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Courtesy of University Theatre

Marlene (Bekki Barnhart, center) and Dull Gret (Rachel Aanestad, right) react to a story told by Pope Joan (Yasmin Ravard).

'Top Girls' traverses many dimensions of womanhood

■ Women and their upward mobility processes are focus of new UT play, 'Top Girls'



Top Girls
A University Theatre play written by Caryl Churchill, directed by Beth Cherne.
★★★★☆

By Yael Menahem
Oregon Daily Emerald

Can women have it all? Then again, what is "all," and by whose definition do we decide what "all" is for a woman? Furthermore, will women be happy once they have it "all"?

The University Theatre's production of Caryl Churchill's "Top Girls," which opened Jan. 28 at Robinson Theater, poses these questions and also offers answers in a multi-layered, complicated performance. Even the actors work within this complex structure, with nearly the entire cast taking on multiple roles.

The mood of the play is set as audience members enter the theater. Written on pink paper, quotes by feminist and co-founder of Ms. Magazine Gloria Steinem dot the doors and walls. In them, Steinem observes the privileges that society bestows upon men simply because of their gender and how historically this has worked against women, who were just as worthy of recognition.

In the opening act, Marlene (Bekki Barnhart), who has just received a promotion in her company, invites five fictitious and real historical female characters to join in a celebration. As the group sits down to dinner, a conversation ensues between two characters — Isabella (Minnie Goode) and Lady Nijo (Kim Harmon), the former a European traveler and the latter a mistress to the Japanese emperor.

The two women adhere to the common stereotype that women are competitive and always trying to outdo each other. They purposely talk over each other's sentences, eager to show whose

life was better and whose travels were more exotic.

As the dinner continues, the two are joined by Pope Joan (Yasmin Ravard), a fictitious pope from the ninth century. She reveals to the other women that she once lived like a man to become a clergyman, while having lovers and even bearing a child, for which she was killed.

By meal's end, it's revealed that all of the dinner guests, with the exception of Isabella and Marlene, have had children and gave them up at the demands of the men in their lives. Initially they accept what they did, but by the end of the scene, many of the women break down at the sacrifices that they were forced to make.

As the play progresses, we see Marlene at the office where she interviews women who are looking for better jobs. Issues of age and experience surface during the process and these factors work against the job candidates. Questions of marriage and children also arise as having children leads to maternity leave: How can a woman progress at her job if she has to be absent to raise a family?

Again, it's a double bind for these women who want to have a career but are also expected by society to marry and have children.

In the second act the audience is introduced to Angie (Rachel Aanestad), Marlene's biological daughter, who was raised as her niece. Angie doesn't get along with her Aunt Louise (Ravard) — Marlene's sister whom she knows as her mother — and Angie longs to be with Marlene in the city. Angie isn't considered a smart girl by Marlene's standards, yet she eventually figures out that Marlene is her real mother.

Many conflicts arise during the play, primarily when Marlene returns home to visit Angie and Louise. The two fight bitterly because Marlene left Angie behind when she pursued a career and a better life for herself. Louise, on the other hand, stayed home and is resentful about the

life that she has led and for having to raise Angie.

Could she have been as successful as her sister, she asks. She'll never know, but she lives with that question in her head. At the same time, Marlene's happiness is in doubt due to personal sacrifices she made for her promotion.

Between acts one and two, certain characters are dressed onstage, an interesting scene because the actors stand still like mannequins while the tailor helps them into their costumes. As they stare emptily into space, the actors' legs and arms are moved with no resistance.

These moments are significant because they show that throughout history women weren't allowed to lead their lives in the manner they wanted. Choices were made for them and they have stood still and watched as their lives pass.

Marlene is never dressed onstage, however, and the control that she has over her life is apparent. Although she refuses to wear pants to work, she does wear a tie and jacket with a mini-skirt and heels.

"Top Girls" is a complicated play that has more than one interpretation and a multitude of issues at hand. The story challenges women's changing roles in society and doesn't conclude that choosing one life over the other is better.

If anything, through the complex script, it questions women's expected roles and their now visible roles in society. The play is recommended for women — and men — who are in search of answers and more questions.

"Top Girls" continues tonight at 8 p.m. and has subsequent evening performances Feb. 4, 5, 11 and 12. There is a Sunday matinee Feb. 6; proceeds from that show will benefit the Community Alliance for Lane County. Ticket prices are \$10 for the general public, \$8 for University staff and \$5 for students. A \$1 discount is available to students for Thursday shows.