American Playwrights Celebrate Caryl Churchill at Eighty

The British playwright Caryl Churchill turned eighty in 2018. She provides an example of someone who, for more than fifty years, has been steadily constructing a body of work that takes as its subject contemporary politics and the human condition, in plays that are strikingly original as dramatic form. In America, playwriting has been challenged by texts assembled as collage from non-literary sources and by playwrights displaced by dramaturgs; contemporary playwrights’ work has often been ignored by theatre companies preferring to construct their own texts or appropriate other works; dramatic literature claims less attention in theatre scholarship that now celebrates performance instead. PAJ invited a number of playwrights to consider her work in relation to their own aspirations as writers and to the status of the text in theatre today. What is Churchill’s legacy as a writer? How important has she been in your development as a writer?

—Bonnie Marranca

Permanent Permission Slip (Thank You, Caryl Churchill)

Sibyl Kempson

Every time I have found myself in a place of fear that I am going too far with a play or performance text I am writing or something I am trying to stage, I have thought to myself, often subconsciously: “Yeah, but look what Caryl Churchill did,” and I press forward. In 1978, when I was five, Caryl Churchill wrote Cloud 9. In 1982, when I was in the fourth or fifth grade, she wrote Top Girls. I grew up in rural New Jersey (yes, there is such a place) and didn’t know from Caryl Churchill. So, though I didn’t read or see productions of either of those plays at the time, they formed me as a writer and maker. I find myself checking in on both plays in my thoughts whenever I find myself taking liberties, and they give me strength, affirmation. Those two plays are to me like permanent permission slips.
I want to say that I wasn’t writing plays yet in 1982, in the Reagan-Thatcher era, when *Top Girls* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, but it wouldn’t be true. In the fourth grade, I wrote and co-directed *Ponce De Leon and the Fountain of Youth*, which was presented to the wider student body in our auditorium-slash-cafeteria thanks to a “gifted” program at my public elementary school. In it, I had written parts for three large and masculine boys to play the “Fountain Faeries.” Their task was to protect the Fountain and decide whether Ponce was worthy of claiming its discovery. They sang a song proclaiming their identity and credentials in high falsetto, and in the production I was somehow permitted to costume them in dresses and gowns from my bag of “dress-up clothes” that lived in the back of my mother’s makeshift closet in our attic at home, decking them with jewels and beads and coaching them on their falsettos. If I travel again backward to that wild and complete age of nine, I still marvel at the fact that no one stopped that from happening. The boys were reluctant, but they did not refuse or openly balk. They gritted their teeth and did the job they were assigned, and no parent intervened, no one of the ladies from the principal’s office (who you could be fascinated to see watching, with devoted indulgence, *As the World Turns* or *One Life to Live* or *Guiding Light* on the television in the school library during their lunch break) came clicking or clopping into the room with any cease-and-desist. I don’t have any memory of how it was received, but I remember that it was allowed to take place. I think I am still waiting for someone to come in and stop the plays I make from happening.

The town where I went to high school was in Pennsylvania, and the county library was situated in a big, creaky old Victorian house on Main Street. My mother taught high school an hour away in the neighboring state, and I would haunt its dusty rooms and book-lined hallways after school each afternoon from roughly two fifty-five to four thirty most weekdays, waiting for her to pick me up. There might not have been a copy of *Cloud 9* on a shelf in the “drama” section of that library, along with plays by Arthur Miller and George Bernard Shaw and Bertolt Brecht, but I seem to remember one. I am almost positive there was a copy of *Blithe Spirit*. There might have been one book of plays by Beckett or Camus. There were no plays by Fornes that I remember. None by Shange. It was a conservative town (the Fountain Faeries might not have made it there), now infested with Trump supporters. But if I travel backward through time to become once again that clueless but curious, displaced and disconnected teenager, I access a memory of opening a copy of *Cloud 9* and reading an elaborate cross-gender-casting scheme. It had not occurred to me that “you could do that” out in the “real world.” Something opened, dimly, inside of me. A possibility. A nod of the head from some distant, unknown authority. Some ancestor.
Derek Campbell was one of the acting teachers in the drama department of the small liberal arts college I attended. He directed a student production of *Top Girls*. Derek was from Belfast, Ireland. He told us all about the political context of the work, from his own experience of the traumatic and sudden class rift in the UK during the nefarious Reagan-Thatcher era. How those economic policies had riven a sudden chasm between friends and families, dividing them swiftly and mercilessly into rich and poor. He talked about the feeling of abandonment felt by the people who were left behind, and the deep and insistent guilt of those who had benefitted so grossly from the new system, and that Caryl Churchill had written this play in response to the troubles of those times. No one had explained the writing of plays to me like that before—as a response.

One thing I knew: this play had REAL PARTS FOR WOMEN. I’d never read female characters like these. Each one was like a vessel for the gurgling rage that drove me at that turbulent age—as a lost but voracious financial aid student at a rich kids’ school, as a child of a broken home, as a blossoming young woman in a jacked-up capitalist man’s world stacked to prey upon me—and they backed me up on every swing I took. I was cast in three different parts: Pope Joan, Mrs. Kidd, and Joyce. We explored the characters through exercises that started with an outward physical shell—walking, gesturing, indeterminate vocalizing—and Derek kept a certain supportive distance as we worked our way inward. I gave it all I had, and so did the other students, actors, and designers alike. He didn’t have to tell us the implications Caryl Churchill was making for feminism. Even though it was the 1990s, and feminism had become a dirty word, we didn’t need him to utter it for us on her behalf. We knew exactly what she was talking about.

And another thing . . . I didn’t see it at the time, but I see it now: the combination of gritty realism, coupled with the fantastical impossibility of a conversation taking place simultaneously in another realm, was set into a formal structure that challenged the linear modes of thought we had been (falsely) fed as universal.

No one stops me, now or ever—and that’s because of Caryl Churchill.

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