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Time Out Chicago / Issue 159: Mar 13–19, 2008

Theater review Top Girls

Critic's Rating



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20% Theatre Company at Live Bait Theater. By Caryl Churchill. Dir. Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald. With ensemble cast.

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A feminist play that opens with an imagined dinner party with legendary women from assorted centuries sounds like an academic groaner. But if you're not familiar with Churchill's landmark 1982 drama, you're in for some surprises. Churchill offers no easy answers in her initially dreamlike, ultimately realist play about the successes and sacrifices of Marlene, a high-flying business exec at a Thatcher-era London employment firm. Surprise, surprise: The exceptional women from history are simultaneously inspiring and self-absorbed; the successful female exec smashes stereotypes but aligns herself with patriarchal values in the interest of self-promotion. There is no sisterhood here—not even between the actual sisters whose emotional confrontation ends the play.



THEY JUST WANNA HAVE FUN The Girls gather for a chat.

Groundbreaking when it premiered in 1982, *Top Girls* is starting to show its age. The icon of the brittle, masculinized female go-getter begins to lose its relevance in a world where employer-provided child care is at least a possibility and many women have returned to the role of homemaker by choice. But as a thought-provoking meditation on the sacrifices made by women in a male arena, *Top Girls* still delivers the goods, both as polemic and as moving drama.

Thankfully, both elements are very much on display in 20%'s production. Schwan-Rosenwald fares better with the realistic scenes than with the play's whimsical titan dinner sequence, but once the action enters the world of the real, the performance becomes gripping. She's aided by several stand-out cast members, particularly Lauren Van Kurin in the dual roles of the mythical Dull Gret and Marlene's slow-witted niece, and Abby Rowold in a trio of roles as varied as they are convincing.

— Kay Daly

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