







## Performing, on stage

## Not just a 'woman's' play

"Top Girls," this year's University Theatre Second Season swansong, could be dubiously tagged a "woman's play." The two-act play is written by a woman, directed by a woman and acted by women. But to dismiss it as a feminist piece would both limit and insult a production that appears to strive for a more universal appeal.

The action focuses on Marlene (Kimberly Anderson), a contemporary woman who has just been promoted to an influential position in the employment agency, Top Girls. Employment agencies are in the business of selling people to the world of commerce, and Marlene is in the thick of it.

Marlene must test her emotional strength by balancing her "female" sensibilities against



Four years in the making. a three part, four hour film masterpiece

what are traditionally perceived as male drives - ambition, power and success. The prices she pays are predictably exorbitant, and the resulting crimes of the heart are poignant. Marlene is the prototypical modern woman plagued by the modern woman's disease: self-doubt. Top or not, she's still a girl.

Though convincingly portrayed by Anderson, Marlene's dilemma is a hackneyed one. Fortunately, "Top Girls" is intriguing enough to transcend the familiar feminist line. In fact, the play is so full of characters, set changes and time warps that, ultimately, the cliched theme is overshadowed by an interesting and experimental production.

British playwright Caryl Churchill begins the first act with a dinner party that is attended by a handful of historical women who have struggled with power and position. The play then jumps back and forth in contemporary time. Structurally, for most of us who think in linear terms, this theatrical device can be confusing, especially when the same actresses play several different characters. The structural arrangement also requires patience; the last scene of the first act appears to have no relationship to the first scene - until later. The play does, however, fall together neatly in the final scene.

Even if the play is awkwardly conceived, it is well acted by a number of the women, all of whom play more than one role. Nancy Julian and Shannon O'Keefe give exceptional, insightful performances. Their roles build the emotional substance of the play. Both actresses rarely miss a beat or crucial detail in their parts as Marlene's martyred sister, lovce (Julian), and Joyce's slow, clumsy daughter (O'Keefe). Julian's Scotch-Irish brogue that she delivers in her historical part as Isabella Bird was a genuine theatrical high point.

The set, which was designed

by the indefatigable Faber deChaine, is one of the more complex Arena Theatre designs. The set is radically changed several times, but most of the transitions are pulled off with grace by the cast members. Each piece moves smoothly on and off the stage. The most appealing set is the first scene's, in which Marlene meets with her historical guests. A long table dressed in a fuschia tablecloth and sparkling with crystal at the upscale Chez Femme Restaurant, recalls a kind of ironic Woman's Last Supper.

Director Lynda Czajkowska is following in a Second Season tradition of working with new material that stands artistically to the left of UT's more mainstream Robinson Theatre presentations. Czajkowska could have directed a more strident production, thrashing out sins visited upon women from the beginning of time. Such an interpretation might have even been suitable to the Arena Theatre. The Arena audience, more so than the Robinson spectator, is better prepared for dramatic innovation obsessed with message.

Instead Czajkowska, who also directed last year's "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground," chose wisely to vary the play's pace and capitalize on its humor and ironies. Women do jabber, do expose their hearts easily and do know the designs of martyrdom, "Top Girls" suggests. Without exploiting these "weaknesses," Czajkowska seems to have taken them seriously enough to laugh at them. The strength symbolized by these women - compassion, empathy and esprit de corps are thus even more triumphantly exposed.

The play continues in the Arena Theatre May 11-12 and May 17-19. Admission is \$2. Ticket information and reservations are available at the Box Office at 686-4191.

Angela Allen Morgan

Food Service



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