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Performing Feminism: Exploring Churchill's Top Girls with Teenagers in 2006

by

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Abstract

Why does it mean to be a teenager in 2006? How cognizant are young women that they may be 'feminists'? Can performing a feminist character in a play serve as a worthwhile point of reflection for a young woman as she moves towards personal autonomy?

Without question, drama has potential to provide its participants a voice and, as a discipline, drama benefits many students in a high school environment, particularly young women.

For nine teenagers, Caryl Churchill's Top Girls was a challenging, thematically dense play as they explored, rehearsed and performed it. For the teacher-director, this project allowed for personal creativity, critical analysis and reflective pedagogy. All will serve to strengthen her teaching practice.

Three qualitative research methods were used to track the meanings which the participants, including the teacher-director, made through involvement in the Top Girls Project: journals, field notes, and one-to-one interviews.

This thesis is dedicated
to three very important women in my life:
my Grandma Elsie,
my mother Marilyn,
and my daughter Nyssa.

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Preface

It is a Friday after school. A female student and I are setting up our rehearsal space and she begins to cry. In attempting to comfort her, I learn that not only is she failing math but broken up with her boyfriend. Even worse, her father has been seriously ill for nearly eight months. It is clear that female adolescence is not for sissies. I offer to cancel rehearsal but she says, 'Please no. It would be really nice to be someone else for a couple hours.'

It is the Wednesday after school. Friday is Opening. It is the Dress Rehearsal for the Dinner Party. We run the scene. The energy begins low and lurches along. Lines are paraphrased and dropped. The tension among the actors is palpable. In the midst of the Griselda story, two actors dry completely. I stop taking notes. I realize, with absolute clarity, that I have asked too much of these girls. I am not angry or disappointed. I am matter-of-fact. This is a demanding scene, even for professional actors. When the lights go down, I give my few notes and end by saying; 'We can just take pictures for Archives and call it a night if you like.' The girls look stunned. Kathleen pipes up, 'Are you kidding? That was a train wreck. We have to do it again.' The other girls agree. We take a fifteen-minute break. I find every girl and tell her what she's doing right. The next run is exactly what it should be. There is energy and humanity. They are working together, having fun, and thinking on their feet. In notes, they are victorious.

Chapter 1: Creating Community

SCHMUNK. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

CAMILLE. Not really. Well, I guess to some extent but not an 'intense feminist.'

SCHMUNK. What do you hope will happen with the project?

CAMILLE. I hope that all the members get something out of it.

(Interview 2.23.06[1])

Introduction

Since I began teaching drama in the high school system in 1992, I have proceeded on faith. I believe profoundly in the power of drama to facilitate personal change in my students and in my role an 'accompanist.' This means that irrespective of the students' skill levels, I endeavor to answer their energy, passion and curiosity with knowledge, challenge, and responsiveness. My teaching work is predicated on the core values of hard work, an emphasis on both individual and collective growth, and nurturance of all members in the ensemble. I have consistently used text as the basis for my teaching practice.

I am particularly concerned for many of my female students who live in an increasingly fragmented and complex world. Their expected adolescent struggles with body image, sexuality, identity, and authority occur against a backdrop of uncertain home lives and conflicting societal values. Many girls worry aloud about the pressures they feel from parents, teachers, friends, employers and the future. They find it difficult to maintain a sense of self. Teenage girls operate within a discourse not of their own making, locating themselves inside a high school curriculum where they are 'other,' the

[1] Each of the female participants in the ensemble was interviewed three times: at the beginning, middle and end of the project. These interviews occurred on different days. The referencing format will be as follows: Interview day/month/year.

object of study rather than the subject (Smith 33). These girls are unquestionably resilient. Few would call themselves 'feminists.'

Research Rationale

In designing my research, I worked from the assumption that drama is a powerful creative medium that can give the participants a 'voice' regardless of their personal circumstances. Experience has taught me that when working as an ensemble towards a shared creative objective, participants find that the final production generates pride and focus among the participants. Moreover, when a girl gains dramatic skills, she views herself as more multi-faceted, better able to withstand societal pressures (Pipher 265). To further this end, my project would involve only young women, designed expressly to examine issues pertinent to women. I theorized that a women-only project might enhance these benefits. My intention was to create an opportunity, in a high school context, to make the invisible subject, the 'feminine' visible (Gallagher 2000 27). I reasoned, therefore, that working within a well written, feminist play like Caryl Churchill's Top Girls would offer the participants many possibilities for personal and political exploration as well as creativity.

Caryl Churchill believes that gender and class are inextricable. In the play Top Girls, she exposes the limits of liberal feminism by placing the character of Marlene personally and politically at odds with her socialist sister, Joyce. Joyce is a lower class, single mother who raised Marlene's illegitimate daughter Angie as her own while Marlene traveled abroad and pursued success in the business world. The sisters' irreconcilable differences serve as Churchill's call to action to the audience to participate in fundamental social change that addresses not only gender but also class.

The power of Top Girls' last scene between Marlene and Joyce is a direct result of Churchill's theoretical and dramatic acumen, most notably a reverse time structure which reveals earlier in the play that the sisters do not reconcile and that Angie's prospects for success in life are slim. In the play's first scene, the dinner party, Churchill deliberately subverts traditional, patriarchal Aristotelian theatre, while simultaneously exposing the historical construction of gender through narratives shared by female guests gathered in honor of Marlene's promotion to managing director of the Top Girls Agency. These guests are Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda, Pope Joan, and Dull Gret, none of who existed in the same time period. The stories aptly expose the material conditions of their respective time periods. Taken together, they illuminate the historical oppression of women, which from Churchill's materialist feminist perspective, is the site of *significant* social change.

I chose Top Girls as the centerpiece for the project because of its superb writing, diverse female characters, non-linear structure with its challenges of form and style, and, most importantly, its materialist feminist underpinnings. I believe that it is crucial for young women to gain appreciation for materialist feminism, particularly its value of placing the needs of the group over the individual. Hope for the future rests with them. It is in their – and our - best interests that they understand the historical construction of their gender. These young women are individuals shaped by society, but by virtue of their age, they also have the power and potential to shape society (Quigley 47).

The Top Girls Project involved fieldwork: the rehearsal and production of Churchill's Top Girls from February through June 2006 and a parallel process of investigating participants' responses to the play and the process. The Research Questions

were as follows: 1) Is Churchill's Top Girls an appropriate and relevant dramatic text for young women in 2006? 2) With which character would the girls identify, the historical or contemporary? 3) Would the teenage participants understand and/or question the play's materialist feminism? During this time period, I used three qualitative research methodologies to record the participants' responses to the play, rehearsals, and production: Rehearsal Journals, One-to-One Interviews, and Field Notes. The initiating questions were designed to ascertain each participant's understanding, questioning, and interpretation of the play during the fieldwork.

Research Design

As director, I first questioned whether Churchill's Top Girls was an appropriate, relevant dramatic text for young women in 2006. From a personal perspective, would they see similarities between themselves and the characters? With whom would they identify? Moreover, would they perceive Churchill's intent with the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary female characters? Ultimately, I wondered whether the sheer excitement of acting in a play, and in particular this play because of its challenging text, might eclipse their understanding of its materialist-feminist politics. I believed that it was most probable that the girls would interpret Top Girls and its characters very personally and very differently from each other. The prospect was very exciting. As researcher, I would attempt to track each girl's individualized, creative journey with as much awareness and detail as possible.

Being a teacher, I thought that three conditions were necessary to the rehearsal 'fieldwork': 1) a long time frame, specifically February through June 2006, 2) a small cast of girls, and 3) an exploratory, non-linear approach in rehearsal. All three would

increase the likelihood that the girls would gain an appreciable understanding of the characters and the play and/or make connections between the play and their lives.

For the Top Girls Project, I chose a combination of three qualitative, interpretative methodologies - Rehearsal Response Journals, One-to-One Interviews (conducted at three points in the process) and my own Field Notes. I believed that journals would allow each girl a voice and serve as a creative medium for character exploration, while allowing me to track her evolving understanding. I hoped that interviews would yield insight into each girl's shifting interpretation, acting challenges, and responses to rehearsal. My Field Notes would serve as an opportunity to record my rehearsal observations with regularity, cultivating a thoughtful reflective practice as teacher-director.

Research Findings

Given that most of the participants had little or no theatre experience, the girls' ability to take Top Girls to production is remarkable. The majority of them enjoyed rehearsals and all loved performing. Without exception, the participants improved in personal confidence, basic acting skills, and their willingness to take physical risks. The girls who remained with the Top Girls Project displayed exemplary commitment to the play, the ensemble, and their art. While they had difficulty explaining to friends and family what Top Girls was about, they cared deeply about what their family and friends thought of the final production.

For some of the participants, journals were a form through which to reflect usefully on the play's characters. This medium was highly personalized and creative. Other participants found the journaling less useful and onerous. For reasons that are discussed in Chapter 3, this methodology was discontinued. As a researcher, I still

believe in the legitimacy of this methodology but also understand that interpretation of some journal entries requires significant psychological background. The One-to-One Interviews, because they were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the production process, allowed me insight into each girl's changing interpretation of the play and its characters, her comfort with the rehearsal process, and whether performance in Top Girls was significant to her. The Journals and Interviews, in combination with my Field Notes, provided much-needed clarity and continuity as I took the girls' diverse points of view into account.

Interpretative analysis of the results from all three methodologies leads me to believe that *all* the participants perceived participation in Top Girls as an acting challenge rather than an opportunity for personal and political reflection. This was not entirely unexpected. All of the girls got involved in Top Girls for the opportunity *to* perform. They were inexperienced, and the dinner party in particular is very challenging to act. The girls were intent on meeting the demands of the scene. The scene's materialist-feminist political aesthetic was of little concern to them. Again, this is not unexpected.

Interviews revealed that the girls saw few connections between the historical women's lives and their own, but there was a greater tendency to identify with the contemporary characters in Act Two. There was little recognition of the historical characters' parallel circumstances. In spite of our exploration in rehearsal, the girls saw the historical women as very separate, even from each other. They did not articulate similarities between the historical characters and contemporary characters. Most surprisingly, the actors who played historical *and* contemporary characters expressed no recognition of similarities between their characters' oppressions and life obstacles.

Interpretatively, all of the girls saw Top Girls as having three very separate units – the dinner party, the office scenes, and the family scene. At the end, all the dinner party actors perceived it as their greatest acting triumph both individually and collectively, but believed that its significance was lost on the audience. In general, the girls saw the conflicts depicted in the office and home environments as more relevant to their lives and to the audience in 2006. A number of the girls admired the 'realism' of the family scene's conflict and dialogue, relating strongly to the mother-daughter relationship between Joyce and Angie.

It is worth noting, that with rare exceptions, the girls did not overtly align themselves with feminism. They realized that Top Girls was a feminist play. But the girls did not criticize Marlene for her political orientation, her liberal feminist definition of 'success', or giving up her daughter Angie to Joyce. Rather, they identified with Joyce and were critical of Marlene's treatment of her. At no point did they blame Joyce for creating her own circumstances. But rather, several girls admired Joyce because she faced the challenges of poorly paid work and mothering. They praised Joyce's quick wit and resilience but saw little hope for change in Joyce's circumstances if her own sister, Marlene, treated her so dismissively. So, while the girls did not articulate a feminist perspective, they certainly identified with a number of the arguments that form a foundation for the second half of Churchill's play.

Title Rationale

I believe that one of the crucial aspects of material feminism is that it calls into question what is 'real' and therefore unassailable, challenging us to change (Hennessy 5). My female students operate deep within the high school's patriarchal structure, and I see

that there are significant personal costs exacted. These girls are aware of their civil rights. They understand that they can vote, own property, earn money, and hold public office (Lerner 1979 31; hooks 1984 31). But they do not identify themselves as feminists.

I titled my research project Performing Feminism because we must dare to call these young women what they are – feminists. We must dare to name their world (Freire 77). As we played within Top Girls Project, we explored, through the performing of its feminist characters, the significance of their world. And as a result, I hope that the likelihood is increased that they may transform their, and our, world for the future.

Timeframe and Context

The Top Girls Project occurred from February to early June 2006 in a high school drama department, in Edmonton, as a co-curricular performance opportunity. It was open to whichever girls wanted to be involved in the exploration, rehearsal, and production of Churchill's play.

The Recruitment Process

Involvement in the project was not limited to drama students. I pitched the project to all first semester drama classes, plastered posters around the school, and published promotional information on the school's website. Administration, school counselors, and the current drama teacher all agreed to refer participants. The criteria were simple. The female participant need not have any drama experience but must be willing to commit to the project's duration from February through to June 2006. In exchange for her participation, she would receive five Performing Arts credits. I aimed to recruit a company of twelve girls. I knew that it would be difficult to mount the play

with less than seven. Referrals from administration and student services were not fruitful. While prospective participants appeared intrigued, none followed up. But rather, personal contact with either the current drama teacher or me was crucial in soliciting interest. Ultimately, a company of nine girls stayed for the duration of the Top Girls Project, with only five girls falling away by mid-March.

Of the final nine participants, Lainie, Grace, Camille and Alisha[2] were directly invited to join by the current drama teacher or myself, Nikki responded to an in-class promotional presentation, friends referred Kathleen and Taylor, and Maighdlin and Bobbi agreed to be involved because I had taught them grade ten drama (2004). Because of prior commitments, Maighlin and Bobbi did not join the company until late March and were involved only in Act Two.

The Company

The girls ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen, and were in grades ten, eleven, and twelve. As with a regular drama class, academic abilities varied. In grade twelve, Maighdlin, Bobbi, Taylor, and Kathleen all maintained Honors standing with plans to attend university in the fall. In grade eleven, Alisha maintained an average in the high 70's, while Nikki, an International Exchange student, maintained an average in the low 80's. In grade ten, Grace and Camille were both stable academically, excelling in the subjects that most interested them. Lainie, also in grade ten, was the only participant with an identified Learning Disability (i.e. dyslexia, short-term memory, written expression). She received daily academic support and exam provisions. Rehearsals revealed, however, that Nikki's English as a Second Language (ESL) posed significant

[2] All of the participants' names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. All the participants were aware that it was part of the fieldwork for my thesis. Their participation in the Top Girls Project was voluntary.

decoding and comprehension challenges for her, particularly given the complexity of Churchill's text.

Fortunately, all the girls involved in the Top Girls Project attended school regularly, appearing to have sufficient home support. Their life circumstances varied, and I believe that this diversity influenced their interpretations of the Top Girls play and its characters. Of the nine girls, only Grace and Bobbi lived in two parent families. Nikki lived with a host family in Canada but was being raised by her mother in Hong Kong. There was no contact with her natural father. The same was true for Camille who was raised from infancy in Newfoundland by her maternal grandmother and later by her mother. Taylor, Alisha, and Kathleen lived in divorced families with their mothers. In all instances, the daughters' relationships with father were amicable although Alisha and Kathleen admitted that relations with their much younger stepmothers were strained. Lainie's father lived apart from the family because of a degenerative mental illness, while Maighdlin's father had been seriously ill for eight months. His prognosis was uncertain. It is important to note that the participants' life circumstances were never solicited. They were volunteered either in rehearsal or incidental conversation, perhaps because of the project's context or duration.

Maighdlin and Bobbi had considerable acting experience, but the remainder of the company did not. Lainie and Alisha's drama experience was confined to short-term camps or community classes, and while keen, Taylor and Nikki had only ever performed in one high school play. Camille also lacked previous experience but was enrolled in Drama 10 and acting in a production outside school. Grace, recruited out of my English 10 class, had no drama background whatsoever.

As expected, the reasons articulated for wanting to be involved in the Top Girls Project varied. Lainie, Alisha and Grace liked the idea that they didn't have to audition. Their involvement in the final production was guaranteed. Taylor explained that she was "interested to see what the dynamics are in an all-female cast" (Interview 21.02.06) while Nikki, having previously attended an all girls' school, articulated that she "liked working with girls better" (Interview 23.02.06). Kathleen viewed the Top Girls Project as a safe, creative means to finally try drama in high school – something she had been meaning to do. Only Camille admitted to being attracted to the play's feminism. She believed that "women don't really get enough recognition for doing things to change the world; even if it's just to change their world" (Interview 23.02.06). Late in the rehearsal process, only the more theatrically attuned Maighdlin grasped the stature of Churchill's Top Girls in the feminist dramatic canon: "I don't know who Caryl Churchill is but other people 'in the know' do. It's a play that has credentials behind it" (Interview 6.06.06).

My initial reasons for wanting to direct Churchill's Top Girls were almost wholly emotional. As a woman, feminist, academic, and mother, I have wrestled repeatedly with issues of personal identity, the male definition of success, as well as motherhood's inherent sacrifices. Having worked in human services with the disenfranchised, I value Top Girls' materialist feminist underpinnings. Living in a rich province like Alberta, it seems that monetary success for the few rarely translates into justice for the majority.

Thesis Organization

Performing Feminism is organized into five chapters. This chapter, Chapter 1: Creating Community contains the project rationale and research design. As well, there are brief explanations of my chosen qualitative research methodologies, research

findings, and the thesis title. Chapter 2: Text, Context & Analysis situates Top Girls in the landscape of feminism and critically analyzes Churchill's materialist-feminist aesthetic in the dinner party and the family scene between Marlene and Joyce. Chapter 3: The Dramatic Journey: Voice, Meaning & Community examines selected participants' responses to the process and the play through journals and/or interviews. Chapter 4: The Teacher-Director examines particular rehearsals and actors' processes, both of which motivated my pedagogical change towards movement-based work. This chapter concludes with four participants' reflections on the significance of performance in Top Girls. Chapter 5: Implications for Future Teaching Practice answers the research questions and examines the effectiveness of the research methodologies and my pedagogical choices.

Chapter 2: Text, Context and Analysis

> SCHMUNK. What do you think of the Top Girls characters?
>
> TAYLOR. I think that they are very interesting women. A lot of them are strong in their own way, which I find interesting. And I like how their stories all interconnect and how they are much more similar than they seem at first. (Interview 2.2.06)

Introduction
Why this play – in a high school ?!?!

Do all women share a vision of what equality means? If a woman desires social equality with men, does this make her a feminist? Is feminism necessarily political? If a woman demands acceptance of her right to individual conscience and judgment, does this negate her common humanity and responsibility to other relationships in her life? (hook 2000 19-24) These questions are crucial to young women. But in high school, girls are asked to locate themselves inside a curriculum that has constructed them as 'other,'[3] as the object of study rather than the subject (Smith 255). My thesis project was predicated on a belief that, in a drama context, I could create a space in which the absent female subject's voice *could* be heard. My choice of Caryl Churchill's Top Girls as the centerpiece for research with young girls was deliberate.

Feminist theorist Amelia Howe Kritzer argues that women artists must combat both "systemic and systematic exclusion" (5). Without question, this is true. And like Kritzer, I believe that drama offers feminists potential and challenges in its production. With Churchill's Top Girls, this observation is particularly apt. The *potential* impact for this project was for rich, collective exploration of the play's strong female characters and their worlds with the girls. Thus, I hoped to give voice to the absent female subject. The

[3] Philosopher Nietzsche argued that the state of being 'other' means to be heterogeneous in relationship to the dominant culture. Feminists, therefore, perceive 'the feminine' as a life force suppressed by the patriarchy, the dominant male culture (Gelfand 45).

challenge was inherent in my choice of play. As a director, Caryl Churchill's Top Girls demands acknowledgement of the co-dependence of its politics and aesthetics (Kritzer 2).

Chapter Organization

Critical study of the play in its entirety was inordinately useful for informing both my pedagogy and directorial preparation. The analysis which follows is confined to three excerpts of Top Girls which were both particularly significant and challenging to the participants during rehearsal: the last minutes of the dinner party (Act One); the personal-political argument between sisters Marlene and Joyce (Act Two); and the play's final moments between Marlene and Angie.

This chapter is organized into three sections. Section One: Text and Context introduces the female characters in Top Girls and situates the play in the landscape of feminism. Section Two: The Dinner Party examines dramatic structure and the theatrical convention of multiple voices through the speeches of Patient Griselda, Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, and Dull Gret, with analysis of the dinner party's last chaotic image. Section Three: The Family Scene discusses the semiotics of doubling, the praxis of the personal and political with reference to Marlene and Joyce's relationship, and Angie as a specter of the future.

Section One: Text and Context
Top Girls' Characters

In the opening scene of Top Girls, Marlene hosts a 'dinner party' to celebrate her promotion to managing director of the Top Girls Employment Agency. Churchill's constellation of female guests is highly unusual. Isabella Bird was a renowned Scottish traveler and explorer in the 19th century. Lady Nijo was a 13th century courtesan to Japan's Emperor who later became a Buddhist nun. Dull Gret exists in Brueghel's

painting, in which she leads a charge of women into the mouth of Hell. Patient Griselda is the obedient wife from "The Clerk's Tale" in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, while Pope Joan is rumored to have presided over the Catholic Church from 854-856 A.D. (Churchill 4). Staged first, the dinner party occurs chronologically one year *after* the play's final scene between Marlene and her sister Joyce.

In the next four scenes, we are introduced to Top Girls' contemporary female characters. Angie is Marlene's illegitimate daughter given to Joyce to parent. Kit is Angie's much younger but close friend. Shona, Louise, and Jeanine are clients in search of jobs through the Top Girls Employment Agency while Mrs. Kidd is the bitter wife whose husband lost the promotion of managing director to Marlene. Win and Nell work alongside Marlene at the Top Girls Agency but will soon become her subordinates.

In Top Girls' last scene, the family scene, Angie tricks her 'Auntie Marlene' into paying a surprise visit to Joyce's home. This ends in a very bitter argument between Marlene and Joyce, during which the two sisters become estranged.

Situating Top Girls in Feminism

With regard to her playwriting, Caryl Churchill does not attempt to hide her politics. As early as 1972, Churchill was preoccupied with examining, through her art, the relationship between patriarchal-capitalist ideologies and the material conditions of various historical realities (Kritzer 191). Of Top Girls, Churchill stated, "socialism and feminism aren't synonymous, but I feel strongly about both, and wouldn't be interested in a form of one that didn't include the other" (Betsko and Koenig 78). While Churchill clearly does not equate socialism and feminism, it is intriguing that the final scene

between Marlene and Joyce operates in the spirit of socialist feminism[4] with conflation of the personal and the political, of family and public life. This said, I believe that examination of Top Girls in its entirety as a work of art reveals Churchill's materialist feminism aesthetic.

Academic Gayle Austin states that materialist feminism minimizes biological difference between men and women while stressing the interests of the group over the individual (qtd. in Reinelt and Roach 226). Moreover, feminist Rosemary Hennessy states that material feminists wish to move away from the limited idea that power consists only of rights and liberties, to embrace the idea that power operates across economics, politics, and ideology (25). First, materialist feminism locates its subject of inquiry within social history by revealing the material conditions of production (i.e. race, class, gender). This acquired knowledge has the potential to become a site for political change. Second, materialist feminism favors analyses of cultural arrangements that oppress women (Gelfand 49). This includes critical study of literary and artistic works to reveal both the social contexts and the ways in which women are represented. This critical literary analysis focuses on how written works construct gender, for example through "sexualized power" and "authority" in the texts' language. Third, materialist feminism focuses on the postmodern conceptions of language and subjectivity. The French feminist theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous argue that most often words such as 'woman, 'feminine,' and 'femininity' refer to what is *negative* in Western

[4] **Socialist Feminism** was dedicated to creating a society where the individual can develop fully as a human being in all aspects, physical, mental, emotional and artistic. This development is less likely to occur within an economic system that is geared to profit rather than human needs (Samuel 1).

culture (Gelfand 47). Fortunately, these words are simply signs.[5] As such, they are neither constant nor immutable. They are simply signifiers, as opposed to referents for concrete female experience (Gelfand 47). *All* signs are subject to change, and as a result, it is entirely possible for the negative associations with the feminine to change (Hennessy 5). Interpreted from a materialist feminist point of view, this deconstruction of language can call into question what is 'true' and 'real,' challenging us all, women and men, to participate in this change.

I believe that Churchill's feminist critique within Top Girls goes further than a simple rejection of economic determinism[6] or facile blame for women's oppression on capitalism's patriarchal systems of power. Rather, through the character of Marlene Churchill explodes the myth of liberal feminism[7] by revealing the moral and ethical deficiencies of a young woman who defines success in terms of 'making it in a man's world.' Marlene does not acknowledge capitalism's exploitive structure nor does she feel compelled to change it (Merrill 70). Instead Marlene touts the virtues of Margaret Thatcher and individualism, not recognizing that her 'success' comes at the expense of lower class women such as her sister, Joyce. Marlene operates deep within an ideology through which men's dominance over women is further complicated by class difference among women (Kritzer 4). In the final scene of Top Girls, which is a fiercely accurate picture of humanity, Marlene betrays Joyce and is subsequently rejected by her. The

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[5] Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argues that words are 'signs' comprised of the mark (written or spoken) called the 'signifier' and the concept called the 'signified'. Their relationship is arbitrary, dependent only on difference between signs or signifiers (Scholes 14-15).

[6] Economic determinism: the belief that a society's economic organization determines the nature of all aspects of life.

[7] Liberal feminism does not advocate challenging men as a group. It is based on a belief of equality between men and women. Liberal feminists believe in reform of the present through 'liberal' practices in society (i.e. legal means, social reform) as opposed to full-scale revolutionary change.

scene is unquestionably powerful. For reasons that are discussed in Chapter Three, the girls involved in the Top Girls Project were deeply affected by this scene. I think this was as a direct result of Churchill's ability to create dramatic art that meaningfully incorporates her political sensibility.

Churchill's materialist feminism is woven deftly into the dinner party through the juxtaposing of Marlene's success with the personal narratives of Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda, Dull Gret, and Pope Joan. Each character's story locates her, as a result of her gender, class, and/or race, within a specific time period with its associated material conditions and oppressions. Once all their narratives are shared, the commonality is clear. *All* the historical characters operate within a patriarchy, but each one responded differently to male oppression. They reacted with varying degrees of rebellion. On one extreme, Patient Griselda, symbolic of female submissiveness, obeyed (Churchill I. i. 15). At the other extreme, Isabella Bird rebelled. She defied Victorian expectations by traveling abroad until she was seventy years old (Churchill I. i. 17).

From a materialist feminist perspective, there is a powerful cumulative effect created by the female characters' stories. It locates the feminine *beyond* the present. The womens' historical narratives demonstrate that a network of forces - race, class, and gender - constructs the feminine. As a result, because these forces have hierarchies of inequality that are historical *and* systemic, the feminine is subordinated and oppressed. But is this situation immutable? I believe that Churchill would argue that it is *not*. As a playwright whose materialist feminist ideology and art converge (Kritzer 2), I believe that Churchill *intends* to provoke change by raising consciousness with Top Girls. She does this first by revealing the structures of oppression, and then through highly theatrical

techniques, implicating the audience and empowering them to change (Reinelt 1995 178; Kritzer 111).

Section Two: The Dinner Party
Dramatic Structure and Multiple Character Voices

In order to reveal the structures of oppression, Churchill subverts the Aristotelian ideal, the "maleness" associated with traditionally structured plays (Kritzer 2). Nowhere is this more evident than within the dinner party where Churchill repeatedly disrupts expectation. Academic Stuart Marlow praises Churchill's "structural radicalism" (70). I see this structural radicalism manifest in distinct ways which interrelate. First, our sense of the characters' shared time and history is disrupted, and this upset is compounded by an incongruity of character source. Second, the audience's expectation of a single dominant male voice is undone by the multiple female voices in the scene; this conglomerate of female voices disrupts traditional Aristotelian dramatic structure. This sense of disruption is sharpened by the characters' vocal overlapping which, in turn, contributes to a repositioning of the female subject.

Marlene's guests – Lady Nijo, Isabella Bird, Pope Joan, Dull Gret and Patient Griselda – cohere in that they were *all* subject to punishment as well as suffering and sadness (Aston & Savona 32; Keyssar 97). However, none of these characters hail from the same time period. Nijo lived in 13th century Japan, Joan lived in 9th century Athens and Rome, and Isabella lived in 19th century Scotland (Churchill 4). As a result of this discrepancy, our expectation for a traditional dramatic structure is immediately disrupted. There is no sense of unified time or history. Moreover, Churchill draws Griselda and Gret from sources other than lived history. Griselda is inspired by Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Gret comes from Brueghel's painting that is named in her honor (Churchill 4).

My view is that Churchill's choice of source for Gret and Griselda impacts their character complexity, as compared to the historically based women. Gret and Griselda are mysterious and intriguing characters, but ultimately they do not seem to be as rich and layered as the others. I view Churchill's choices as purposeful. Academics Elaine Aston and George Savona argue that Churchill's incongruity of source undoes assumption of dramatic coherence (36). As a result, we are placed at a "critical remove" from both Griselda and Gret, with less likelihood of indulging in emotional identification (Aston & Savona 37). I agree. In rehearsals, the actors displayed a sense of emotional distance from Griselda and Gret. They most certainly did *not* identify with Gret and Griselda to the same degree that they did Nijo, Isabella and Joan (see Chapter 3).

Aristotelian drama depends on a single unified male voice. In order to rebel against this patriarchal authority, Churchill creates a dramatic form that affirms the subjectivity of many. She disturbs expectation of a single male voice by deliberate use of 'plural voice,' specifically multiple *female* voices. This use of plural voice *and* vocal overlapping contributes significantly to the dinner party's radical structure. Academic Janelle Reinelt argues that the vocal overlapping is indicative of the characters' self-centeredness and inability to communicate (2003 180). On one level, this is true. However, I view Reinelt's interpretation as generalized and somewhat misleading. Irrespective of the overlapping, there are instances when the dinner party women are trying not only to converse but also to connect and even empathize with each other. For example, sincere attempts are made to understand Pope Joan's circumstances.

ISABELLA. You dressed as a boy?

MARLENE. Of course / for safety.

3 JOAN. It was easy, I was only twelve. / Also women weren't allowed in the library. We wanted to study in Athens.

4 MARLENE. You ran away alone?

5 JOAN. No, not alone. I went with my friend. / He was sixteen but I thought I

6 NIJO. Ah, an elopement.

7 JOAN. knew more science than he did and almost as much philosophy.

8 ISABELLA. Well, I always traveled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I as other than feminine.

9 MARLENE. I don't wear trousers in the office. I could but I don't. (Churchill I. i. 8)

In this passage, Isabella and Marlene express interest while Nijo empathizes. I admit that Isabella's last remark is self-centered. But I think that all of the characters are *trying* listen to Joan. They are able to communicate. But there is one more critical aspect to consider in examination of this example.

Aston and Savona argue that Churchill's use of plural voice serve to politicize the concept of gender.[8] More specifically, they argue that Churchill's use of plural voice disrupts the *I-You* exchange[9] (70). In rehearsing this short passage, it became obvious to me that this series of 'I's' have a cumulative effect. Joan says, "*I* was only twelve" (line 3), "*I* went with my friend" (line 5), and "*I* thought *I* knew more science" (lines 5, 7).

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[8] As with many critics, Aston and Savona view gender as socially constructed. As such, feminists consider it a legitimate site for political struggle against patriarchy and oppression

[9] *I* is imbued with agency, action and/or power. *I* can be either subject or object. But when the *I*'s are repeated, there is a cumulative power. The female subject becomes plural. *You* also expresses subjectivity. Gender, life experience, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, class, family relationships, education and/or politics affect subjectivity.

Isabella remarks, "*I* always traveled as a lady" (line 8), and Marlene observes, "*I* could wear trousers in the office but *I* don't" (line 9). These repetitious I's construct a plural female subject, placing it at odds with the patriarchal, phallocentric order (Aston and Savona 9). In this case and others, Churchill uses language to reposition the female subject. This repositioning, combined with its radical structure, enables Churchill's Top Girls to deconstruct assumptions of a stable historical discourse that is male-oriented and positivist (Marlow 70; Keyssar 96).

I would describe the accumulation of the characters' disjointed and dislocated narratives as being fugue-like in structure. I also think that Churchill is purposeful in choosing these particular stories. She does more than just engage us with stories of oppression. She reveals the material conditions of each woman's time period as the story unfolds. Lady Nijo was a poet's daughter, privileged by wealth and education, yet discarded by the Emperor once her father died. Nijo observes sadly, "Better to leave if your master doesn't want you" (Churchill I. i. 15). Pope Joan hid her gender to escape poverty and pursue her studies only to be killed for being female and presuming to control the Catholic Church. She was stoned to death when she gave birth in the street. Joan explains, "... A Pope with a child was about as bad as possible. I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope" (Churchill I. i. 11). Isabella Bird's travel abroad was at the expense of her relationship with sister Hennie. She married Hennie's doctor, John Bishop, late in life out of gratitude for his care of Hennie. Isabella's sense of propriety prevented her from marrying earlier to the rugged Jim Nugent. She explains, "Mr. Nugent was a man that any woman might love but none could marry. I came back to England" (Churchill I. i. 8). By the end of the dinner party,

once Gret and Griselda's narratives are also revealed, a definite pattern emerges: historically, the male *is* privileged over the female (Fitzsimmons 21). These women have enjoyed fewer rights and privileges, exerting less power than the men around them in their respective time periods. Yet quite consciously, Churchill disperses authority among multiple female voices, undoing the singular sovereign voice of the master narrative[10] traditionally dominated by the male (Diamond 161-163; Bristol 21). I interpret these critics' view to mean that by facilitating multiple female subjectivities in Top Girls, Churchill rejects existence of a single, universal, unified truth.

Patient Griselda's Narrative

Griselda joins the dinner party late, about twenty-five minutes into the scene. It is Griselda's narrative, interrupted often by Marlene, which ratchets up the dramatic tension. Griselda is matter-of-fact about her husband Walter's many tests of her obedience: "It was always easy [to obey] because I always knew I would do what he said" (Churchill I. i. 15). Griselda exemplifies female submissiveness, but her purpose within the dinner party is to provoke. Griselda's dispassionate account of Walter taking her children from her only to reunite her with them twelve years later creates controversy:

1 MARLENE. Walter's a monster. Weren't you angry? What did you do?

2 GRISELDA. Well, I fainted. Then I cried and kissed the children. / everyone was making a fuss of me.

3 NIJO. But did you feel anything for them?

4 GRISELDA. What?

[10] Master narratives are 'grand over-arching truths' intended to create a unified understanding of the world. Jean Francois Lyotard argues against one universal, over-arching truth, charging that even science seeks to legitimate itself through 'metadiscourse' (xxiii).

5 NIJO. Did you feel anything for the children?

6 GRISELDA. Of course, I loved them.

7 JOAN. So you forgave him and lived with him?

8 GRISELDA. He suffered so much all those years.

9 ISABELLA. Hennie had the same sweet nature.

10 NIJO. So they dressed you again?

11 GRISELDA. Cloth of gold.

12 JOAN. I can't forgive anything.

13 MARLENE. You really are exceptional, Griselda.

14 NIJO. Nobody gave me back my children.

Nijo cries. (Churchill I. i. 16)

Griselda survived Walter's tests of her devotion. Her forgiveness and gratitude at regaining her children are unequivocal (lines 2, 8). But her stoicism precipitates diverse responses. Childless, Isabella is mawkish in response while Joan, who does not admit to grieving her child, is dismissive (lines 7, 12). Plied with wine, Nijo is inconsolable at the loss of her own four children (lines 5. 14). Marlene's outrage (line 1), meanwhile, does not make sense until the final scene of Top Girls when her back-story is revealed: father was an alcoholic who abused her mother, and Marlene gave up Angie at seventeen to Joyce. I think that Churchill creates a breadth of response to Griselda's story as a kind of foreshadowing. Just as the characters do not respond uniformly to Griselda's story, Churchill offers her audience no single universal truth at the end of the dinner party. In stead, she subverts audience expectation of dramatic cohesion.

After Griselda's narrative, the dinner party's plural voice structure changes to a series of monologues. There is little vocal overlapping. These monologues go mostly unchallenged by the others. I think that Churchill wants to make clear the characters' situations, actions, and motivations (Kritzer 194). Also, in general, Isabella, Nijo, Joan and Gret are more honest in their monologues than earlier.

Isabella Bird's Monologue

Churchill describes Isabella as "a mixture of very proper, straight Victorian behavior coupled with an indomitable spirit and great courage and a will for adventure" (qtd. in Goodman 1998 94). But in this monologue, Isabella reveals a profound sense of melancholy and longing:

> I can never be like Hennie. I was always so busy in England, a kind of business (sic) I detested. The very presence of people exhausted my emotional reserves. I could not be like Hennie however I tried. I tried and was as ill as could be. The doctor suggested a steel net to support my head, the weight of my own head was too much for my diseased spine. It is dangerous to put oneself in depressing circumstances. Why should I do it? (Churchill I. i. 17)

As daughters of a zealous Scottish Victorian clergyman, Isabella and sister Hennie no doubt faced severe, prescribed behavioral expectations (Chubbick 3). In Purity and Danger, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that religious beliefs express society's awareness of itself and that religion's social structure is imbued with punitive powers that maintain its being (101). So what specific impact might societal expectations have had

on Isabella?[11] It is clear that Isabella could not 'live up' to prescribed expectations. Twice she laments, "I tried to do what my father wanted" (Churchill I. i. 6). Although Isabella lived under the constant specter of her father, I think that it is simplistic to assume that Isabella's illness was church-induced. In Letters to Henrietta, biographer Kay Chubbick contends that Isabella's illness was at least partly medically induced. She endured several surgeries, was bled regularly by leeches and incisions, took opium and chlorodyne (opium and cannabis), and drank quantities of alcohol 'for her nerves' (5). . Chubbick characterizes Isabella was a Victorian 'neurasthenic', a woman plagued by physiological problems arising from the psychological (6). Many times Isabella experienced vitality abroad only to lapse into illness when she returned to Scotland. Isabella once wrote her publisher from Korea, "I suffer from fatigue of the *social* kind, and that part of *ordinary* life, the attempt, often fruitless, to make things 'fit in' which produces attacks of nervous exhaustion and partial failure of the heart" (qtd. in Chubbick 7). I find it ironic that Isabella's poor health allowed her to travel yet she worried that her illness was psychosomatic. I believe that Isabella's insatiable desire for psychological and physical freedom was twisted and grotesquely manifest in her material body (Bakhtin 24). I believe that Isabella 'punished' herself physically with illness for wanting more than Victorian society allowed.

Isabella's last question, "Why should I do it?" a cry from the heart, goes unanswered for several lines until she herself declares, "I cannot and will not live the life of a lady" (Churchill I. i. 16). The lack of response from the others to Isabella is

[11] During rehearsals with the actor, we explored Isabella's circumstances: societal expectations, religious beliefs, and her relationship with her father. Deciding to what extent these affected Isabella's health was helped a great deal by the actor reading Kay Chubbick's biography of Isabella, Letters to Henrietta.

important. Aston and Savona argue that realistic theatre depends on purposeful interaction between speaker and listener: the *I* addressing *you* here and *now*. This I-You refers to the situation at hand while, at the same time, referring to unseen characters, events, and spaces *beyond* the scene (52-53). When none of the other women answer, Isabella's question hangs potently in the air. The question, which refers to *her* world, challenges *them*. What compels them, in their respective offstage worlds, to acquiesce and 'live like a lady'? I find their lack of verbal response intriguing but sad. The question is too large, too personal. I think that, with the exceptions of Isabella and Gret, it *never* occurred to the others that they could choose *not* to live like a lady.

The lack of verbal response is likewise significant to the scene's dramaturgy. It undermines the realism by stalling the scene's forward momentum. In effect, a cohesive dramatic build to the anticipated traditional climax and denouement is sabotaged. French feminist Helene Cixous considered such climax emblematic of male pleasure (qtd. in Goodman 1996 233; Gelfand 49). So once again, by working against expectation, Churchill works against archetypal masculine dramatic structure.

Lady Nijo's Monologue

Human experience is fragmented, but as anthropologist Mary Douglas argues, behavior carries symbolic meaning. Thus, the function of rituals is to modify human experience (69). Lady Nijo despairs at missing her father's funeral procession. But her sadness quickly gives way to anger:

> I was eighteen, at the Full Moon Ceremony. They make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks, and then they beat their women across the loins so they'll have sons and not daughters. So the Emperor beat us

> all very hard as usual ... he told his attendants they could beat us too. Well they had a wonderful time/ So Genki and I made a plan, and the ladies all hid in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. 'We wouldn't even dream of stepping on his Majesty's shadow.' And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick. (I. i. 16)

With this concrete experience, Nijo transgresses several modalities of difference: her race, gender, class and sexuality, providing a lens into the construction of her non-Western woman's experience (Hennessey 65). As a court lady, Nijo participated in the elaborate court ceremonies central to the social life of the Imperial family. She was high-ranking and favored but extremely spirited. She excelled at music, painting, and poetry but never received the rank of official consort. In The Confessions of Lady Nijo, Karen Brazell points out that Nijo may well have become Empress had it not been for her father's untimely death (ix). At court, Lady Nijo was reputed to be a sophisticated, vain, and mean-spirited young lady who loathed disrespect (Brazell xx). All these qualities are evident in this story from Nijo's youth. She not only participated in the rebellion but also helped to plan it.

Nijo was willing to endure a beating from the Emperor. But Nijo scolds Marlene for not understanding that she objected not to the Full Moon ritual itself but to the Emperor allowing *other* men to beat her. In the retelling of the story, Nijo is astonished at her youthful audacity. She repeats twice over "I hit him [the Emperor] with a stick,"

reveling in her newfound potency (Churchill I. i. 16). One would hope that remembering her former audacity might hearten Nijo, remind her of her inherent strength. But it does not. According to the play's stage directions, at the end of the dinner party Nijo is crying (Churchill I. i. 17).

Pope Joan's Monologue

The role of Pope Joan signifies the extent to which a woman will go to live to her intellectual potential: Without realizing that it is 'wrong,' Joan transgresses gender in order to rise to the highest ranks within the Catholic Church, effectively undermining papal authority. At the end of Act One of Top Girls, Pope Joan speaks Latin, the traditional language of the patriarchy, the academy and the Church (Bimberg 94). Michael Lupu, dramaturge for the Guthrie production (2002) argues that Joan's recitation of Titus Lecretius Carus's poem; "De Rerum Natura" (The Nature of Things) is a personal act of comfort and a withdrawal from the dinner party's chaos (Strangl 26). But I interpret the Latin recitation as a ritual, elevated and highly theatrical, symbolically linking past and present (Douglas 99). In the midst of the chaos, Joan relives the zenith of her papal power by speaking to her faithful masses outside the Vatican.

Joan's power is short-lived. Significantly, she vomits at the end of the Latin speech (Churchill I. i. 17). I think that the significance is not in the filth generated but how it issues forth. In Joan's case, it transverses the boundary of the body through the mouth that dares to speak what it should not (Kristeva 69). Feminist Julia Kristeva argues that filth signifies for the subject the risks to which the symbolic order is exposed. As a consequence, the filth becomes a device of discrimination (69). In Joan's case, she dared to enter the symbolic order, the patriarchal Catholic Church. Therefore, her vomit is a

visceral reminder of her difference, her femaleness. Joan says, "Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope" (Churchill I. i. 11). Quite clearly, Joan must not dare to speak the Latin of popes, of men (Aston & Savona 70). This analysis can be taken further. I think that Joan's vomiting is a visceral reminder of her childbirth. The baby, something only a woman can create transverses the boundary of her body through the vagina. I think that through this birth, Joan was made abject. As a result, she is punished through death by the same faithful who once admired her because she dares to 'defile' the position of Pope.

Dull Gret's Monologue

Art theorist Robert Delevoy describes Dull Gret within the Brueghel painting quite graphically in Symbolists and Symbolism:

> She [Gret] strides boldly forward, carrying the long sword of the giants of mythology, wearing a helmet and breast plate, her eyes flashing fire, while from her gaping lips issues the song of the eternal tyrant, wil je niet je moet wel ('whether you like it or not, you shall') ... Clearly this apocalyptic figure, central point of the composition, has symbolic meaning ... she incarnates the spirit of oppression and brutality – elemental malevolence without a spark of pity. (71)

While there is some agreement among theorists that Gret's only monologue exemplifies female resistance to oppression (Brown 128; Fitzsimmons 1987 20), Max Stafford-Clark, director of the original Top Girls, believes that Dull Gret speaks and behaves as a *contemporary* character: a subversive woman of peasant background created by Churchill in direct response to Thatcherism (qtd. in Goodman 1998 95). Stafford-Clark cites the fact that Gret's verb tense shifts to present halfway through her monologue:

> There's lot of little devils our size, and we get them down all right and given them a beating. There's lots of funny creatures round your feet, you don't like to look, like rats and lizards and nasty things, a bum with a face, and fish with legs, and faces on things that don't have faces on. But they don't hurt, you just keep going. Well we'd had worse, you see, we'd had the Spanish. We'd all had family killed. Men on wheels. Babies on swords. I'd had enough, I was mad, I *hate* the bastards. I come out my front door that morning and *shout* till my neighbors come out and I said, 'Come on, we're going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.' And they all *come* out just as they was from baking or washing their aprons, and we *push* down the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell. (italics added, Churchill I. i. 17)

The inconsistency in Gret's verb tense can be explained simply by her lower social status. Still, I find Stafford-Clark's interpretation of Gret as a contemporary character intriguing. In rehearsal, I could see quite clearly that Gret's shift to present verb tense created a sense of immediacy, bringing the 'revolution' into modern times. Firstly, Gret situates her village at the mouth of Hell that is burning because of the soldiers' attack. This image could well represent Britain. Life was notoriously bad for poor women under Thatcher's Conservatives during the 1980's (Gardner 1995 21-23). Gret goes on to say, "There's a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he's scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it's falling down on us, and it's money, so a lot of the women stop and get some" (Churchill I. i. 17). This mention of women who mistake shit for money

could be read as criticism of women who have been duped by capitalism. It is interesting that Gret urges not men but women to put aside their baking and aprons and fight alongside her in Hell. Gret then boasts that she can fill a basket with gold cups owned by the devils that live there (Churchill I. i. 17). As a woman of lower class, Gret despises the devils, the rich. This creates an immediate parallel with Joyce. Also a woman of lower class, Joyce loathes the "rich cows," the upper class women for whom she cleans house (Churchill II. ii. 42).

I think that Gret and Joyce have another crucial similarity. Both characters are warriors. Joyce relishes the idea that a 'revolution' is close at hand. In the midst of arguing with Marlene, Joyce warns her, "So don't be around when it [the revolution] happens because if someone's kicking you I'll just laugh" (Churchill II. iii. 42). Likewise, Gret describes how in the heat of the battle, "you don't stop for nothing," boasting that "we give them devils such a beating" (Churchill I. i. 17). Ultimately I think of Gret as an *emblematic* warrior who links the past with present, the ongoing rebellion against oppressions of both gender and class. Compared to Joyce, Gret seems larger than life. I choose to believe that hope is embodied in Gret and Joyce because both characters seem determined and strong. Neither seems likely to perish in the midst of the revolution.

Isabella's 'Last Hurrah'

It is significant that, at the end of her life, Isabella still boasts of defying male authority. She had lived for so long and so unhappily confined by her evangelical father's expectations. In contrast to her previous monologue, this one is imbued with Isabella's indomitable spirit:

> I thought I would have a last jaunt up the west river in China. Why not? But the doctors were so very grave. I just went to Morocco. The sea was so wild I had to be landed by ship's crane in a coal bucket. My horse was a terror to me - a powerful black charger ... So off I went to visit the Berber sheiks in full blue trousers and great brass spurs. I was the first European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco. I was seventy years old. What lengths to go to for a last chance of joy. I knew my return of vigor was only temporary, but how marvelous while it lasted. (Churchill I. i. 17)

I find the most poignant line of Isabella's monologue to be the last one, "I knew my return to vigor was only temporary, but how marvelous while it lasted" (Churchill I. i. 17). There is a kind of impermanence to Isabella's joy; her bravado is fleeting. But with her spirited rebellion against male authority, Isabella serves as an example to the other women. She made very different life choices than many; the most obvious of these is motherhood. Isabella states flatly, "I never had children. I was very fond of horses" (Churchill I. i. 12). Is it possible that in choosing to *not* bear children, Isabella still inspires the others to use their bodies in ways that honor their respective natures?

Aston argues that Isabella's voice "unfastens" the other women. They break from their bodies, where formerly they were forbidden to take pleasure (1995 48). This is possible. Most of the characters – Nijo, Joan, and Marlene - take pleasure with their bodies sexually but the costs exacted are *significant*. The most extreme example is Lady Nijo. She was raised from a baby to be the Emperor's courtesan but had to endure many indignities. Nijo had to bring the Emperor other women (Churchill I. i. 5), and the

Emperor gave Nijo to another man for sexual pleasure (Churchill I. i. 9). It is hardly surprising; therefore, that Nijo's first child by the Emperor was a stillborn boy. The second child was a girl, the result of an affair with Akebono. To hide her indiscretion from the Emperor, Nijo relinquished her daughter to Akebono so that his wife could raise her (Churchill I. i. 9-10). The Emperor did not care about Nijo's affair with Ariake. By that point, Nijo was out of the Emperor's favor. Her affair with Ariake resulted in her third and fourth babies, both boys. She states that she never saw the third child, and that because Ariake died before the fourth was born, Nijo "felt nothing for him" (Churchill I. i. 12). It appears that by that point, Nijo's heart was broken.

Joan and Marlene's circumstances are less complicated than Nijo's but the stakes are still high for them. As a result of an affair with the chamberlain, Pope Joan became pregnant. She gave birth in the street during the Rogation Day procession. The clergy and mob took Joan by the feet, dragged her out of town, and stoned her to death. The baby also died (Churchill I. i. 12). Marlene's unnamed affairs also had consequences. At seventeen, she relinquished baby Angie to Joyce. Her next two pregnancies ended in abortion (Churchill II. ii. 40).

The Dinner Party's Last Image: 'Chaos'

The dinner party is the last scene in the story of Top Girls. From a chronological perspective, it occurs a year after Marlene's visit with sister Joyce. The scene's last moments are deliberately orchestrated chaos, bereft of conclusiveness. Christiane Bimberg claims that the last stage picture is reminiscent of "the world of men": Nijo is crying, Joan is vomiting and Marlene is drinking Isabella's brandy (400). The anarchic speech and behavior by the women, normally associated with men, constitutes a "revolt

of the female body" (Aston and Savona 120). I think that it is most significant that Churchill expresses these characters' actions as stage directions that directly *conflict* with Isabella's victorious speech (Churchill I. i. 17). This incongruity has a destabilizing effect, contributing *to* the chaos. The audience's expectations of dramatic clarity, unity, and cohesion are again undermined (Aston and Savona 131). Their last glimpse of the historical characters offers no "ennobling models of successful behavior" (Quigley 42). Quite deliberately, Churchill offers the audience no happily-ever-after, no satisfaction. There is just unease fashioned by both the form and content of the last image.

The audience's inability to neatly interpret the dinner party's characters segues into this chapter's next topic, a discussion of theatre semiotics[12], in particular a discussion of 'doubling' in Top Girls. By this I mean the playwright's direction to have an actor play more than one character within the play. The audience perceives this as significant. It is often assumed that Churchill wrote Top Girls determined to use doubling. This is not the case. Churchill's original intent was to write Top Girls so that it could be produced with a large company of actors *or* a small company of actors with double and triple parts (Goodman 1998 92). As it happens, in the original production (1982) at London's Royal Court Theatre directed by Stafford-Clark, the majority of the actresses played two or three parts because of financial constraints (Churchill 3). The only character *not* doubled was that of Marlene. That said, the published text suggests the doubling of specific roles.

[12] Based on the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the study of signs focuses on the ways in which words, images and behavior convey meaning and we perceive them. Words are not referents but signs. The mark is the 'signifier' and the corresponding concept is the 'signified.' The relationship between the two is arbitrary. Theatre semiotics, therefore, is the study of signs put onstage for the audience to interpret (Fortier 19; Aston & Savona 99).

Section Three: The Family Scene
The Semiotics of Doubling

The audience sees that the actress who plays Marlene has only one part while the actress playing Isabella *also* plays Mrs. Kidd and Joyce (Churchill 3). They read this doubling as a semiotic sign , which pulls them out of the illusion of reality. One possible audience reading of Isabella/Mrs. Kidd/Joyce is as more long-suffering than Marlene having acquired 'historical memory' of female oppression. The audience sees this same actress repeatedly, as different characters in different contexts. As Isabella, she rebels against Victorian societal constraints, suffering extremely poor health (Churchill I. i. 7). As Mrs. Kidd, she is a stay-at-home mother and wife who supports husband Walter "all the way" (Churchill II. i. 30). And as Joyce, husband Frank abandons her, leaving her to raise Angie single handedly and work four cleaning jobs to pay the bills (Churchill II. ii. 41). A kind of collective effect is created. I also believe that the repeated appearance of the same actress refers audience to something *outside* the scenes and play itself, the larger concept of female oppression throughout time and history.

I do not think that the audience reads the actress playing only Marlene in the same way. She is not subject to the 'cumulative oppression' experienced by the actress who plays Isabella, Mrs. Kidd and Joyce. The actress playing Marlene listens to the sufferings of the dinner party women but does not accrue suffering. She does not experience it first-hand. One wonders how conscious the character of Marlene is of female oppression. Is she only self-interested or is she cognizant of other women's suffering? Does Marlene feel any sense of responsibility to women of lower class like Joyce?

Marlene & Joyce's Relationship
Praxis of the Personal and the Political

As sisters, Marlene and Joyce grew up in a socialist home. But they do not share a common vision of equality (hooks 1984 29). Marlene equates feminism to a search for economic equality with men while Joyce perceives her domestic life experiences and those of their mother as utterly devalued by Marlene:

> JOYCE. You said mother had a wasted life.
>
> MARLENE. Yes I do. Married to that bastard.
>
> JOYCE. What sort of life did he have? /
>
> MARLENE. Violent life?
>
> JOYCE. Working in the fields like an animal./ Why wouldn't he want a drink?
>
> MARLENE. Come off it.
>
> JOYCE. You want a drink. He couldn't afford whiskey.
>
> MARLENE. I don't want to talk about him.
>
> JOYCE. You started. I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.
>
> MARLENE: She was hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.
>
> JOYCE: It's not all down to him. / Their
>
> MARLENE: She didn't hit him.
>
> JOYCE: lives were rubbish. They were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of a life / did they have? (Churchill II, ii. 41-42)

Based on this exchange, I think that Joyce identifies more strongly with the working class father while Marlene identifies with their long-suffering mother. This discrepancy unmasks Churchill's socialist-feminist critique by exposing class tension and political difference even within the family (Reinelt 2003 180; Aston 42).

As a director, I questioned why Joyce was so defensive. I think she is so because in defending her parents, Joyce is defending herself and the limits of her life choices as both a woman and member of the working class. In effect, Joyce is denied the possibility of change (Fitzsimmons 147). Joyce's shouldering of the responsibility for Angie conferred on Marlene opportunities for success in the public marketplace. As a result, Marlene has experienced more choices, a greater number of opportunities such as living and working in America (Churchill II. ii. 42). Marlene has experienced the freedom to choose while Joyce has not. Joyce is limited. Joyce is confined. With her husband gone, she must work four housecleaning jobs, paid work that exists within the realm of the home (Reinelt 2003 174; Barrett 14). Unfortunately for Joyce, Marlene does not appear to grasp how this gender-based division of labor limits Joyce's power. Marlene's solution is to offer money, which Joyce rejects saying: "I've always said I don't want your money" (Churchill II. ii. 41).

But Churchill does not leave this as a simple case of class exploitation nor a clear case of dominance and submission because of gender and class. Churchill adds *another* layer of complication beyond blame of the characters' outside circumstances. Churchill demonstrates that we must *also* examine the destruction that characters create for each other (Sauer 32):

MARLENE. You're jealous. / I had to get out, I knew when I

JOYCE. Jealous?

MARLENE. was thirteen, out of their out house, out of them, never let that happen to me, never let him, make my own way, out.

JOYCE. Jealous of what you've done, you're ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn't you, I'm ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you've got on, nothing's changed for most people / has it.

MARLENE. I hate the working class.

JOYCE. Yes you do. (Churchill II. ii. 42)

Joyce is clearly hurt by Marlene's abandonment. She believes that Marlene's escape has cost her significantly and hints that Marlene perpetuates her domination (hooks 2000 26). Moreover, Joyce is angered that Marlene cannot see women as a collective group *and* refuses to acknowledge the existence of Britain's working class. Joyce reacts ferociously with a kind of "crude socialism" (Lane 25):

MARLENE. It [the working class] doesn't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid. / I don't

JOYCE. Come on, now we're getting it.

MARLENE. like the way they talk. I don't like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits / and brothers and sisters –

JOYCE. I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring / Mercedes it was.

MARLENE. Oh very mature –

JOYCE. I hate the cows I work for and their dirty dishes and blanquette

of fucking veau. (Churchill II. ii. 42)

Having escaped her inherited socioeconomic restraint, the working class, Marlene dismisses others as lazy and stupid. In doing so, she criticizes Joyce who is anything but lazy and stupid (Kritzer 147). Joyce is degraded. The argument escalates into gross images from both sisters: beer guts, football vomit, dirty dishes and blanquette of fucking veau. Academic Austin Quigley argues that these images create an unflattering look at Margaret Thatcher's empty promises of equality (45). Certainly, under Thatcher's Conservatives, during the years from 1979-1990, the gulf between rich and poor in Britain was ever-widening (Gardner 1999 91). As Marlene and Joyce illustrate, there was no equality of opportunity.

Kritzer argues that this final naturalistic scene between the sisters is "patterned on patriarchal opposition of masculine and feminine" (148). In other words, Marlene views success from a male, capitalistic perspective while Joyce operates within the female realm of the home. She has limited job prospects, tends her father's grave, and visits her mother weekly (Churchill II, ii, 36; Kritzer 146). Operating within capitalism, what choices does Joyce really have? It is little wonder that Marlene's assurance to Joyce, "You've got what it [being successful] takes" rings hollow (Churchill II. ii. 43). The sisters' vocal overlapping precludes a simplistic interpretation of their opposing politics:

MARLENE. I will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket and I won't be sent to Siberia / or a loony bin just because

JOYCE. No, you'll be on a yacht, you'll head be head of Coca-Cola and you wait, the Eighties are going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs –

MARLENE. I'm original and I support Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star because the reds are swarming up his map and I want to be free in a free world

JOYCE. What? / What?

MARLENE. I know what I mean / by that – I mean not shut up here.

JOYCE. So don't be round here when it happens because if someone's Kicking you I'll just laugh. (Churchill II. ii. 47)

Joyce cannot allow herself to forgive Marlene's aligning with 'them', the upper echelons of power who oppress her (Fitzsimmons 23). Reminiscent of Gret, Joyce relishes the impending 'revolution', feeling no guilt that Marlene would be a 'casualty'. On the other hand, Marlene is just as entrenched, spouting the rhetoric of Thatcher and Reagan. How is this to be interpreted? Churchill says, "I never intended them [the audience] to agree with Marlene's argument ... [but] I think it would be wrong to show Marlene wavering in her convictions" (Fitzsimmons 62). Thus, the overlapping lines are particularly effective. Marlene remains undaunted in her convictions even when confronted full force with Joyce's bile. As a result, the audience's interpretation cannot be confined to the simplest scenario, that of 'the exploiter and the exploited' (Kritzer 148). The discrepancy between Marlene and Joyce with regard to personal circumstances, social class, and values seems insurmountable. Joyce's prospects, as a member of the working class, are bleak and as a liberal feminist, Marlene does not care about the costs exacted for her success at Joyce's expense. With the complexities of oppression exposed, Churchill offers her audience no easy answers. Instead, she creates unease by revealing how truly untenable the situation is: any liberal solutions for reform from within the existing systems appear wholly

inadequate. Cleverly, Churchill refers the audience to the political framework *outside* of the dramatic work (Kritzer 2). As a consequence, the audience is implicated and empowered to participate in the requisite changes (Reinelt 2003 178; Kritzer 11).

The argument between Marlene and Joyce over Angie's future escalates their conflict:

> MARLENE. I didn't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class / Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes.
>
> JOYCE. And if they haven't?
>
> MARLENE. If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job. Why should I?
>
> JOYCE. What about Angie?
>
> MARLENE. What about Angie?
>
> JOYCE. She's stupid, lazy, and frightened, so what about her?
>
> MARLENE. You run her down too much. She'll be all right.
>
> JOYCE. I don't expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. (Churchill II. ii. 42)

It is intriguing that Marlene deflects when Joyce asks, "What about Angie?" Does Marlene agree with Joyce that Angie is stupid, lazy and frightened? Perhaps Marlene has no easy comeback because she views her biological daughter as being all she despises. But is it a foregone conclusion that Angie's life will be as limited as Joyce's?

I think that Angie's future prospects are grim, given that she is "useless at school" (Churchill II. ii. 38) and subsequently drops out (Churchill II. iii. 23). The likelihood that Angie's life will be limited like her mother's is confirmed for the audience earlier in the

play. In Act Two scene one, Angie ran away to London to find her 'Auntie Marlene' who she suspected was her biological mother. At that point, Marlene dismissed Angie's potential to her co-worker Winn saying, "She's not going to make it" (Churchill II. i. 33). This is major. Chronologically, Angie's reunion with Marlene occurs one year *after* this argument between Joyce and Marlene. Therefore, by the time the audience hears Marlene's remark; they have already glimpsed Angie's future. It is not good.

By the end of this argument, the relationship between Marlene and Joyce is beyond repair. Too many things have been said to allow for forgiveness:

> MARLENE. You've got what it takes.
>
> JOYCE. I know I have.
>
> MARLENE. I didn't really mean all that.
>
> JOYCE. I did.
>
> MARLENE. But we're friends anyway.
>
> JOYCE. I don't think so, no. (Churchill II. ii. 42)

Kritzer argues that Marlene desires maternal approval from Joyce (147). The situation clearly backfires. Regardless of Marlene's motivation, the sisters do not reconcile. We know this because a year later, Joyce is not at the dinner party to celebrate Marlene's promotion to managing director of the Top Girls Agency.

By the end of the family scene, Joyce and Marlene's personal relationship is effectively ended because the political and personal positions they occupy are separate and impossible to bridge. With this, Kritzer argues that Churchill is pleading for a fundamental overhaul of the world of work, questioning the rewards of economic productivity and calling for a re-evaluation of the costs of caring (149). While

theoretically, I agree with Kritzer in this, I must admit that in directing the actors, I interpreted "the costs of caring" as personal. I felt that at that moment, the costs of caring exacted were on the sisters themselves. The stakes were high for each sister; each would experience loss. In rehearsal discussion, the actors predicted that both Marlene and Joyce would experience grief as a result of their estrangement.

Angie: a specter of the future

In Act Two scene two, Marlene and Joyce's back-story is revealed; as is the fact that Marlene is Angie's biological mother. Given its sparse text and indeterminate last image, how is this scene best interpreted?

> *Marlene sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink.*
>
> *Angie comes in.*
>
> ANGIE. Mum?
>
> MARLENE. Angie? What's the matter?
>
> ANGIE. Mum?
>
> MARLENE. No, she's gone to bed. It's Auntie Marlene.
>
> ANGIE. Frightening.
>
> MARLENE. Did you have a bad dream? What's happened in it? Well you're awake now, aren't you, pet?
>
> ANGIE. Frightening. (Churchill II. ii. 43)

Does Angie say "frightening" because she hears the argument between Marlene and Joyce? Churchill states that it is entirely possible that she eavesdrops (qtd. in Goodman 1996 97). However, Stafford-Clark interprets the exchange socio-politically: "The play is frighteningly prophetic ... Angie has been asleep and has had a nightmare and has

woken up, so that her line 'frightening' applies [literally] to the dream that she's had, and also [metaphorically] to the context of the decade to come and the prospects for someone like Angie" (Goodman 1996 97-98). I view Angie as symbolically poised between the loyalties and social classes of the two sisters: She embodies their fundamental beliefs and their dreams (Quigley 50; Goodman 1996 98). But what does her future hold? Academic Lisa Merrill argues that if the audience cannot or will not create a space for dialogue around Churchill's desired changes, Angie's future is indeed frightening (72). In other words, Angie is the specter of what may come.

The Resonant Last Image

Quigley argues that theatre is a powerful medium for "therapeutic images" to combat the devastating depictions of culture that are often transmitted to us (47). From this perspective, Top Girls' final tableau is a challenge of representation for the director who must strive to create an image layered enough to encapsulate the intricacy of the play's inherited *and* emerging political realities:

> ... a child rejected by an adult, a daughter rejected by a mother, an unsuccessful person rejected by a successful person, a woman rejected by another woman, and one individual rejected by another individual. It is an image not of achieved but aborted community (Quigley 46).

In a University of Hawaii production (1987), director Juli Thompson Burk chose an image that she felt reflected Marlene's emotional conflict:

> After her last word, "Frightening," she [Angie] laid herself across Marlene's lap. This image was deliberately staged to ironically invoke Michelangelo's Pieta, visually confirming Marlene's historical inability to

> maintain close family ties and her complete alienation from the experience and commitment to motherhood. (76)

Burke argues that this image had decided resonance in Hawaii, a Catholic state (76). But in view of her stated materialist-feminist interpretation (Burk 67), I feel that Burk's Madonna image is unsuitable. Firstly, I think that this image privileges the theme of motherhood over the themes of oppression (i.e. class and gender). I also question whether a Madonna image successfully encapsulates this play's inherited and emerging *political* realities. Moreover, I find the sheer religiousness of Burk's Madonna image unsuitable because of emotional associations with the Virgin Mary. Catholics appeal to the Virgin Mary for help, for comfort.

I believe that Churchill's intent with Top Girls is not to comfort; it is to discomfort. She does not ask the audience to have 'faith' that change will come but to *actively* participate in bringing it about. Moreover, as Pope Joan's narrative shows, there are few patriarchal institutions as recalcitrant, conservative, oppressive and misogynist as the Catholic Church. As feminists, we must be cognizant of which narratives, and images, include and exclude women. Those that exclude women circulate as ideologies perpetuated by the hegemonic patriarchal culture (Hennessey 118-119). Why thoughtlessly participate in our own demise? I agree with feminist bell hooks that the narratives and images that we, as feminists, perpetuate must be grounded in critical political awareness (1994 26).

Conclusion

Janelle Reinelt points out that Top Girls generated controversy in 1985 when it played in San Francisco (2003 181). Marlene was perceived to represent all feminists,

and it was believed that Marlene had failed Angie. The pervasive interpretation was that feminism had 'failed' women in promoting the value of paid work over marriage and motherhood. This prompted renewed calls for women to stay home with their children (Reinelt 2003 181). As with so many mostly male theatre critics, of the London (1982) and New York (1983) productions, Churchill's materialist feminist political aesthetic was misunderstood.

With Top Girls, Churchill consciously avoids offering easy answers. Churchill explained to Linda Stone of New York's Village Voice: "I quite deliberately left a hole in the play, rather than giving people a model of what they could be like. I meant the thing that is absent to have a presence in the play" (Stone 80-81; Fitzsimmons 1989 148). What is "the thing that is absent" to which Churchill refers? I do not think that it is what the majority of theatre critics believed, that Marlene realizes too late that she stupidly sacrificed Angie in pursuit of success. I do not believe that it is a nice, tidy epilogue about Angie's future that proves she has 'what it takes' to become more than a packer at Tesco. I agree with Kritzer who argues that what is conspicuously absent from Top Girls is *men.*

Without the tangible and moral support of men, how can women create a more humane kind of feminism, one in which no longer denotes power and servitude but values the nurturing of our dependents both economically and politically? (Kritzer 149) Women need men to participate in creating these fundamental changes. Therefore, I believe that with Top Girls, Churchill appeals to all audience members, men and women, to participate in bringing about the necessary change.

I think that Caryl Churchill's Top Girls illustrates to young women - in particular, those involved with me in producing the play – that there is a profound need for both individual personal growth *and* community support. Each young woman in the Top Girls Project, like Angie, stands poised between inherited and emerging political realities. She may not yet realize that she is a feminist. But as an individual, she is shaped by society, and conversely, has the potential to shape society (Quigley 47). It is crucial, therefore, that each girl lives life with consciousness *and* conscience.

Chapter 3: The Dramatic Journey: Voice, Meaning and Community

> SCHMUNK. Do you have any comments about the project?
>
> MAIGHDLIN. I think the interviews were cool. It's important to talk to actors and find out what they're thinking because actors are not always that forthcoming about their ideas for the play. So I like the interview process. (Interview 6.6.06)

Introduction

Peter Brook says "theatre is not at its best if it gives just one person's point of view" (Moffit 17-18). But in high school, productions often turn solely on the director's interpretation. I believe that teenagers can make connections between their lives and their art. Using a well-written play like Top Girls, I hoped that the participants could explore its many meanings and contradictions. I share Paulo Freire's belief that the learner has the capacity to situate herself in her own historicity, grasping the social complexities of class, race, gender, and social organization (30). I also agree with Kathleen Weiler who argues that the feminist teacher must create for the student a means to examine power relations, history and personal experience (xiii). The key to the students' empowerment is 'voice.' Jonothan Neelands contends that a child's learning through drama can be stretched if she can combine something of her previous experience with imaginative speculation (1988 84). For the Top Girls Project, I set out to track the *impact* of the project on each girl, but also to provide her with a place to express her voice, the means to make connections, and the space to play imaginatively. I selected methodologies that were field-based, qualitative, and interpretative in character: Rehearsal Response Journals, One-to-One Interviews and my own Field Notes (May 229).

Journal Rationale

Howard Gardner believes that the journal allows the student the opportunity for "production, perception and reflection" while enabling the teacher to track the learning process (qtd. in Cary 320). Lucia Capacchione, meanwhile, advocates creative journal keeping, recommending use of media and forms beyond writing, to allow for growth and development of the student's personal expression (5). I reasoned that the journal was a viable means for the participant to express her creative individuality while providing me with a tangible record of her developing understanding of the play and its characters. Moreover, I believe that, as Richard Courtney argues, as the drama student makes meaning, she 'co-creates' the play (122). Ideally, journals could allow me, as director, to take each girl's point of view into consideration as I addressed the production as a whole. Each girl would be afforded a voice.

Interview Rationale

Each participant was interviewed three times: at the beginning, middle and end of the Top Girls Project. I structured the interviews in an open-ended fashion, working from a general list of questions that were pertinent at that point in the production process (see Appendix A). I altered the phrasing of the questions to fit the individual girl or rephrased for understanding to solicit varied meanings and interpretations (Denzin 43-44). Many of the interviews were almost conversational in nature because I encouraged the girls to ask questions of me, and we would discuss our mutual understanding of the play or its characters.

Interpretation

I recognize that, as Richard Cary suggests, my interpretation of the journals and the interviews is colored by my values and assumptions, and affected by critical perspective (19). Given my intentions, the methods are legitimate. In contrast to the conditions of my regular drama classroom, the Top Girls Project allowed me the luxury of a long rehearsal period and a small cast size with which to explore their emerging understandings. As a teacher, I could attend more closely to the nuance of each girl's learning process, and as a director, be more responsive to her needs in rehearsal. Moreover, my Field Notes enabled me to better understand my core beliefs and teaching practices. The combination of these three methodologies, journals, interviews, and field notes, has allowed me to reflect on my drama teaching practice (May 229).

Chapter Organization

Chapter 3 is organized into three sections. Section 1: Voice and Meaning via Journals and Interviews examines four students' responses to the process and the play through journals and interviews. Section 2: Interviews features another four students' responses through interviews only. Section 3 focuses specifically on the participants' perceptions of the relevance of Top Girls in 2006.

Change in Research Methodology

I planned to take advantage of the small company and generous timeframe to use an exploratory, non-sequential rehearsal process. The journals were central to this approach. Once the project was in motion, I remembered that a key teacher-director attribute is responsiveness to the company. This insight led to the discontinuation of journals and a shift in pedagogy (as discussed in Chapter 4: The Teacher-Director).

For the first five weeks, I generated individual and collective focus questions for the participants' Rehearsal Response Journals, urging creative responses to the Dinner Party characters. The results from this methodology were limited. All of the girls carried full academic loads. Kathleen, Nikki and Taylor said they could not complete the reflections, apologizing often for 'letting me down.' I also worried that journaling placed needless pressure on Lainie because of her learning disability. By week six, in the interests of the girls' well being and believing that the interviews gave me ample insight into their thinking, I abandoned the journals in favor of other forms of data collection. (Field Notes 23.03.06) It is worthwhile, however, to examine journal entries by Grace, Lainie, Taylor and Camille in *combination* with their interviews.

Section 1: Voice and Meaning via Journals and Interviews
Grace

The least experienced in the group, Grace was initially very reticent to verbalize her ideas in rehearsal. But her journal entries revealed a sensitive and emerging understanding of Pope Joan's character:

> Joan seems to be a little more shy than some of the other characters at the dinner party, although she is more than happy to explain some of the knowledge she has. Near the end of the dinner party, everyone starts to break down. Joan starts to ramble off in Latin as a way to escape the stress the rest of the characters get lost in. The poem "De Rerum Natura"

> speaks of how God created the world but He did not come first. I don't understand why Joan chose to recite this poem. I would think that she would have a strong belief that God came first. (Journal 8.03.06)[13]

Where Grace was not initially confident acting, she was confident writing and drawing. A small but delicately rendered pencil sketch accompanied this journal entry: Grace's tentative visual interpretation of Pope Joan.

Psychologist Jean Miller describes how, in order to keep living, a woman repeatedly breaks through to a new vision of her creative self (44). This new emerging self, which was so very evident in Grace's written work, was confirmed by her last interview. There was a marked change in her demeanor. She remarked how much she had grown personally during the course of the Top Girls Project. Grace still adored the character of Pope Joan but she saw *herself* differently: she no longer saw drawing and poetry as her only means of creative expression:

> With poetry, you're a bit farther away from people and you can't get them to understand your point of view completely. You try but it's hard. But with drama, you can express a little bit more because *you're* talking through words ... the way you play the character is the way you see the character ... you always throw in a little bit of the personality that you have or that you wished you had. (Interview 10.06.06)

Grace's changed view of her creative self illustrates not only the power of her involvement in the drama project but the need for me, as director, to make time and space for her to articulate her experience in learning (Gallagher 2000 19). Journals can provide

[13] Creative Response Journals were utilized for the first few weeks of the project. Weekly focus questions were offered to individuals and/or the group and creative responses were encouraged. Exploration of any and all characters was welcomed. All such journal entries will be referenced as Journal day/month/year.

this time and place. It is likewise crucial for me, as the teacher-director; to cultivate a drama environment that challenges the students' preconceived notions about theatre, the world and self (Lutenbacher 185).

Taylor

For the first seven weeks, Taylor's unhappiness with my decision to cast Grace rather than her as Pope Joan was evident. In rehearsal, Taylor articulated an affinity for Pope Joan's intellect and rebellion, and her only journal entry revealed her expertise with literary commentary: "Marlene has many similarities to Pope Joan; however, Joan does away with all outward signs of femininity while Marlene embraces her femininity as an emblem of willpower and defiance. Both of them have been betrayed by their bodies through [the bearing of] unwanted children" (Journal 3.03.06). This is an insightful comment, to be sure. Taylor's ability to make thematic connections and draw objective comparisons was strong. In sharing her interpretation of the characters, she was forceful and articulate. This intimidated the other girls, particularly Grace, which in turn created tension in the ensemble.

My concern was two-fold. I needed Taylor to realize that, much like an athlete, an actor thinks and feels simultaneously. It is this combination of thinking, feeling and acting which would foster the learning of *her* role in rehearsal (Hornby 116), that being Marlene. Most importantly, each girl in the ensemble must have an equal voice and feel affirmed for her interpretation of character. I subsequently scrapped the journals and designed rehearsals around character movement, visual interpretation and structured improvisation to allow each girl to meaningfully explore her Dinner Party character (see

Rehearsal Plans and Analysis in Chapter 4: The Teacher-Director). To her credit, Taylor eventually overcame her resistance to being cast as Marlene:

> I didn't like Marlene, but as I started working with the character more and more, I started sympathizing with her more and more ...so I did finally find that way to sympathize with Marlene because I have been in situations where I work so hard and focus so much on something – be it school work or music or my personal life or whatever – I do start to alienate people. (Interview 5.06.06)

Because Taylor was the most challenging participant in the Top Girls Project, not only for me but the other girls, I find her eventual empathy with Marlene ironic. I feel that the emotional detachment that Taylor demonstrated through journaling lessened substantially through the interview process. She made much needed emotional connections when she verbalized her ideas. In hindsight, I think that of all the participants Taylor most exemplified the power of drama to facilitate reflection on self.

Lainie

Lainie's frequent response to rehearsal discussion was silence. Unless asked directly, she contributed very little, often-feigning disinterest in the finer points of interpretation. Lainie proudly shared this entry in rehearsal, but because of her poor reading fluency, the significance of its subtext was not clear:

> Even tho (sic) I maybe quite (sic) when I talk I always make a mark on the topic. Even when I don't listen I still have a mark. Even when I am not apart (sic) of the conversation I still leave a Mark (sic). Because my name is Gret and when I talk I always leave a mark. (Journal 4.06.06)

Pema Chodron suggests that, in writing, "all our unresolved issues will come up; we are confronted by ourselves" (79). With this idea in mind, I interpret this journal entry as a mirror: Lainie was exploring not only the character of Dull Gret, but the foundation of who she – Lainie - was and how she experienced life, at least in rehearsal (Capacchione 55). This journal entry created a lens into Lainie's subjective rehearsal experience. I suddenly understood that her displays of indifference masked vulnerability. Her innate sensitivity was affirmed in the interviews.

Anxious about her learning disability, Lainie requested the part of Dull Gret; insisting that if she were only responsible for Gret's monologue at the end of the Dinner Party, she would be less likely to 'screw other people up'. By the midpoint interview, however, Lainie's identification with Gret was obvious. She viewed Gret's presence at the dinner party as essential, suggesting an alternative and more workable eating arrangement for the guests so Gret could sit closer to Marlene:

> Gret knows what Marlene's going through. Like I can see them as blood sisters – being if she has a problem, she could go to talk with Gret and Gret wouldn't say anything. She's a great listener. That's why I want to be there because I'm a good listener. (Interview 2.05.06)

Camille

Hans Georg Gadamer argues that "the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (75), while drama educator, Christine Hatton, points out that the medium of drama allows the participant to engage the audience in a 'dialogue' about issues important to her (149). Both perspectives may explain why Camille responded so enthusiastically to the creative

journal form by focusing on the mother-daughter relationship between Marlene and Angie. As rehearsals progressed, I understood her preoccupation with the theme. Camille had been living with her mother for only seven years. Camille's mother became pregnant at nineteen and Camille's Pentecostal grandmother raised her in small Newfoundland village while her mother finished university and established her career.

Nancy Chodorow (1974) argues that, by the age of three, the core of a female child's sense of gender identity and personality development is in place. In fact, the female identity formation takes place in the context of an ongoing relationship, which is typically with the mother (Gilligan 7). Daughters will experience themselves as their mothers, fusing attachment with identity formation. In adolescence, typical girls will experience a second "individuation process," a crucial time of separation (Gilligan 11).

With this in mind, it seems likely that Camille did not experience that formative identification with her mother; she had only been living with her from the age of nine. Camille's feelings about their relationship appeared conflicted. There seemed to be a feeling of abandonment. There was also pride at her mother's ability to overcome adversity. But Camille also expressed a fear of replicating her mother's choices: "I'm getting married because there's no way I'm going to be as miserable as my mother" (Field Notes 3.23.06). I believe that Camille explores some of these feelings in a poem:

> So now she [Marlene] is like she'll never feel again and in her child's place the shattered remains of a frame pictures that blister off and on upon her frontal lobe, taking over her mind. It's all just sudden regard for far too long everything's been 'alright' ... the child's dirty sense of sarcasm. Only something she could fathom. In the grip of her hand the child could

> dissolve into water-soluble power ... if only then she could stir her into her drink and sip her down without a frown. (Journal 7.03.06)

In rehearsal, Camille shared copious detail with the other girls and me about her day-to-day relationship with her mother. Sometimes she grumbled at the intensity but generally Camille basked in her mother's concern. Given her personal history, it is clear why Camille insisted on playing Marlene's estranged daughter, Angie. It was likewise clear why Camille objected to playing Griselda:

> It was kind of hard for me to relate to Griselda at first because she takes a lot from people and I don't ...if it were me, I'd say, 'Why are you taking my children?' I realized that I had to let myself go in order to become her because she thinks so differently about life than I do. So had to stop thinking like myself for a while. (Interview 7.06.06)

Capacchione states that the journal offers an open-ended approach for play: a place to "let yourself out, channel your inner world into tangible form. The page becomes a mirror for seeing yourself more clearly" (6). This appears to be the case, particularly with Camille. Camille's journal entries, in combination with the interviews, provided me with a clear view of the meanings that Camille made through participation in the Top Girls Project.

Camille, Taylor, Lainie and Grace's journal responses illustrate this medium's potential as a means to track the drama experience. In retrospect, while journal writing was proving onerous for several participants, I regret scrapping them so quickly. The use of journals is consistent with my desire, as teacher-director, to deepen the girls' dramatic experience and increase their sense of personal agency within the rehearsal process. The journal affords me a lens into a girl's individual creative process. An introspective young

actor like Grace or Lainie has the means to explore connections between character and self. If her insights are shared and sensitively received by the group, the ensemble's collective understanding of the play is strengthened; and the director no longer becomes the sole arbiter of interpretation.

As a researcher, I think that some creative journal entries require significant psychological theory in order to be interpreted meaningfully. Moreover, I think that as a personal creative process, journaling served some participants well and others not. If a participant perceives journaling as additional homework, then it becomes onerous and is of questionable creative value. For all the girls' sakes, I wanted the keep the focus on exploration and rehearsal of Top Girls.

Despite the discontinuation of the journals, I was able to trace each girl's deepening understanding of the play through the One-to-One Interviews. This methodology allowed me to understand how each girl's perceptions were framed by the dramatic art form (Hatton 140). I realize that the meanings each girl attributed to Top Girls were colored by her age, life circumstances, and previous theatre experience. Answers to "What is this play about?" changed over time.

Section 2: Interviews
Taylor and Kathleen

Some academics argue that Churchill's Top Girls speaks to divisiveness and disparity among women. Taylor's first interpretation was probably closest to Churchill's materialist-feminist intent:

> I think that Angie's character contrasts with Marlene and with a lot of the powerful women in the play, not only to show how powerful and brave they really are, but show their effects on the younger generation. I mean

> these women are so focused on the status quo and making a life for themselves that they're really not focusing on who will follow in their footsteps. (Interview 22.02.06)

Kathleen's interpretation of Top Girls ran counter to Churchill's materialist feminist intention: "It's this amazing play about women bonding and being together ... and I think that, as a group of girls, we need to bond together and work together" (Interview 9.03.06). At the project's end, Kathleen said, "I *still* don't think I have a full grasp of the play" but she believed it was about "being together" (Interview 6.06.06).

Maighdlin

Maighdlin's understanding of Top Girls was the most informed in the ensemble. Aware of England's socio-political situation in the 1980's, Maighdlin admired the play's writing but also integrated personal values into her interpretation of Joyce:

> When I initially read her [Joyce], I read it as a character that was a little bit bitter. But there are a lot of sides to her. And that's a testament to a really good script with very well written and developed characters. They all stand for different facets of society. I think it's a very equal representation of the time ... Joyce looks at Marlene more as somebody she knows and less of her family. As somebody she has to try to get along with because she has those family obligations. Joyce will always uphold those; she still keeps up the father's grave! And she still visits her mother regardless of whether or not she ever liked those people, she will still continue to support them ... From my knowledge of England in the 1980's, it really didn't get better for quite a while. So as long as they [Marlene and Joyce]

> are staying in their socioeconomic circles, nothing will change in that sense between them. Joyce has been betrayed, in a way, by Marlene, so she just can't forget that. (Interview 22.05.06)

Norman Denzin argues that the researcher's interpretation and analysis of an interview requires a focus on the speaker's personal experience and key phrases in relation to what is being discussed (55-56). In this passage, I believe that Maighdlin's key phrases are "she [Joyce] will always uphold those [obligations]" and "she [Joyce] will continue to support them [family]" (Interview 22.05.06). Maighdlin's interpretation of Joyce is legitimate and deepened by her personal life. For months, Maighdlin's family had coped with her father's poor health and uncertain prognosis. At age eighteen, Maighdlin was the family's advocate with the doctors. Understandably, her sense of responsibility and obligation to family were profound, but she never discussed her family's crisis publicly. Any details shared with me were outside rehearsal through incidental conversation.

For Maighdlin, involvement in theatre is a respite from her 'real life' but clearly informed by it. Her view of acting is healthy and positive: "I know every time I do a piece, I learn a little bit more" (Interview 22.05.06). I deeply respect Maighdlin's intellect, work ethic, and willingness to risk emotionally in her performance of Joyce.

Kathleen

Kathleen exemplifies how, because it is a collaborative process, drama can reorient a student's thinking and challenge her assumptions (Gallagher 2002 9). Having witnessed Maighdlin's performance as Joyce, Kathleen reconsidered her interpretation of the character:

> She's [Joyce's] the one that I thought originally, 'you poor sap ... you

> idiot. But in the end, seeing Maighdlin play her made me respect her more because I think Joyce has a certain strength that I didn't see initially ... that wasn't there for me when I read it. Joyce has a lot of strength and resilience. She is a bright woman and she's just been dealt an unfortunate hand. (Interview 6.06.06)

In her interviews, Kathleen revealed a frequent willingness to reconsider character interpretations, her own and others. Kathleen was loath to call herself a feminist but lived the Eleanor Roosevelt's maxim, 'No one can make you feel inferior without your own consent' (Interview 3.16.06). While several girls found Griselda's submissiveness problematic, Kathleen's reaction was extreme:

> When I first read the Griselda story, I thought this is a joke. This woman is a joke. But then, [in rehearsal] Camille said it was because she [Griselda] was doing what she truly believed to be right ... if she truly believes what she's doing is right, then who am I to say that's wrong? So I guess that she had some integrity in doing what she did. She truly believed that it was correct, that what she was doing was right. It made me bite my tongue. (Interview 04.20.06)

Through her actions, rehearsal behavior, and incidental conversation, Kathleen made clear that she deeply valued personal integrity, perseverance against obstacles, and self-pride. She aspired to cultivating these values in her personal life. By her midpoint interview, Kathleen was wrestling with her Act Two character, Winn. Kathleen was upset by Winn's self-defeating behavior, particularly her affair with the married man and the downplaying of her intelligence:

> Working on her [Winn's] scenes now, especially with Nell and her saying 'it's funny that I have to duck down and drive in'... I'm thinking 'Wait a sec! That's not funny!' Initially I thought Winn was more grounded, smarter ... and now I don't know ... she's got all these levels and she did sciences and she's good at selling but she presents it in a flippity way. You should have some self-pride in that! I'm not going to go out and brag about what I've done, but at the same time, if I've done something I'm proud of then why not show that? (Interview 04.20.06)

It was not my intention to use Top Girls as a vehicle for values clarification. But I can see that Kathleen was engaged in the dramatic process of "active inquiry" (Neelands 1992 71). Through examination of Winn's behavior and intentions in the play, Kathleen was exploring issues relevant to her life. This allowed her to create meaning for the drama out of her own experience (Neelands 1992 73).

Nikki

French phenomenological critic, Mikel Dufrenne, states that, "The artist is an artist only through his act. He does not think the idea of the work but rather about what he is making and what he perceives as he creates"(30). But what if the actor's judgment of a character prevents her from entering wholeheartedly into the creative process? In a high school context, this presents a significant challenge for the teacher-director who must spur the young actor's process without entering into the therapeutic realm.

Among the Top Girls participants, Nikki was the most resistant to immersing herself in her characters, those being Louise and Isabella Bird. Journaling was ineffective as part of Nikki's creative process, and while energetic and playful in

improvisation, she often joked that she saw no connection between these 'activities' and 'real acting'.

Nikki was extremely suspicious of vulnerability, and while she tried to commit to Louise's office scene out of deference to me as the director, Nikki was very critical of the character's emotional breakdown. Nikki protested repeatedly, 'I would never behave that way.' At the project's end, Nikki was less critical of Isabella's vulnerability but centered her interpretation on the boisterous, drunken monologue at the end of the dinner party:

> I can relate to Isabella Bird ... she can get wild and then she wants to hold to another image in front of the other people. She wants to be proper all the time. I think that inside of her it's actually pretty difficult for her to live because of her health problems. She has to be proper all the time in front of everybody. Inside she has many revolutionary thoughts. (Interview 09.06.06)

In performance, Nikki appeared seduced by the audience's laughter, sacrificing some of the pathos she expressed as Isabella in rehearsal. This reaction puzzled me. At Nikki's last interview, she admitted that there were still many aspects of the play and acting technique that she did not understand. She reiterated her commitment to the Top Girls ensemble but said that she felt she lacked a sense of emotional connection to her characters.

I believe that Nikki experienced personal growth from her involvement in the Top Girls Project. Referred by the drama teacher, Nikki was rather depressed and without friends when she joined the Top Girls Project in February 2006. One-to-one, Nikki complained of feeling like 'an outsider' at the high school: a conspicuous International

Student. Nikki worried about her mother's financial sacrifice to educate her in Canada, that teachers underestimated her, and that her peers dismissed her. At the project's end, Nikki was much more out-going and at ease. She understood that the Top Girls cast shared her interests, accepted her individuality, and did not judge her sexual orientation.

Taylor

The level of Taylor's previous theatre experience was equivalent to Nikki's and creative process was as blocked. In rehearsals, Taylor sought director approval for the correctness of her movement, interpretation, gesture, and even line inflection. By mid-April, it was clear that Taylor was completely out of her comfort zone. Journals had been discontinued, discussion minimized, and the rehearsals focused on 'doing' (Field Notes 17.04.06). Fortunately, at midpoint, Taylor had a breakthrough:

> In rehearsal on Sunday, I got a whole new perspective on Joyce and Marlene's relationship, and why Marlene is visiting Joyce and Angie at that point in her life. You mentioned that she might have been turned down for a job promotion; I thought that left Marlene in a really interesting and vulnerable position. That just opened up the scene for a totally new interpretation for me … she [Marlene] is this powerful woman with an image in her mind of who she wants to be – really trying to be that yet there's a part of her that doesn't want to become this power-woman because she misses her time with Joyce. She misses the river where she and Joyce hung out and she definitely misses the town. I think she misses the certain innocence that she had. (Interview 21.04.06)

Paulo Freire believes that drama has the potential to make us more 'fully human' (41-42). He refers to the restraints that others place on us, but I would argue that the limits we place on ourselves are equally debilitating. Only when an actor opens herself to another possibility, can there be some humanity. Taylor exemplifies this idea. In realizing that Marlene needed and missed her sister Joyce, Taylor found the character's humanness. Slowly, Taylor began to *respond* to Maighdlin/Joyce in rehearsals. This was the seed of truth that the scene desperately required and the beginnings of reciprocity between the two actors.

Unquestionably, this scene is crucial to Top Girls. I believe that both Taylor and Maighdlin made an effort to both understand and commit emotionally to its performance. Certainly all the other actors who witnessed the family scene in rehearsal remarked that it affected them. But I would argue that of all the participants, Taylor and Maighdlin came closest to fully experiencing the weight and complexity of Churchill's feminism. I think that Maighdlin's awareness of the play's socio-political history and her own life circumstances (i.e. family illness and social class) deepened her interpretation and understanding. But I also feel that while she did not state it explicitly, in playing Marlene, Taylor *began* to experience the cumulative power of the play's feminism. The end result was not necessarily miraculous. They did not immediately self-identify as 'feminists' but I can state confidently that this acting experience – and in particular these characters - affected Taylor and Maighdlin. To what degree it affected them, influencing their perception of themselves as feminists, may only become clearer with the passage of time. I can only hope that their involvement in the Top Girls Project was timely and, in the future, will serve as a valuable point of reflection for them.

Section 3: The Relevance of Top Girls in 2006

At one point or another, all the participants *tried* to explain to family and friends what Top Girls was about. It became an inside joke with the company. Camille, Alisha, Grace, Bobbi, and Lainie would simply say 'it's Marlene's story'. Kathleen and Maighdlin dared to characterize it as a 'feminist play.' Taylor was the most thorough: "The actual play is written backwards but it's about Marlene's world, her chronology: as she moves farther and farther up in the business world and moves away from her family, and as she becomes estranged from them, she becomes more and more alone" (Interview 10.06.06). Given Top Girls' complexity, I am still surprised at the girls' absolute conviction that we could mount the entire play. When asked directly, none of them questioned the play's suitability for the project, but their views on the play's relevance in 2006 differed.

Lainie & Maighdlin

Lainie viewed the play's message to an audience in 2006 matter-of-factly. She believed Top Girls was about "telling people that this is the way life is. The way it happens is the way that it happens. And you can't always change back to something you wanted it to be ... like when Marlene comes back [to Joyce] and says, 'So do you want me to take Angie from you then?'" (Interview 5.06.06)

Maighdlin distinguished between the audience's ability to understand the play's political references and how they might relate to the conflicts set up within the world of the play:

> The specific references [Britain and Thatcher] are not as relevant, but on the whole, it probably *is* relevant. The workplace – when you see them

their offices – it kind of reminds me of certain people in my mom's office. The constant struggle in the workplace and equality in the home and the fact that siblings quarrel. And there still are broken homes and there will always be broken homes. Family issues will always be dealt with. (Interview 22.05.06)

Camille

Camille's response to the question of the play's relevance in 2006 was altogether unique. It was early in the rehearsal process. It was her first interview, and I thought at first that she had misunderstood the question:

> I think it [the play] says that even if you're not the strongest person in the world or the most brave or the smartest or the prettiest, you can still change things. And even if you're young – say fifteen, sixteen, seventeen – you can change things for yourself that will eventually result in even greater changes, even if it's not for the whole world. (Interview 23.02.06)

Camille's interpretation was not borne of critical analysis. It was not a function of studying Churchill's materialist-feminist sensibilities. In fact, I am not certain whether Camille spoke as herself, the teenage girl involved in a drama project, or from the perspective of her favorite character, Angie. But her answer intrigued me.

Expressed in this manner, Camille's answer exuded a strong sense of hope, volition, and autonomy. Camille sounded like a *feminist*. Was this a 'snapshot' of Camille as she journeyed towards consciousness of self? Feminist Gerda Lerner provides a possible explanation: "Autonomy means moving out from a world in which one is born to marginality, to a past without meaning, and a future determined by others – into a

world in which one acts and chooses, aware of a meaningful past and free to shape one's future" (1992 xxiv). The possibility that I witnessed Camille locating herself in her world is exciting. But there is another equally moving possibility. Perhaps Camille's participation in the Top Girls Project, by virtue of its timing, supported her quest for both voice and community.

Conclusion

The combination of qualitative methodologies - Rehearsal Response Journals, One-to-One Interviews, and my own Field Notes - was strong, yielding a breadth of perspectives. Given the freedom of the creative form, the participants' journal entries were intriguing and highly personalized. It is essential to use journals thoughtfully and ensure that entries shared in rehearsals are sensitively received. Because I controlled the questions asked during interviews, this methodology yielded many insights specific to the girls' deepening understanding of the play and the characters, their responses to the rehearsal process, and the significance of the act of performance. I am most surprised by my Field Notes. In addition to revealing my core values, these notes allow me a measure of objective insight into the highly subjective, creative processes of teaching and directing.

Chapter 4: The Teacher-Director

SCHMUNK. For you, what was the most important aspect of the Top Girls Project?

CAMILLE. The way everything was brought together into modern society with the dream at the beginning. It relates to a lot of things we have now without being exact. Like the relationship between Joyce, Marlene and Angie which is something that *actually* happens. (Interview 7.6.06)

Introduction

I wish for a society where the citizenry is creative, empathetic, and self-aware. I am particularly concerned for my female students who live in what psychologist Mary Pipher characterizes as an increasingly chaotic, fragmented world (286). In using Churchill's Top Girls as the centerpiece for the project, I hoped to offer the girls a variety of opportunities for personal and political reflection as well as creativity.

As director, I deliberately chose a non-linear, exploratory approach to rehearsal. Taking advantage of the long rehearsal period and small cast size, I wanted to deepen the actors' creative processes and involve them meaningfully in the interpretation of their characters and the play. As a teacher, there were important pedagogical benefits to these conditions. Most of the participants had little theatre experience. This required the teaching of basic acting, characterization, and ensemble skills in the context of rehearsals. Teaching while directing is a challenge. Not always aware of their lack of prerequisite skills, young actors are anxious to maintain a sense of momentum in rehearsal. They are impatient with drama exercises they interpret as 'exploration for exploration's sake.' With this project, I wanted to create a rehearsal environment conducive to creativity as well as questioning of and personal response to the play. I desired openness to

characterization exercises, responsiveness to others in rehearsal and performance, and a sense of community.

Chapter Organization

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section 1 is The Griselda Rehearsal. Section 2 focuses on Supporting Actor Process: Kathleen and Taylor. This leads directly to The Movement Workshop and The Movement Workshop Revisited (Section 3). Section 4 examines The Significance of Performance in Top Girls, highlighting four participants' experiences.

Pedagogy Shift: Working Through the Body

Materialist feminists have long debated the social constructedness of the body, aligning with Michel Foucault's argument that the body is the elemental materiality on which history is inscribed (qtd. in Hennessy 44). As such, the body can serve as a potential point of resistance against the apparatuses of power, which simultaneously inscribe themselves on the body. The body is located *inside* and *outside* the social use of power. It is thus imbued with power even as it is caught in a system of subjection. Ideally, the body can take on idealistic, mythic dimensions as a site of truth, existence, and resistance against oppression, domination and exploitation (Hennessy 44-46).

There is little question that, as a play, Churchill's Top Girls necessitates working through the body. The play's very content is concerned with the female body as a site of political oppression and resistance (i.e. childbirth, mothering, female abjection). Moreover, the form and style of the play, most notably the last minutes of the dinner party, demand extended physical characterization and working through the body. It was

therefore inevitable that my rehearsal process address physical work with the actors. It is interesting that it was the actors themselves who influenced the timing of this work.

I chose Churchill's Top Girls for its well-written text only to realize that the words were a burden for the actors (Field Notes 18.04.06). By mid April, the Dinner Party's text was totally overwhelming for them. They struggled with the sense of their characters' stories and were totally preoccupied with the words rather than the intent. They were intimidated and fearful of making mistakes, particularly with the vocal overlapping. There was no sense of play, spontaneity, or reciprocity. It was obvious that I must get the actors 'out of their heads' and 'into their bodies' so that they could play and explore character in a visceral way. This prompted me to create movement-based rehearsal plans (Field Notes 21.04.06 & 05.05.06). Fortunately, this movement-based acting work is philosophically aligned with the feminist focus of the Top Girls Project.

Section 1: The Griselda Rehearsal

From the first reading, it was clear that Camille had misgivings about Griselda's submissiveness. It was also evident that some of the other girls shared this point of view. This judgment was obstructing Camille's actor process. I had to address this problem because, in the context of Top Girls' dinner party, Griselda's narrative increases the dramatic tension. I needed Camille to commit wholeheartedly to the character. My objectives for the Griselda rehearsal were two-fold: 1) cultivate non-judgment of Griselda's behavior in order to overcome actor resistance, and 2) as an ensemble, to 'play within' Griselda's narrative in order to foster differentiated character responses. Each character's response must make sense to the actor in terms of her character's emotional

journey, with particular attention given to her character's behavior at the end of the dinner party.

I began with a Circle Question: "What are one personal quality that has served you and one personal quality that has gotten you into trouble?" I hoped to seed the idea that, like real people, the Dinner Party women are multi-dimensional.

I had collapsed Griselda's narrative into a page handout, so we read the story line-by-line three times to familiarize ourselves with its flow and pathos (Marlow 75). We experimented vocally with Marlene's interjections that were labeled 'the skeptic': chorally, by whispering, and through repetition of single words and phrases. We had the most fun using Marlene's interjections for a children's game of Telephone; while Griselda shared her story, we gossiped on the 'party line' behind her back (Neelands 1992 29).

At this point, I needed to shift the point of concentration away from the words to image. For our physical warm up, I used Still Life (Neelands 1992 19). The purpose of this exercise is for the group to crystallize a moment, idea or theme *without* the benefit of words. We attuned to each other physically by creating a series of silent shifting tableaux, simply by responding to the visual offers. We then kept the exercise going with Griselda's thematic trigger words: fairy-tale, motherhood, pain, sorrow, responsibility, sacrifice, obedience, innocence lost, dependence, and independence.

Having tapped into images, I reintroduced the text. The girls took turns speaking Griselda's story while the others created shifting tableaux in response. At that point, we broke into pairs for the Hotseat game (Neelands 1992 28). One girl played Griselda while the other actor interrogated her about her story, background, motives, and

unexpressed feelings about Walter's tests. In exercise debrief, Camille pointed out that Griselda acts with *integrity*, citing as proof from the text: "It [obedience] was always easy because I always knew I would do what he wanted" (Churchill I.i.15). I felt that Camille's acknowledgment of Griselda's integrity was a sound starting point for her to begin characterization. I interpreted this newfound awareness as a positive sign in terms of her actor process (Field Notes 15.2.06).

Camille's remark prompted a rich discussion around Griselda's situation. Which of Marlene's remarks makes Griselda overtly defensive? Has Griselda defended Walter to other people? What does Griselda need from Walter? What does Griselda need from the group? Why did Marlene invite Griselda? Is Griselda accustomed to criticism? The actors *seemed* to realize that not all their characters react to Griselda with Marlene's same judgment, but was this level of understanding reached? I ended the rehearsal with ten minutes of journal writing to check for this understanding. The assumption was that each character felt *differently* about Griselda's story. I hoped that the differentiated answers might serve each actor's creative process, leading her emotionally to the dinner party's conclusion. But they did *not* automatically make those connections. I assumed that too much would be understood in too short a time. Several girls responded with 'I don't know what to write'. I had to formulate pointed questions for each girl. Nikki, why does Isabella start to despair over not being like Hennie? Kathleen, what does Griselda say that contributes to your breakdown? Lainie, what is Gret thinking while Griselda talks? Grace, what does Griselda say that distances you emotionally? Taylor, where is Marlene's vulnerability beneath the verbal barbs lobbed at Griselda?

In my Field Notes, I reflected on why the Griselda Rehearsal had limited results (Field Notes 02.28.06). Clearly, I had planned too much for the hour and half timeframe. The actors lacked drama background and were struggling with the exercise mechanics. The group was small in number and they felt self-conscious. The actors' resistance to journal writing *in* rehearsal indicated that they did not see how exploring Griselda's story – and later Lady Nijo's story (Field Notes 03.03.06) – related to their own characters. In other words, there was no recognition of common circumstances between the characters. Moreover, there was no sense of shared purpose. It was essential to cultivate a sense of ensemble.

With only two rehearsals a week, the actors were anxious that I was wasting time. They craved a linear approach to rehearsal. As the teacher, I knew they didn't have the necessary skills to characterize independently. There were also attendance problems that precluded full company rehearsal of the Dinner Party. I questioned whether the project could go forward. Then a realization:

> The most meaningful/germane conversations occur *after* rehearsal! Today, Taylor announced 'I'm never getting married. I'll adopt a foreign child at 35.'Lainie piped up: 'I might get married but not for a long time.' And Camille replied, 'I'm getting married; but there's no way I'm being as miserable as my mother!' What interesting segues considering the Nijo and Isabella stories we've been working on! And much more revealing of unconscious connections that are going, as opposed to any stupid journal entry I could concoct. (Field Notes 03.23.06)

I needed to be more responsive. I scrapped the journals. I began to solicit more light-hearted forms of creative expression from the girls (i.e. tableaux, female silhouettes, single words in Circle). I vowed that we would play more in rehearsals to both characterize and cultivate a sense of community.

Section 2: Supporting Actor Process
Kathleen's Lady Nijo

At midpoint, Kathleen, cast as Lady Nijo, was very anxious about "learning to cry because it's called for [at the end of the dinner party]" (Interview 20.4.06). Kathleen's worry about *how* to get to a particular emotional pitch is not an uncommon concern among young actors. I tried to reassure Kathleen that Nijo's crying is an outward manifestation of something much larger and important, her emotional journey.

Kathleen had no acting experience, so we experimented together with a variety of basic characterization tools. She read Karen Brazell's translation of Confessions of Lady Nijo. We had two tutorials to discuss Nijo's chronology and explore her monologues. We discussed how each anecdote contributed to Nijo's emotional journey: 'why this story now?' We gave each monologue a general vocal 'shape' and then created preliminary blocking that served the character and the scene. I was careful to draw these ideas from Kathleen. I wanted her to have the confidence to take more physical risks as Nijo.

In working rehearsals, Kathleen used her fan and wore both the Japanese kimono and tabi sandals. The tight kimono and shoes limited her stride and prompted a more upright seated posture. The large sleeves and fan influenced the scale and speed of her hand gestures at the dinner table while she ate. During two runs of the scene, Kathleen focused on her speech, consciously elongating her vowels and playing with the cadence

of her phrases. There was undeniable progress. After the production, Kathleen was less worried about Nijo's crying and more attuned to her emotional journey:

> She's [Nijo's] so sad. Everything about her is sad. Maybe her heart has been tangled with a lot. She can't untangle it; she can't figure it out. She's had so many lovers. She must have loved the Emperor at one point – on some level. But he sort of broke her and Akebono sort of broke her and everybody broke her. When she finally did leave [to be a Buddhist nun], she was wandering and trying to figure it all out. I don't know if she ever does. (Interview 6.6.06)

Taylor's Marlene

The Griselda Rehearsal did not give Taylor the insight I had hoped. During subsequent dinner party rehearsals, Taylor/Marlene's verbal attacks on Griselda remained 'one-note', lacking in purpose or vulnerability. At her midpoint interview, Taylor was struggling to legitimize her interpretation: "She [Marlene] invites Griselda and she's obviously heard Griselda's story before but in the retelling she absolutely cannot hear it. Why invite her [Griselda] if it repulses her that much?" (Interview 04.21.06) Taylor was over focused on state of being. She did not understand that the actor can only act from the unconscious through the conscious elements of *seeing* and *doing* (Donnellan 57).

In discussion, I posed several 'what-if' questions to Taylor. What if Marlene invites Griselda to the party to make a point and she does not get the anticipated reaction? What if Marlene is dismayed that Isabella and Nijo sympathize? What if Marlene believes that Griselda is a compliant, weak 'breeder,' dependent on a man, but the others

see Griselda as enduring and possessing integrity? Wouldn't Marlene feel betrayed by the other women she invites? (Interview 04.21.06)

In my experience, responsiveness is a difficult acting concept for young actors to grasp. It was a common problem among the Top Girls actors, but Taylor was an extreme example. Taylor placed inordinate pressure on *herself* to manufacture a specific emotional response or physical business in a scene: "the first day, the [dinner party] scene was very strained. I was fishing for things to do" (Interview 21.04.06). But the character does not exist alone; she exists in context, in relationship to other characters in the scene. If the actor cannot trust or surrender to others who *should* affect her, responsiveness is sacrificed. Then in rehearsal, any *shared* sense of discovery is truncated (Donnellan 23).

Taylor's resistance was most evident working on the scene between Marlene and Joyce. I frequently reassured Taylor that playing *in response* to Maighdlin was beneficial, even freeing. It allows for a sharing of emotional energy and reciprocity. But more often than not, Taylor would stop the scene to say, 'Shouldn't she [Maighdlin} be doing/saying ....?' Acting theorist Richard Hornby argues that the irony of achieving focus onstage is that it cannot be done by excluding inappropriate thoughts but by cultivating responsiveness to *appropriate* ones (80).

I struggled to find a more appropriate and beneficial focus for Taylor. How could I cultivate responsiveness while instilling confidence in the actor's intuition? This challenge alone illustrates how beneficial the Top Girls fieldwork was for me as a teacher-director. In contrast to my regular drama classroom, with the Top Girls I had the luxury of time and a small group. I could respond to the actors' needs with specificity. It

became clear that I had to move away from emphasis on Churchill's text to processes that honored the body. But the girls had no physical characterization skills. Progress would require a movement workshop. I anticipated resistance to the work if I could not frame it as directly benefiting the final performance. It was fortunate for me that *they* insisted on a four-hour rehearsal during Spring Break.

Section 3: The Movement Workshop

Acting teacher Michael Chekhov advocates primary-process thinking in all creative endeavors: catch the first image; learn to follow its independent life; collaborate with it by asking questions; penetrate the inner life of the image; develop flexibility of imagination; create characters by yourself; and study how to incorporate characters (31). Obviously the last two steps depend on a student's familiarity with acting. Constantin Stanislavsky argued that the character is a person with existence above and beyond the confines of the actions and 'given circumstances' that are executed in role. Moreover, a role has no meaning without character. If the actor cannot find the character, the role loses meaning, lacking the "organity" of the actor's body and mind (Ruffini 172).

The actors in the Top Girls Project were inexperienced. I reasoned that movement work had four clear benefits. It removed the burden of words. It was means to access image. It is a legitimate characterization tool. And finally, it feeds the actor's inner life (Hornby 92; Barba 112-113). My goal was to keep their movements 'real' in substance - ideally psychophysical - rather than indulging in empty gestures (Barba 117). Yielding to the girls' pressure for a linear rehearsal process, I deliberately structured the movement work to operate within the play's dramatic context, the indeterminate ending of the dinner party. It was a logical framework within which to work.

Previously, we had been rehearsing in the Archives Room. This is the high school's intimate carpeted meeting room. It has low ceilings, not conducive to large physical gesture. Fearing that a move directly into the much larger theatre would intimidate them, I organized the Movement Workshop in the Drama Studio for its mirrors and open space. Still I underestimated the effect of the venue change. In Kathleen, the move created a sense of urgency: "Things changed for me when there was that movement rehearsal in the studio and very soon after that we were in the Black Box [theatre]. That felt official. I remember thinking, 'We are now in the theatre. And we are doing this. And it's going to happen!'" (Interview 06.06.06)

The Movement Rehearsal Plan

1) Seed the Alice in Wonderland concept for the end of the Dinner Party.
2) Brainstorm and record characters' daily activities on chart paper
   (Vened 46)
3) Visualize: character appearance, eye focus
4) Animate: 'Character portraits': sit, stand, lie down, daily activities from chart
5) Travel: character gait through space
   explore character center (Vened 35-38)
   explore character walk (Vened 44-45)
6) Choreograph: character movement phrase of activities
7) Experiment: freezes, slow motion, retrograde, change of level & facing
8) Play with movement phrase to unrecognizable music
9) Move actors into the Dinner Party ground plan

10) Blocking: integrate characters' movement phrases for stage areas, clarity, focus

11) Reintroduce the character lines from Top Girls, script in hand (Field Notes 14.04.06)

I tried to keep the movement exercises playful and non-threatening, but the actors were very disconcerted. Lainie was short-tempered, Grace was anxious, and Camille left early shaking her head. It was clear that a single movement workshop was not a panacea. "Their movements are very constrained. We didn't get as far as I had hoped." (Field Notes 14.04.06)

In retrospect, I think I was well intentioned but overly ambitious. Stanislavsky argues that there are no hard and fast rules for manifestation of meaning for the actor (Ruffini 173). There is no one universal method for characterization. Instead, he states that acting is comprised of distinct yet interwoven processes: the construction of the organic mind-body, the character from the written role, and the character from the acted role (Ruffini 172). But Stanislavksy is careful to point out that the *conditions* for the manifestation of meaning must pre-exist (Ruffini 173). With my cast, this meant prerequisite skills. This was the crux of my problem. Without acting experience, the girls were once again distracted by the mechanics of the exercises. Given the change of rehearsal venue, their quest for a linear rehearsal process, and the lack of experience, it was unrealistic to expect them to create 'truthful' character movement that would 'give meaning' to their performance (Ruffini 173).

In my teaching practice, I have faced physically inhibited actors before. But the small Top Girls cast afforded me a unique pedagogical opportunity. I would try again.

This time, I worked from a different premise. If the actor is physically involved in actions predicated on her character's given circumstances, these actions may gain significance through repetition and practice (Giebel 165). So rather than ask the actor to create significant character movements, *I* would supply the movements to inspire character development. This would greatly lessen the complexity of what I was asking. The actors' challenge would be to express and release the dramatic tension with the movements for scene's finale (Giebel 165).

The Movement Workshop Revisited

It was still necessary to create a safe creative structure for the girls. At the next rehearsal, I presented each actor with a 'cheat sheet' of specific, stylized, slow motion movements grounded in the character's given circumstances (Field Notes 05.04.06). Using several instrumental musical selections as a sound carpet, our rehearsal focus was on body-awareness of self and others in space, repetition of movement, increasing the movement size, and sensing the impulse to change movements. This change in pedagogy had a positive effect on at least one of the girls. Despite her initial resistance to movement, Camille's attitude changed by the end:

> My strongest memory would probably be during the dinner party with the movement piece. That was my favorite part ... it didn't involve a lot of talking and it was mostly something that you [the audience] watched. It kind of actually made sense if you [the audience member] listened to the stories of the other people ... and people knew what was going on." (Interview 07.06.06)

Overall, this more clearly defined creative structure was beneficial. As director, it allowed me interpretative clarity. My decisiveness gave the girls confidence. Moreover, my expectations for physical risk-taking from them were more realistic. Meanwhile, their desire to rehearse *for* the audience's benefit was honored. Why else do teenagers persevere in rehearsals but to prepare for the performance? Isn't that the point?

Section 4: The Significance of Performance in Top Girls in 2006

The opportunity to solicit individual impressions of performance was one of the great benefits of the Top Girls Project. New to performing, Grace remembered the adrenalin and risk, "All those people are watching you and you're stressed at first and you're afraid. But then everything flows a little more smoothly" (Interview 06.06.06). Grace learned to forgive herself for dropped lines but Nikki did not:

> When I'm performing, I have to visualize things on the page. Which part of the script; where it is. That's what I'm thinking when people are saying their lines. Where is it? Where are we now?' Just to make sure that I don't miss my lines. It surprised me that sometimes a few lines before, I'll know that after these few lines, I'm going to say that line. But when I get there, I've forgotten it. I'm still eating! (Interview 09.06.06)

Where Grace was receptive, Nikki had a strong work ethic and great sense of personal responsibility to the ensemble. Both girls exuded courage and openness, in combination with their specific skills. Peter Brook points out that one can ask no more of untrained actors (qtd. Delgado and Heritage 53).

Maighdlin and Taylor's strongest memories were in the scene between the sisters, Marlene and Joyce. Maighdlin was surprised at her body's physical response:

> My strongest memory would probably be this one point where Taylor [Marlene] and I are getting angry with each other, and I could feel it in my chest. I could actually feel that I was breathing heavier and I was 'oh, this is weird.' I really enjoyed that. It doesn't always happen in rehearsals but I felt like I really got into it at that point. (Interview 05.06.06)

Taylor also expressed surprise at the intensity of the sadness she felt holding Angie in her lap during the play's last scene: "I actually started tearing up at the end. In that moment, I just really, really understood Marlene. It's not that I *just* understood the character; I think I really placed myself *in* the character. I took the character to heart" (Interview 8.06.06). Maighdlin and Taylor's insights are significant. I believe that actors genuinely feel imaginary emotions: the physical sensation, the intuitive awareness, and the outward expression of emotion (Hornby 124). But as an educator, I believe that it is my responsibility in rehearsal to help young actors *safely* explore their characters' emotions. I am inordinately grateful that both Taylor and Maighdlin experienced these emotions as the logical *end point* of rehearsal: the performance (Hornby 125). There can be no greater reward for the teacher-director or actor.

Conclusion

My choice of Churchill's Top Girls was legitimate, but there were inherent challenges. The play was not written with student actors in mind. It is rich with possibilities for personal, political and creative exploration, but the text is intimidating for them. The rehearsal period of four months was needed because inexperienced actors cannot be expected to characterize independently. Young actors resist an exploratory approach, believing rehearsal to be a linear process. Teaching acting skills within the

context of rehearsal is not easy. My rehearsal plans were grounded in acting theory but often too ambitious for the time allotted. Lacking in background, the actors struggled with exercise mechanics and connections to character were not always automatic. My pedagogical choice to honor the body was timely and legitimate, but the girls were unfamiliar with physical character work. I had to lessen my expectations and place the exercises within a safe creative structure that the girls perceived would be of immediate benefit to the final performance. I learned to temper my idealism with responsiveness.

Chapter 5: Implications for Future Teaching Practice

MAIGHDLIN. I'm not that familiar with feminism.

SCHMUNK. You *are* one, Maighdlin.

MAIGHDLIN. Oh, well. There you are then. (Interview 22.05.06)

Research Findings

Top Girls as an Appropriate and Relevant Text

Was Top Girls an appropriate, relevant dramatic text for young women in 2006? 'Appropriate' and 'relevant' were revealed to be two different things. When asked, none of the girls questioned the appropriateness of my play choice for the project. In fact, Camille said, "I think that this play was a really good choice without knowing the people [beforehand] ... the people who decided to be in it actually fit quite well with the characters" (Interview 7.06.06). Camille's remark ties to what I think was one of my stronger decisions – honoring most of the girls' wishes for casting. It explains two trends in fieldwork, the rehearsal: 1) girls whose requests for a particular role were honored and who subsequently identified *strongly* with their characters (i.e. Camille, Grace, Lainie), and 2) girls whose casting requests were not honored and exhibited subsequent resistance to process and character in rehearsal (i.e. Taylor, Nikki). Camille insisted that she play Angie. She stated after the production that, "I can relate to Angie because she didn't know her father and I don't know mine either" (Interview 7.06.06). On the other hand, Taylor's discontent with being cast as Marlene rather than Pope Joan in part explains her challenges during rehearsals. Even Nikki, who did not express a role preference, resisted vulnerability in her characters of Isabella Bird and Louise. Examined together, these three instances underscore how crucial choice is to young actors.

I think that in the future, as much as possible, I will have young actors cast themselves in plays. If anything, it allows actors like Lainie, with her identified learning

disability, to strike a balance between creative risk and her limitations. However, I cannot argue for complete student autonomy with regard to casting. This would not benefit less motivated acting students. These students resist hard work and risk-taking with character, invariably opting for the least emotionally, physically, and challenging roles in classroom work. As their teacher, I am obliged to encourage *all* students to take calculated risks with character. This is but one aspect of the prescribed drama curriculum. Moreover, I believe that it is my duty to expose students to challenging dramatic works beyond conventional realism, such as Churchill's Top Girls, that both challenge them as actors and deepen their appreciation for theatre.

In the project's planning, I was unconcerned with the audience's response. But the girls' perceptions of Top Girls' relevance in 2006 was tied to whether the audience understood the play. The girls cared deeply about the feedback they received from family and friends about the final performance. Grace's response was typical:

> I found it next to impossible to explain the play, except to my mom. It was impossible to explain to my dad. Partly because there are so many different aspects to it and there's a big jump from the dinner party to the office scenes to the Family Scene. And with that, I know that's what they liked best – the intensity, the yelling. They found it very believable. (Interview 10.06.06)

The majority of the girls agreed that the office scenes and the family scene in particular were most relevant to the audience and to their own lives in 2006. These perceptions were most often linked to how 'realistic' they perceived the characters, dialogue, and

conflicts to be. Even Lainie, who was not apt to analyze, believed that Marlene and Joyce's conflict over Angie was 'the way life is.' Having said this, the dinner party actors - Taylor, Grace, Nikki, Lainie, Camille and Kathleen - all considered that scene to be their greatest dramatic triumph but believed that its significance was lost on the audience.

Actor Identification with Character

In terms of personal growth in a dramatic context, I view Grace as having made the greatest gains in skills and confidence. She grew immeasurably through the challenge of characterization. She blossomed during the project stating, "I love my character [Pope Joan]. I love being in this play. I look forward to going to rehearsal all the time" (Journal 22.02.06). I would argue that Grace both identified with her character and benefited from involvement in the project. But Camille is the clearest example of an actor who, because of life circumstances, identified strongly with her character Angie and who was challenged by playing Griselda. The intent of the Top Girls Project was not *expressly* therapeutic, but it does seem that Camille used the rehearsals and her performance as Angie as a means to explore conflicted feelings in a dramatic context.

My personal belief is that drama is inherently therapeutic. Like all creative and expressive arts in a high school context, drama supports and maintains the students' emotional well being. As a drama teacher, I must honor students' individual processes but create emotional safeguards within my practice. In the past, these have included circle questions, journals, and one-to-one interviews. Most significantly, my concern for students' emotional safety prompted a pedagogical choice early in my career, that of working principally from text. I have observed that many young actors identify strongly

with their roles. In all likelihood, like Camille, they work through personal issues during the acting process. But these actors rarely require referrals to counseling caused by identification with character. It is more common that that an actor needs a referral to counseling *after* a show closes. When the production's shared creative purpose and community dissipate, the actor is no longer distracted from dealing with her pre-existing personal issues. It is only after the drama is done that the personal crisis occurs. In Camille's case, I would argue that her personal process was honored, supported, and protected. All the safeguards were in place – journals, interviews, and text. As a result, as teacher-director, I was very cognizant of Camille's emotional well being.

Did the girls identify more strongly with the contemporary characters than the historical ones? In general, they did. Lainie admired Nell's 'no-bullshit' attitude in the office and said that like Shona she could envision faking a resume if she were desperate for a job (Interview 5.06.06). Alisha, Nikki, and Kathleen were most critical of their contemporary characters' behavior, assuming that these more 'modern' women should behave in a more 'enlightened' manner (i.e. not manipulative, vulnerable or self-deprecating). As discussed in Chapter 3, Kathleen exemplified this trend, being more critical of Winn than her historical character, Lady Nijo.

In retrospect, I think that the beauty of the historical characters was that they were *far* from the girls' experience. This eventually allowed the girls to feel less self-conscious during the dinner party's final movement piece because they realized that there was no need to be realistic. As a teacher-director, my hope was that this limited exposure to non-realism would whet the girls' appetite for diverse forms of theatre for the future. In my teaching, I often find myself frustrated with students' limited notions of what is

'theatrical.' Many young playwrights, for example, believe that it is gritty subject matter, witty dialogue, and kitchen-sink realism that constitute a 'good play.' In terms of theatricality, they give almost no credence to image or stylized physical movement. At this point in my career, I am becoming convinced that this allegiance to realism is both misplaced and limiting. As a result, exposing students to non-realistic theatre is one of my expressed professional goals for the upcoming year, both in my teaching and directing.

It is interesting that apart from Taylor who played Marlene, the girls did not sympathize with that character. Camille criticized Marlene's dismissal of Angie's potential, specifically "She's [Angie's] not going to make it" (Churchill II.ii.33), while Kathleen, Lainie and Grace criticized Marlene's disregard for her sister Joyce. Their objections were based on Marlene's personal behavior, not her expressed political ideology.

Second wave feminists argued that 'the personal is political' (Krolokke & Scott 7). But most of the participants gave no indication that they interpreted Joyce's personal struggle as a class struggle. Therefore, I can only conclude that they do not, as yet, see the inextricable link between personal, sexual, and social struggles (Betsko and Koenig 78; Krolokke & Scott 10). This being said, I think it is a testament to the strength of Churchill's script that, even in 2006, twenty-four years after it was first produced, young women were still so powerfully engaged by Joyce's character. I can only hope that this identification increases the likelihood of further growth in feminist consciousness, as they grow older.

The Actors and Material Feminism

While the actors and I did discuss Top Girls' socio-political context repeatedly during rehearsals, their interviews revealed that material feminism was not meaningfully woven into their interpretations of the family scene or the play as a whole. Only Maighdlin, who played Joyce, objected to Marlene's participation in the perpetuation of hierarchical social relations, remarking that Marlene lacked awareness of the social forces that shaped her (Hennessy xv). Quite specifically, Maighdlin articulated that the sisters' disparate political stances compounded Joyce's sense of being abandoned by Marlene.

My initial prediction was confirmed. The girls were the most excited about acting in a play. *This* was their focus. With the dinner party, for example, they wanted to fulfill the demands of the scene. Churchill's craft in revealing the construction of gender was of little concern to them. But I will not diminish the company's accomplishment in taking Top Girls to production by saying 'they didn't get it'. Instead, I view the girls' lack of understanding of the play's political implications as secondary to their involvement in, commitment to and perseverance with the project.

Few would dispute that Top Girls is very challenging play for high school students. My teacher colleagues might even question the use of this play at all, arguing that I must 'meet students where they are.' It is this kind of limited thinking which keeps students' theatrical tastes firmly entrenched in the tyranny of naturalism. This point of view underestimates our students' capacity to understand and grow as theatre practitioners. Moreover, it wrongly excuses us, as their mentors, from being well read. It is our responsibility to keep abreast of new plays, not just new pedagogy. Does not working within a school context compel us to model excellence, curiosity, and challenge

for our students? And if we cannot tackle important plays such as Top Girls in a high school, then *where* would examination of its socialist-materialist issues be more appropriate?

I believe that it is precisely *because* of the density and difficulty of this particular play that it yielded such rich data for my research project. I am very fortunate to have benefited from the girls' honesty in the One-to-One Interviews and Rehearsal Response Journals. This entire experience will greatly serve my future teaching practice.

Research Methodologies - Effectiveness

As a research methodology, the One-to-One Interviews were extremely effective in helping me track each girl's shifting perspectives on the play and its characters, as well as the significance of the act of performance in Top Girls. Taylor expressed a profound love of acting: "It [acting] is a definite emotional release. It's kind of escapist. Because when I'm rehearsing, I'm not me. It's a ways to let go of the problems of the day (Interview 06.08.06). I think that this love of pretending is central to why drama can be such a powerful means of creative expression for teenagers. Barba argues that every performer fears falling into "chaos" (58). In the throes of the scene, the actor can feel as if she is taken out of herself, as though "possessed" (Barba 58). I think that this is the thrill of acting. This experimentation is made safe expressly because the actor is firmly – and safely – anchored to the earth by the craft, the dramatic art (Barba 58). I also believe profoundly that, in a high school context, the young actor's emotional safety depends upon the quality of the teacher-director's leadership.

If I were to compare the effectiveness of the research methodologies used in the Top Girls Project, I must concede that the One-to-One Interviews were more beneficial

than the journals. Each girl was interviewed three times: the beginning, middle, and end of the project. These gave me a fairly complete understanding of interpretation and the acting challenges. The question framework also was sufficiently flexible that I could respond to the individual girl, focusing her on the kinds of feedback I required for my research (see Appendix A). Because I asked the questions, I could shape the moment. If necessary, I could clarify, rephrase, or be more specific with my questions. I could even follow up on an intriguing remark put forth by a participant. The same sensitivity was not possible with journals.

I believe that my strongest research decision was to combine the three interpretative, qualitative methodologies: the Journals, the One-to-One Interviews, and my own Field Notes. The Field Notes compelled me to record my rehearsal observations. In hindsight, I can see very clearly my stresses and vulnerabilities. These Field Notes have caused me to reflect on my core teaching and directing values. Moreover, they have had significant impact on my teacher-director methodologies. In combination with girls' journals and interviews, I have a fuller understanding of the meanings that we *all* made with Top Girls.

Pedagogical Choices - Effectiveness

My choice to rehearse Top Girls from February to June 2006 in a non-linear, exploratory fashion was a strong one. The long timeframe and the small cast size allowed me the opportunity and necessary time to make pedagogical changes. The most obvious example of this was the shift away from emphasis on Churchill's text to acting processes that honored the body (see Chapter 4: The Teacher-Director).

My greatest on-going challenge was teaching in the context of rehearsals. The actors were inexperienced but resistant to dramatic exercises that they viewed as frivolous exploration. The girls' view of rehearsal as a linear process forced me to frame the movement work as directly beneficial to the final performance.

Creating the girls' Movement Workshop (Chapter 4) constituted my greatest pedagogical risk during the Top Girls Project. I had developed a limited repertoire of movement exercises while teaching Drama 149 three times (2005-2006) in the university's drama department, but I had not used them with high school age students. In retrospect, I think that this work was predicated on sound acting theory, but that I was too ambitious in the planning. Given the actors' lack of familiarity with physical work and my relative inexperience in this kind of facilitation, I needed to have more reasonable expectations. I plan to use physical movement work in future rehearsals and drama classes, but I will ensure that it is introduced in a more gradual, organic way to lessen actor resistance. The Top Girls ensemble was an excellent test group.

At points during the project, I worried that I was too demanding of the actors. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised at Kathleen's point of view:

> I'll probably remember the rehearsals more than I'll remember the actual performance. Some of the most fun times were hanging out in here or in the Archives room and we had rehearsed so much and chatted so much, whereas performing was maybe, altogether five hours or something onstage? Which is a rush. There's that feeling of exhilaration and the smiling and the cheers ... But what I'll look back on is the rehearsal and the fun. (Interview 5.06.06)

I share Kathleen's sentiments. As a teacher-director, I much prefer rehearsals to performance. I love exploration of the play with the actors and the sense of community that is created.

With the Top Girls Project, the interviews and journals allowed me insight into each actor's personal creative process and her challenges in rehearsal. My efforts with Kathleen and Taylor illustrate my conscious attempt to be alert to the actors' needs. I am not always able to be this responsive. In my regular drama classroom, I face larger class sizes, time pressure, curriculum demands, and a spread in literacy and/or academic abilities. As a result, there are fewer chances to solicit meaningful feedback from *all* the actors.

Maintaining the momentum of the production while teaching drama skills was a major challenge during the Top Girls Project. The actors were often anxious that rehearsals were not progressing quickly enough. After much reflection (see Chapter 3), I discontinued Rehearsal Response Journals in response to the girls' pressure and needs. Many were not able to complete journals outside rehearsals and were resistant to writing in rehearsals. In retrospect, I regret scrapping journals so quickly. As Grace, Lainie, Taylor and Camille illustrate, the creative journal can allow the actor a voice, deepen her acting process, and facilitate safe sharing of perspectives with the director. The journal is a legitimate means for tracking actor process, but the researcher needs both sensitivity and grounding in psychology for interpretation.

I recognize, given my experience with Kathleen and Nikki, that journaling is not every actor's creative tool. In fact, many past drama students in grade 10 have balked at journaling. At this level, there is a noticeable spread in literacy and/or academic abilities.

I have observed that many non-academic students enroll in drama hoping that they can escape the demands of writing. If I insist on large amounts of written work out of class, they will not complete it. If we do the work in class, these students are more apt to be off-task and/or misbehave. This erodes any sense of ensemble that I try to cultivate in drama class. To date in my drama practice, journaling with grade 10 drama students has been largely ineffective.

Creative process journals have worked best in grades 11 and 12 (i.e. Drama 20 and Drama 30). With one very creative group of grade 11's (2000-2001), I utilized weekly journals very successfully. I emphasized development of the actor's individual process apart from rehearsal of a specific play. The focus was on creative exploration. I challenged them to explore diverse creative forms and take risks. Each Friday, students could share their entries with classmates if they wished. The choice was theirs. This group went on to become an exemplary grade 12 class. With grade 12's, I have often used directors' journals to facilitate project planning, track interpretation and/or decision-making during rehearsals, and record self-assessments following production. At this level, there is little resistance to journaling. The directors experience first hand the benefits of preparedness and self-reflection in the rehearsal hall.

In her final interview, Kathleen was the only participant to address creative process. She indicated that it was different from what she was expecting:

> I knew it [rehearsals] was going to be creative and whatever, but I thought it would be more like, 'so you're going to sit down and memorize your lines and you're going to do it this way and this is how you're going to say that line. You're going to emphasize this word and look over here.' But it

> was not like that. It was much more working together and not being told what to do. There was a lot more room for me to do what I wanted. You helped us along, but you allowed me to interpret the character. Ultimately it was up to me how I wanted to interpret her and how I wanted to play her. (Interview 6.06.06)

Kathleen's feedback typifies the cast's view of rehearsal as a linear process. But her eventual relaxation into *this* process confirms that my evolving exploratory approach, as a director, is workable even with less experienced actors. In the future, I intend to continue emphasizing actor autonomy, risk-taking, and creative exploration of the character and the play.

I pride myself on being a reflective practitioner, so I must admit that my core teaching value of responsiveness has been tested during the Top Girls Project. It was a constant challenge to honor Churchill's play and the project's intent. Given the luxury of such a small and dedicated cast, it felt inexcusable to not respond meaningfully to the ensemble and each girl's individual needs. Given this perfectionism, I was 'saved' by the forethought incorporated into the project design, its structure, timeframe and methodologies. All these allowed me to attempt greater responsiveness in my pedagogy and directing.

The girls clearly view the performance as the highlight. The older girls like Maighdlin, Kathleen, and even Nikki often asked me whether the play turned out as I envisioned. I never answered this question directly. They interpreted this to mean that I was disappointed with the outcome, which is definitely not the case. Did the girls understand what they were saying? For the most part, they did. Were they working as a

tight ensemble? For the most part, they were. Were their performances heartfelt, responsive, and authentic? There was definite growth in this area. But clearly, my director's impressions of the final performance cannot be divorced from gauging the actors' development during rehearsals. As a teacher-director turned researcher, I view the performance as only one aspect of much larger creative, educational process, theirs and mine:

> If I go back to the original impetus for the [Top Girls] project, it was probably reading Mary Pipher's Surviving Ophelia and looking at what girls need. They need a sense of community. They need a sense of being valued. And a sense of being challenged and validated. And I think that theatre production has the capacity to do all those things with strong leadership. And maybe that's what it comes down to – the teacher at the helm. And that's where my own practice comes in. (Field Notes 04.06.06)

From my researcher's perspective, the more germane questions are: 'Am I content with what the girls got from the play and the experience?' and 'How effectively did I serve the actors' needs in rehearsal?'

The Top Girls Project was predicated on my drama teacher's desire to engage female students in an active, creative, and thoughtful all-girl project, the focus of which was on issues pertinent to women. I believe I achieved this. As a director, I wanted to direct a play that would not typically be directed in high school because I believed that the girls were capable of it. It was a challenge, but I think we did justice to Churchill's play. In a perfect world, I hoped that this research project would create a *space*, both

physical and psychological, in my teaching practice for shifts in consciousness among the female participants (hooks 11). But I did not anticipate that one of these shifts in consciousness would be mine.

My conception of research was not necessarily that a specific idea was waiting to be "captured" at the end of the Top Girls Project (Barba 57). In fact, I was not averse to moving in an unanticipated direction with the project. I was willing to embrace whatever meanings the girls expressed about the play. This included the chance that they might reject Top Girls and want to create another drama in response to it. I am still surprised that the girls had complete faith that we could take the whole play to production. I did not always share their certainty or optimism.

Did the participants understand the play, Top Girls, in its entirety as a feminist work of art? I must honestly say that, with the exception of Maighdlin and Taylor, they did not. In retrospect, I see several contributing factors. First, the actors were young. Many had little theatre background. Both factors lessened the likelihood that they would understand everything within a play of this thematic depth and complexity. Second, the Top Girls Project was deployed over a four-month period to allow for my research and exploration and also to prevent it from interfering with the girls' academic work. This most certainly affected the sense of continuity in rehearsal, theirs and mine. Their level of understanding of the whole may have been greater had rehearsals been conducted in longer blocks of activity over a shorter rehearsal period. Thirdly, I concede that my openness to their performing only *some* of the play may have prevented me from fostering understanding of the play in its entirety as a work of art. Rather, I was open to

possibilities that included performing whichever portions of Top Girls were ready for an audience. This depended on the girls' progress in rehearsal within the time allotted.

In the writing of this thesis, I choose *not* to dwell on the negative. It does not matter to me that few girls understood the materialist feminism in the play. I am not even concerned that they are still resistant to calling themselves 'feminists.' I believe that each girl's involvement in the Top Girls Project is but one small part of her journey into adulthood. Performing in the project may or may not have sown the seeds of feminist consciousness. This will only become clearer with the passage of time. As Gerda Lerner explains, a young woman's journey towards autonomy comes through gaining awareness or and appreciation for one's past (1992 xxiv). I think that the value of Top Girls is that the girls experienced, in acting the characters and situations, the individual and cumulative experiences of diverse women who have come before. Acquiring such knowledge can only help them shape the future, theirs and ours.

Personally, I am aware that the Top Girls Project cannot but lead me to other challenges within my teaching and directing, as yet to be determined. These may only become clear with my new teaching position or my next production. Most certainly, the Top Girls Project has alerted me to the power of reciprocity. The luxury of time, space, and a sustained shared purpose created a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship between the participants and me. Without question, each girl learned about herself, the power of drama, and/or the value of community through her involvement in the project. In return, I was privileged to receive creative trust and honest feedback. This ensemble has reminded me that I must respond uniquely to each cast, indeed each individual. I possess this ability. I understand now that it is unwise to cling to rigid, prescribed

outcomes in rehearsal. It is more crucial to embrace the possibility that rehearsal can be as diverse a journey for me as for the actors.

Appendix A – Top Girls Question Template

Interview 1: Beginning

a) What interested you about the Top Girls Project?
b) What character in the play interests you the most?
c) What do you most want to explore in rehearsals?
d) What do you think the group should focus on most in rehearsals?
e) Do you think that the play has anything to say to young women in 2006?
f) Do you have any questions for me?

Interview 2: Middle

a) How are rehearsals going for you?
b) What do you most want to focus on in rehearsals?
c) What should the group focus on in rehearsals?
d) What character most interests you?
e) As we approach production, what are you most concerned about?
f) Do you have any questions for me?

Interview 3: End

a) For you, what was the most important aspect of the Top Girls Project?
b) How did you describe Top Girls to others?
c) How was it to perform? What is your strongest memory?
d) Was there any aspect of the project that was easy or hard for you?
e) What kind of feedback would you give me about the play, process or production?
f) Do you have any questions for me?

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