

Caryl Churchill's

HEART'S DESIRE

A Playgoer's Guide

“She's taking her time”

“Caryl Churchill has always had an ability to surprise, not just the critics and the audience, but herself and her collaborators as well. She gives challenges to a director that are sometimes alarming.” -- Max Stafford-Clark., quoted in *The Village Voice*, Jan 27-Feb 2, 1999.

Caryl Churchill



Caryl Churchill was born on 3 September 1938 in London and grew up in the Lake District and in Montréal. She was educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she read English..

She was Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court (1974-5) and spent much of the 1970s and 1980s working with the theatre groups 'Joint Stock' and 'Monstrous Regiment'.

Many of her plays are the product of collaboration with director Max Stafford-Clark and/or Joint Stock theatre company (latterly *Out of Joint*): *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *Fen*, *Serious Money*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, *Ice Cream* and *Blue Heart*. In her introduction to *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill generously explains how first working with Monstrous Regiment and Joint Stock in 1976 transformed her as a playwright: "Though I still wanted to write alone sometimes, my attitude to myself, my work and others had been basically and permanently changed."

Among her best known plays, *Top Girls* brings together five historical female characters at a dinner party in a London restaurant given by Marlene, the new managing director of 'Top Girls' employment agency. The play was first staged at the Royal

Court in 1982, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. It transferred to Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in New York later that year. *Serious Money* was first produced at the Royal Court in 1987 and won the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy of the Year and the Laurence Olivier/BBC Award for Best New Play. More recent plays include *Mad Forest* (1990), written after a visit to Romania, and *The Skriker* (1994). *Far Away* premiered at the Royal Court in 2000, directed by Stephen Daldry, and *A Number* (2002), which addresses the subject of human cloning.

[Adapted from the British Council's *Contemporary Writers* web site, and the "Critical Perspective" by Dr. Peter Buse]

the play

Heart's Desire opens with the line "She's taking her time." This could very well describe the playwright, who keeps restarting the action as a London family awaits the return of their daughter from Australia. Not long after the father (Bernard Gallagher) launches into a querulous conversation with the mother (June Watson) and dotty Aunt Maisie (terrifically played by Mary Macleod), who are trying their best to set the table, the actors are forced to begin the scene again from the top. Each reenactment presents a slightly different blend of the fears, longings, recriminations, and regrets that permanently link parents to their children. The bold strokes of Churchill's imagination translate this into the fantastical intrusion of gunmen, frolicking children, Nazis, even a colorful ostrich. By toying with such a simple fragment of plot, the playwright manages to imbue the archetypal homecoming situation with a density of tragicomic implication. [Charles McNulty, "Language Is a Virus," *The Village Voice*, February 3 - 9, 1999.]



Critical views

"Though it feels like the Marx Brothers had a hand in it, *Heart's Desire* really owes more to the bleak landscape of Beckett." – *New York Daily News*.

"Caryl Churchill is an important figure in British playwriting today; indeed, many critics and theatre scholars would argue that she has played a leading role in shaping our contemporary theatrical landscape, on national and international stages. Characteristic of her work is her enduring commitment to a socialist and to a socialist-feminist politics, coupled with a desire to experiment with theatrical form: to find a theatrical means of giving expression to her ideas about and concerns for a world that, as she presents it, is increasingly damaged by the relentless march of global capitalism." – Elaine Aston, "Caryl Churchill." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 30 Jan. 2004.

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