequality, prejudice, sexism, misogyny, violence and censorship continues and exists around



the world. Churchill's *Top Girls* is still relevant today. That it is a canonical work in the UK, US and Australia is testament to the importance of the way it addresses the current issues of working mothers and motherhood.

Top Girls challenges forms and conventions, the play presents and represents many different generations and classes of women on

stage. There are sixteen roles, usually played by seven actors. On stage, convention of time and chronology are ignored. A distinct Churchillian style is also evident through the device of characters 'talking over' each other. This is a challenge for the actors who conventionally would follow the cue of the previous speaker.

Churchill's characters, especially in Act One, an imaginary dinner scene, follow their stream of consciousness, dipping in and out of the conversation and producing a very naturalistic style. The audience will become engaged in the shocking and moving stories of the women. Churchill then throws us into the 1980's, a society undergoing change and reflecting the appar-

ent emerging opportunities for women and the 'glass ceilings' they will have to break through in the world of the employment agency.

The *Top Girls Agency* is a satirical name. Where women's progression should be encouraged, we see that the patriarchy is alive and kicking, enabled and facilitated by the female employees themselves.

Running throughout the play is the tragedy of Marlene's story; her wish to become a success in business, alongside her personal battle trying to reconcile choices she has made in the past. The devastating impact upon her relationship with her sister, Joyce and niece Angie is laid bare.



Musical Credits

Yazoo.	<i>Only You</i>	1982
Dexys Midnight Runners	<i>Come on Eileen</i>	1982
Queen	<i>I want to break free</i>	1984
UB40	<i>Red, Red wine</i>	1983
Kate Bush	<i>Running up that hill</i>	1985
Eurythmics	<i>Sweet Dreams are made of this</i>	1982
Dolly Parton	<i>9 til 5</i>	1980
Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark	<i>Maid of Orleans</i>	1981
Culture Club	<i>Do you really want to hurt me?</i>	1982
The Jam	<i>A Town called Malice</i>	1982
The Specials	<i>Ghost Town</i>	1981
Madness:	<i>House of Fun</i>	1982
Bananarama:	<i>Cruel Summer</i>	1984
Human League:	<i>Don't you want me?</i>	1981

**A 'new wave' in politics
and the new wave in pop music.**



The Specials



The Human League

The Punk rock era ushered in by the Sex Pistols in 1975 shook the recording and broadcast industries, sticking up two fingers to prevailing political orthodoxies, and offering young people an alternative to the established major rock and pop

acts that had dominated the music landscape since the early 1960s. And whilst the punk era was relatively short-lived (excepting phenomena such as post punk, new punk etc.) its effect on music has been much more long-lasting.



The Clash

As a new decade opened, so a new wave of bands and music come to the fore. Taking their cue from the punk style of 'hand-made' music, the *new wave* wanted independence and the freedom to experiment with new sounds. Music technology was also changing and improving allowing musicians to experiment and produce the 'electronica' which would become a defining sound of the early 80s. Pop music would also find a new showcase in MTV, offering bands (with a big budget) the opportunity to become even more creative with video.

Thatcher came to power issuing a quasi-messianic statement in the words of St Francis of Assisi. But the sense of hope for a new and hope-filled future rapidly disappeared for many as soaring

unemployment, the Falkland's war and growing antagonism with the unions left many people disillusioned. This state was often reflected in the music of the day, sometimes dark and moody, other times critical of the prevailing politics. On the other hand, some musicians looked to give a sense of escape from the reality of everyday life, reflecting the sense that there could be new opportunities ahead. The music industry was still dominated by the big record labels. Many of the *new wave* seized the opportunity to create their own independent labels and have greater creative control and allow their music to be heard.

The music for tonight's show has the flavour of the optimism of the 80s as well as the disquiet felt by many during that time.



Kate Bush



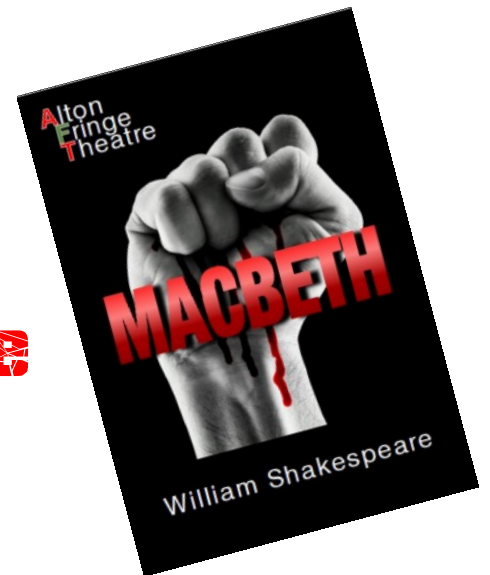
New Order



Eurythmics



Alton Fringe Theatre



Three decades ago, a group of talented amateurs came together during what was then Alton's May Arts Week to perform *Murder in the Cathedral* under the professional direction of Patrick Sandford. Inspired by this experience and led by Tim Guilding, they stayed together to form a new drama group in Alton.

Ever since, they have been challenging themselves and their audiences with a wide variety of dramatic material, including more than 40 plays ranging from Shakespeare to Schiller, from Euripides to Pinter, from Ostrovsky to Lorca, as well as programmes of readings. The characteristically small scale, intimate productions have attracted a devoted following as numerous members of the group have taken turns at directing and performing.

Memorable highlights have included *Moll Flanders, the Musical* in 2009 and Oscar Wilde's *Salome* which received large audiences and an independent four star review at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Recent productions have included *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, in both of which Tim Guilding, who died in August last year took the leading role.

The Fringe is already planning future productions including *The Plague* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

We welcome new members.

www.facebook.com/AltonFringe

