

'Top Girls' reveals regret in success

Six women, all from different periods of history, are seated at a table reminiscent of depictions of the Last Supper. Everyone is talking; everyone is actively drinking wine. The stage is deluged in crimson, and the "fourth wall," separating stage from audience, was severed from when the lights first revealed the chaotic picture.

This is the opening scene of "Top Girls."

Shakespeare '70 opened its production of Caryl Churchill's "Top Girls," on Thursday Sept. 23 in the Don Evans Black Box Theatre. The company's interpretation featured students, alumni and other veterans of the stage. Though the play's nonlinear format and multifaceted characters would prove challenging to any seasoned actor, and there were a few initial hiccups in line delivery, the company captured the spirit of the play brilliantly. The opening scene, in which the dinner guests engage in conversations that interrupt each other, overlap and occur simultaneously, established the cast's mastery of the work, as they maintained the rhythm and timing necessary to preserve the momentum of the moment.

The characters in this scene are a *mélange* of different women, ranging from an image of female strength in the form of Joan of Arc to the subservient Griselda. The only constant character is Marlene, whose memories fuel the conflicting action of the play.

Janet Quartatone, a 1982 College alumna, played Marlene, a woman married to her career who is conflicted by her decisions. Though independent, she can't entirely accept her detachment from those who depend on her.

"I'm happy where I've gone, but I'm not at peace with it," Quartatone said of her character's mentality. Though the dinner in the beginning is a celebration of her success, the nature of her memories reveal regret in separating herself from any family ties. Her relationship with her sister, Joyce, played by Laurie Hardy, is in ruins, and her relationship with her daughter Angie, who was raised as Joyce's child, is nonexistent.

The final scene between Joyce and Marlene is incredibly powerful, accomplished by both actors' ability to simultaneously express their character's pain, lingering love for each other and the insurmountable years of resentment between them. Joyce and Angie, played by 2010 alumna Heather Duncan, created a dysfunctional dynamic through their outrageous, yet believable, hostile interactions. Duncan communicated Angie's sociopathic tendencies clearly, as she seeks her aunt, but really her mother, Marlene's approval and plots to kill Joyce.

The other actors reappear throughout the show, assuming roles of other players in Marlene's life.

"It gives interesting parallels to the characters we play later," said senior philosophy major Sarah Stryker, who doubled as Pope Joan and later, Shona. Joan, dressed as the Pope, disguises herself as a man, while Shona, a girl barely in her twenties, falsely boasts of experience in a job interview.

"They (Shona and Joan) both desire something they're not," she said.

Liz So, junior women and gender studies major, played Lady Nijo, a former concubine to a Japanese emperor and later Kit, a young girl, innocent to any of the horrors experienced by her former character. So as Nijo admits her endured abuse as simply a product of the time, she drinks more wine and begins to unravel before the audience. So made this gradual breakdown apparent as she progressively lost her former poise and control.



From the far left, Jessica Null, Janet Quartatone, Sarah Stryker, Liz So and Susan Fowler are seated in the opening scene, which is both a celebration and lamentation of the women's lives. (Photo Courtesy of Christopher Lombardi)

Patient Griselda, a character from “The Canterbury Tales” by Geoffrey Chaucer, is the image of obedience, played by Emily West. Her character Jeanine is similar in her willingness to abide by her husband’s wishes, but it is as her final role as Nell that she repels any conventional concepts of femininity. Her body language, as well as her costume, signals this difference in attitude, as she is no longer a frail, graceful “damsel.”

Jessica Null was hysterical as Dull Gret, who is depicted in the Pieter Brueghel painting, “Dulle Geit (Mad Meg).” She barely says a word prior to giving a heated description of her battles in Hell, but attempts to steal items from the set, and gives one-word responses usually involving food, throughout. Null as Win, however, is a working woman who seeks thrills in her personal life, including affairs with married men.

Susan Fowler as Isabella Bird, Louise and Mrs. Kidd was overbearing. Though very different, each attempts to maintain control in their sphere of power; Isabella dominates conversation, Louis in her work environment and Mrs. Kidd in her home.

While the play addresses the roles of women — perceived and actual — in society, director Brian Bara, 1987 College alumnus, said the show is at heart a commentary on the responsibility of those with ability.

“I really think it is a play about social responsibility,” Bara said. “It’s up to the top girls and boys to help.”

Shakespeare ’70 will be performing the show at 8 p.m. Sept. 30, Oct. 1 and Oct. 2.

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