

Caryl churchill's play, 'top girls' essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When first looking at Caryl Churchill's play, 'Top Girls' we can analyse the main Acts and obtain some impression concerning the possible dramatic and thematic purpose of the Acts and sections within these Acts. Within Act one, I feel that Caryl Churchill's main purpose is to bring characters and their stories to us and to encourage her audience to make parallels between these characters. Therefore I feel that in this sense Churchill uses certain dramatic techniques in order to convey this specifically.

I feel that if the purpose of this Act was to show how people from different times or cultures would interact and react with one another that Churchill would have presented the characters in a way which shows all the characters listening and discussing one another's individual narratives. Essentially, to begin with, I agree with Julie Thompson Burk's statement in the way that the characters are presented as contradictions in their individual periods and from this I extract that because these contradictions are all based around the same issue of struggling and succeeding in patriarchal societies, that the characters are not shown by Churchill to interact and discuss their stories because they already fundamentally understand each other anyway. I agree to a certain extent that Churchill presents her characters in Act One as relating their own stories without trying to understand one another resultant of the fact that Churchill uses a technique of interruption throughout the Act. For example when Nijo starts to relate the story of when she was first used for the emperors sexual gratification, Isabella doesn't appear to even comment upon it or try to understand, she simply begins to talk about her father.

I think that I actually disagree however more than I agree with this statement as Marlene is quite often bringing the group together by asking questions and linking the characters together with what she says. For example in this particular section Marlene immediately interjects with a question of Nijo concerning rape which Nijo doesn't answer until she has completed exactly what she was saying previously which also shows that perhaps this 'interruption' technique that Churchill uses is not to demonstrate an unwillingness to understand each other's stories but rather to display each women as having a confidence about them and Churchill also effectively displays a suggestion of confidence with the contrast between the women's eagerness to interrupt and speak out about themselves and the subservient waitress featured throughout Act one but never speaks. If we observe throughout the play, there is a degree of interaction between the characters; it is difficult to locate a section wherein no interaction takes place between characters. For example at the start of Nijo's comments concerning religion and how religion is 'a kind of nothing' it appears that some interaction is being participated in as Nijo, Isabella and Gret all come together because of a shared feeling: " Haven't you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already.

You've all felt/like that. " Isabella and Gret at this point respond in their own ways to suggest that they have indeed felt this way. In a way this could suggest that either the characters are not understanding one another but simply relating their own stories because they are interacting but only because of a shared peak of their experiences and therefore they are not making any outward efforts towards understanding something of other's

stories that do not relate directly to themselves. It could also suggest the opposite because in spite of everything the characters are interacting on some level because they are recognising similarities between themselves and other characters.

This type of situation is repeated later in the act. The characters all seem to affect one another and all have the ability to affect each others emotions suggesting a level of interaction. Churchill writes the Act so that they all appear to reach their own peaks of sadness and peaks of hilarity and humour at the same points. She could be suggesting that actually there is a degree of interaction happening there or that they have simply gone through the same types of experiences at the same points In their lives as the same regimes apply because all six characters have battled the same struggle against a patriarchal society. Evidence for the character's sadness to be as a cause of interaction involves a section where sadness is involved. The party are laughing at Joan's experiences after she was found out to be a woman as a pope because of her baby being born.

Comments are made directly in relation to Joan's experiences: " Oh dear Joan what a thing to do! In the street! " Laughter is shared which is a form of interaction as they are looking and appreciating someone else's completely different story. However, one could argue that they may be able to appreciate this in a self-centred way as all the women have been through same kind of experiences in relations to the male gender. A question is asked by Marlene who gets a shocking and upsetting answer which directly affects and upsets the other characters. Further questions are asked by Nijo

which does show interaction but again it is self-centred interaction as she is directly relating it to her own experiences.

She often does this although we could interpret this as her trying to understand the others but from her own perspective. In this instance she asks: “ And the child died too? ” After this point, there is a pause which then takes the action back down again away from this shocking peak. From then, the characters all display signs of sadness and begin to talk in more silenced tones about more melancholy issues in their lives and at this point no direct interaction seems to take place, apart from Marlene's question of Gret who subsequently offers a typical mono syllabic answer which is rather superficial. The other characters seem to launch themselves into their own monologues. The very fact that there is a sadness within all of the women that in some way or another have greatly affected their lives it appears makes me agree with Julie Thompson Burk's statement that the women are presented more as though they are contradictions in society rather than successes. There is a very fine line.

In the last sections of Act One, the characters each in their own way express their own personal successes. For example Nijo overthrows the emperor as she and a fellow woman friend hit the man with a stick which would have been unacceptable behaviour for a woman. However although this is a triumphant act, Nijo is still a very sad and deeply hurt woman. Her children have been killed and Churchill shows us evidence of Nijo's hurt near the end when she states: “ Nobody gave me back my children. ” Griselda in her own way contradicts the conventional thinking of her time and situation by saying: “ I do think-I do wonder-it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had

to. " Each women is triumphant in her own way however this is definitely a contrast to how Churchill presents them at the end of the Act.

Churchill possibly uses the end of this scene to symbolise that even though the women may have been successful in overthrowing the men in their lives they are still not happy. They may have conquered some issues but they are far from happy. It's almost an omen or prediction for all the women who are featured throughout the remainder of the story or for women in general maybe even suggesting that you cannot have the benefits of being a women and the emotional joy that this gives you but also overthrow male dominance. At the end of the scene the characters seem less than contented. Nijo is both laughing and crying, Marlene is drinking Isabella's brandy suggesting she's not happy as she has turned to alcohol to cope with her not so successful ' being a woman side' and Joan gets up and is sick in the corner.

To summarize I agree that to an extent the characters do not seem to make the effort to understand each other's stories because firstly Churchill's purpose was probably just to present them in a way in which is left open for us to make parallels and to show times don't really change and that you may not be able to both be a woman and have happiness with child birth and relationships, and also overthrow men but also that the technique of interruptions may have been to show a number of things, firstly it may have been to show a confidence in the women, secondly it may have been to show a realistic atmosphere of conversations commencing between different people considering the issue that there are six different people present. Lastly it may have indeed been to show that the women were involved

primarily within their own monologues, not willing to understand each others different stories. I agree with Julie Thompson Burk in the sense that the characters are contradictions in their times because each woman had definitely done something more extraordinary than the majority within their times and I also agree that in ways they are not successes and that Churchill presents this view nicely through the way the Act ends in a melancholy and confused manner. However I am somewhat ambiguous concerning the last statement of the characters being happier to relate their own stories than interact with each other for aforementioned reasons and also simply that throughout the play we can see interaction and especially coming from Marlene. Although Marlene is different, she doesn't share as much of herself and seems more of a linking character than anything else she does tend to ask questions and interact. I feel that perhaps when the characters do react it remains to be in quite a self-centred method.