

# Women in The Arts

## Britons generate excitement on NY stage

Vera Goodman

The women have returned in force to the New York theater, but in no way do they resemble Clare Booth Luce's *The Women*. Their life styles would be a bewilderment to Luce's women, their hopes, ambitions, even their "bitchiness" beyond their ken. It is somewhat of a bewilderment also to the men who write about theater for the establishment press, although their critique of both the productions and the actors is usually on target, their reaction to the playwrights' idea is often muddled.

The English seem to have produced one of the most exciting female playwrights of this decade, Caryl Churchill, and she is not easy to decipher. She is currently represented in New York by the long running *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*. In *Cloud Nine* she scrambles sexes and in her newest production she scrambles time and history.

Marlene, the protagonist, is celebrating her advancement to the top managerial post in her agency aptly named *Top Girls*. She throws a dinner party to celebrate this event in a restaurant called *La Prima Donna*, to which she invites an odd assortment of women, some historic, some part of literature and art. They are her guests because they have overcome



CAST MEMBERS OF TOP GIRLS, playing at the Public Theater, New York.

adversity. But the adversities they overcame are complex and it is more a matter of having survived rather than succeeded.

Verbose to the point of rudeness, although her manner is as delicate as a butterfly, is Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan who enjoyed her role until she was discarded by the Emperor. She spends 20 years of her mature life walking the roads of Japan as a Buddhist nun. However she finds no compensation in religion and talks continuously about her life

at court and the men she knew intimately. Yet she admits, "I was not a happy person, I just smiled a lot."

Isabella Bird, another guest, travelled the world, never coming to terms with the Victorian image of women of her period. She tried, and explains, "I wore myself out with good causes," but to no avail. She always felt guilty.

The other guests included Dull Gret who, in a Bruegel painting, leads a group of women against the devil. A peasant, short of speech and crude, her stoic calm is only broken when asked why did she do it. She stares the dinner guests down as she grunts, "We've had verse." Hell to her was no different than life.

Perhaps the most challenging guest is Pope Joan, who disguised as a man, is believed to have been Pope in the 9th century. She prides herself on having been smarter than the men around her and she succeeds in fooling them all, except one. "I thought God would speak to me," she explains ruefully, "But he knew I was a woman."

Chaucer's Patient Griselda, another guest, is the archetypal obedient female. Her husband is her law even when he orders the destruction of their children. She is the difficult guest to place at this *Top Girls* celebration, except that her stand does exemplify the suffering of each of these women at the hands of men, the kinds of sacrifices they had to make to conform to a male-dominated society. Their ability to rise above loss binds them together at this celebration.

In typical Churchill fashion the second scene shifts to today and presumably real people in Marlene's life. We learn that Marlene is a working-class product turned successful and reactionary, a Margaret Thatcher mirror image. She disdains those who can't make it. This rejection includes her own sister who remains behind a typical product of her class, and her daughter whom she has given to her sister to rear as her own so as not to be encumbered in her fight to reach the top. The daughter is a loser, fat, stupid, lazy. Marlene cannot abide losers and her daughter is no exception.

The thrust of the play is most easily recognized in the office scenes. These are clever, pushy women. In several interviews, conducted by her staff, we see these top girls coach female job seekers in using male deception. In the words of one interviewer, "Men are awful \ bullshitters. They like to make out the job is harder than it is."

"Are These Feminists Too Hard on Women" is the snide

dominates both the play and the Baths, is a sometime whore. She assures everyone at first that she enjoys her life. She unabashedly admires her body and knows what she does is better than "The shit work working class women are brought up to do." To her having a man is the armor against sinking into that mire and she wears her status as happily as her tacky theatrical outfits.

A variety of types surround Josie, each a victim of some man. As they discard their clothing they strip away their inhibitions and the Baths become the scene of a consciousness-raising group.

The afternoon Josie enters, bruised by her current lover, she lashes out at the injustice and humiliation of her condition, and her anger and terror of old age surfaces. It ignites the group and all of them join in expressing their misjudgment of the male mystique.

"Why are all men shits," Josie asks?

"We let them be shits," is the answer she receives from one of the women.

Dunn does, however, implausibly create a crisis that seems contrived. The Baths are to be destroyed to make room for a library. The women draw together in joint action against the authorities. Symbolically they all dive into the pool together. Perhaps the contrived message is important. We're eventually all going to be losers unless we bind together in action.

What turned the critics against this play was their conviction that women in America are far ahead of their British sisters and the play is too simple in its statements. But the critics fail to take into consideration the large group of American women, possibly their own wives, who are still acting out a secondary role, and are no further along the road than their British counterparts.

It isn't only women who are writing about women this year. The most interesting factor in David Hare's *Plenty*, another English import, is that its leading character is a woman. What this woman experiences would be

(continued on page 17)

## Self-trained artist startles viewers

Louise Thompson

The exhibit of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo at the Grey Art Gallery in New York City was so successful that the catalog sold out twice, and even the Gallery Bulletin at 25¢ sold out. That the paintings are exquisite, exotic and graphic is a given, but the importance of Frida Kahlo to feminists is large.

To say that Kahlo was a "handicapped" woman is an understatement. At six, Kahlo was infected by paralytic polio and spent much of her childhood in bed. She recovered but was left with a spindly leg. At 18, a school bus on which she was riding collided with a streetcar. Kahlo was speared through the womb by a steel pole. Her pelvis, back and foot were broken and for the rest of her short life she lived in pain and through a series of medical ordeals of reparative surgery. Until long after her death she was overshadowed by her famous husband, Diego Rivera, but when she had her first major show in Mexico two years before her death, she had herself carried to the show in an ambulance and put into her own bed which had been installed there. She had begun painting in the hospital.

According to the catalog: "Kahlo received no formal training as a painter and her style is that of the naive, self-trained artist; the often jarring, arbitrary colors; the lack of concern for convincing spatial relationships and perspective; and the contrasts between simplified and carefully detailed forms." However, Andre Breton in 1938 defined her a surrealist, "an apparition in the flash of light of the quetzal bird which scatters opals among the rocks as it flies away"—and her art—"a ribbon around a bomb."

Kahlo most often painted herself, her own face, said by some men not to be beautiful because her eyebrows ran heavily across her forehead and she had black hair on her upper lip, which she delineated. Her self-portraits with little pets, monkeys, parrots and a black cat, are like enamel miniatures. She also painted her own head in various Mexican headpieces. In one self-portrait with a pet monkey, her throat is necklaced with a vine of thorns which pierce her flesh, and a black hummingbird hangs from the lowest round of vine. In all the paintings of herself, the face is immobile as though held in pride against the pain. She is something more than beautiful.

While she was not physically battered by her husband, his sexual faithlessness and self-interest caused her to paint a nude woman on a bed, one shoe still on, pierced with multiple bleeding stab wounds. A fully clothed man stands next to the bed holding a small knife. It is titled "A Few Small Nips". Whether because of her husband's conduct, or to cram as much living into her inevitably short life, Kahlo had many lovers, both men and women.

Clearly, Frida Kahlo is not a painter for the squeamish, or for women still caught in the "nice" behavior required for us by the traditions. But, not only does she speak for our pain with beauty and skill, but in addition transmits an urgent message to all women who are hesitant to create in their own craft:

I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration.



DEBORAH HEDWALL and KAREN ALLEN of *Extremities*, at the Westside Arts Theatre, New York.

# The British keep coming

(continued from page 6)

thought of as a man's domain as near in the past as 10 years ago.

Susan Traherne, magnificently portrayed by Kate Nelligan, served as a teen-age courier for the French during World War II. Filled with high ideals and exceptional talent, she returns home to a society bent on plenty, plenty of everything. Although she achieves this plenty, she cannot accept the society that produces it. It is this rebellion, ostensibly against the English economic and political system that creates the tension within Susan. She succeeds economically and socially but in her dissatisfaction with the loss of ideals in herself and her society she lashes out with no sensibility for the feelings of others.

Her refusal to accept the world she has conquered, whatever the personal cost may have been, is an interesting digression and can be viewed as a feminist or political statement. Her lack of concern for those she hurts or destroys is lamentable. Her neurotic need to destroy and retreat in spite of success is not a new literary concept. What makes this work fascinating is that a woman is placed in this position rather than a man. Heroics are not usually part of the female character on stage unless she's being heroic for some man.

There is a connection between these British plays and the theater of protest and propaganda in the 1930s. They reach out into the current world while retaining the individual's human reaction and struggle. They are the 1980s *Awake and Sing!*. The difference lies in the feminine component.

## Adolescents

(continued from page 5)

macho man and there is little wonder that there are over one million teen pregnancies in the US each year. But our discussion remained largely descriptive. We lacked the theory and research that might guide responsible

Not to be outdone by the British the American playwright William Mastrosimone has written a play that deals with one of our major concerns. *Extremities* finds a woman alone at home one morning confronted by a rapist. In one of the most sensational scenes on stage this year, she attempts to fight him off. When she is all but overwhelmed her hand finds a can of bug spray, which she had been using earlier to kill a wasp. In a surprise action she blinds the rapist, ties him up and locks him in the fireplace. Unnerved to the point of a psychopathic seizure she plans to bury him alive.

When her roommates come home they find her in this state. Terry, a sweet, shy young woman had once been raped and had considered it her own fault. Patricia, a social worker, cannot help but use social work jargon in facing the situation. What follows is a gradual shift in the sympathies of the roommates from Marjorie, the victim, to Raul, the rapist. Raul, street wise, infects their minds, courts their sympathies and acts the injured party. They feed him, try to ease his pain and harangue Marjorie for her cruelty, eventually doubting that an attempted rape took place.

Patricia, always the social worker, is concerned with the victim's injuries and wonders whether Marjorie has done him some unseen harm. She rips open his vest to look for further scars, and to her horror finds a knife strapped to his chest. Discovered, his confession of past rapes and killings follows.

The playwright has pinpointed the public's inability to accept rape without brutalized results. Even her roommates are willing to judge her the victimizer until the realization that this creature would have raped and killed all three of them.

Mastrosimone has not only written a play that explores what men do to women, but demands a re-evaluation of how we react to their actions against women viscerally. Sensational, but it gets its message across!

Two other plays also presented

women in their relationship to each other and in their repression by men. *Skirmishes* by Catherine Hayes and *Talking With* by Jane Martin. In addition look for *'Night Mother* by Marsha Norman who wrote *Getting Out* and *Dog Eat Dog* by Mary Gallagher. From England we can expect *Fen*, another Churchill explosion and *'Teaneck Tanzi: The Venus Flytrap* by Claire Luckham.

Mel Gussow in an article in the *New York Times* on Feminist plays wrote, "This may be the season in which women started to talk back, and in some cases to get even." The men aren't quite sure how they are supposed to react to the problems women now face but they aren't dismissing them as they did in the past. No, Mr. Gussow it isn't just that women are talking back, but that you and your colleagues are beginning to listen.

## Big deal!

The quote of the week comes from Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, who has been a nun for 38 years and is Director of the Institute of Women Today.

Traxler was commenting on the Catholic Church's revised Canon Law. The changes allow women to hold new positions in a Diocese but still forbid them from serving as altar girls or deacons, except in emergencies, and allow them to preach only at children's services or funerals. The priesthood, of course, is still a no-no. Said Traxler about the revisions: "It's like saying that the parish is a plantation. You can tell the field hand that now she can peel potatoes in the kitchen, she can be secretary in the marriage tribunal, and she can count the money—big deal!"