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**TOP GIRLS**  
 DE / BY **CARYL CHURCHILL**  
 MISE EN SCÈNE DE / DIRECTED BY  
**MICHELINE CHEVRIER**

**“WHAT DO YOU  
 WANT TO BE WHEN  
 YOU GROW UP?”**

DÉCORS / SET DESIGN BY **MAX-OTTO FAUTEUX**, COSTUMES / COSTUME DESIGN BY **MYLÈNE CHABROL**, ÉCLAIRAGES DE / LIGHTING DESIGN BY **MARTIN SIROIS**, CONCEPTION SONORE DE / SOUND DESIGN BY **JESSE ASH**, METTANT EN VEDETTE / STARRING **LAURA CONDILLN ET / AND LENI PARKER AVEC / WITH LAURYN ALLMAN, LUCINDA DAVIS, ELANA DUNKELMAN, FRANCE ROLLAND, JULIE TAMIKO MANNING**. UNE PRODUCTION DU CENTRE SEGAL / A SEGAL CENTRE PRODUCTION



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# PRODUCTION CREDITS

Lauryn Allman  
Laura Condlin  
Lucinda Davis  
Elana Dunkelman  
Leni Parker  
France Rolland  
Julie Tamiko Manning

Joan, Angie  
Marlene  
Griselda, Nell  
Waitress, Kit, Shona  
Joyce, Nijo, Mrs. Kidd  
Gret, Louise  
Isabella, Jeannine, Win

Micheline Chevrier  
Caitlin Murphy  
Max-Otto Fauteux  
Mylène Chabrol  
Martin Sirois  
Jesse Ash  
Graham Cuthbertson

Director  
Dramaturg  
Set Designer  
Costume Designer  
Lighting Designer  
Sound Designer  
Assistant Director

Elaine Normandeau  
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Stage Manager  
Assistant Stage Manager  
Apprentice Stage Manager

## ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

Please take a moment to go over theatre etiquette with your group, as articulated on page 23.

This guide was compiled by Lucie Lederhendler, Educational Programs Manager, with contributions from Jess Fildes, for the Segal Centre for Performing Arts. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

This guide is intended to help educators use an interdisciplinary approach to theatre learning. Although there are several pages devoted to feminism, it is only one of many motifs of this work, and students should be encouraged to consider the play from many different angles.

General questions relating to the topics covered in this guide can be found on each topic page. Questions about the content of the play, including character motivations and plot comprehension, can be found on page 18 and are organized by scene.

Links and references are listed on page 22. Images are not cited, but are hyperlinked. If you would like more thorough citations or if you are not viewing this guide online, please contact us at 514 . 739 . 2301, extension 8360.

# SYNOPSIS

## ACT I

### Scene 1.

#### A Restaurant, London, England.

**Marlene** has recently won a promotion at the **Top Girls Employment Agency**, and is having a dinner party to celebrate. Her guests are **Isabella Bird** (page 11), **Lady Nijo** (page 12), **Dull Gret** (page 13), **Pope Joan** (page 14), and **Patient Griselda** (page 15). All seven characters, whether fictional or historical (or both), recount the stories of their lives and how the men in charge affected them. They reminisce on love, family, and adventure, and discuss the impact that feminism and misogyny has had on their lives.

### Scene 2.

#### Top Girls Employment Agency, London, England.

At work, Marlene's female co-workers, **Win** and **Nell**, celebrate Marlene's success. **Howard**, the other candidate, becomes so distressed that he lost the promotion to a woman that he becomes ill, to the point where he has a heart attack and has gone to hospital.

It becomes clear that Marlene is unhappy despite her career success. In her personal life, she feels lonely. Although she has had many male cohorts, they have tired of her eventually when they learn she will never be submissive or accommodating.

### Scene 3.

#### A backyard in Suffolk, England.

Back in the small town where Marlene was raised, **Joyce**, her sister, lives with her 16-year-old daughter, **Angie**, who is playing with her 12-year-old friend **Kit**. They share an exercise book that holds black magic and politics. Joyce calls to them to come in for tea but they hide. Angie raves about her successful and worldly aunt, and promises to go to stay with her in London.



They decide to go to a movie, and while Angie is chaging into her favourite dress, which no longer fits her, Joyce asks Kit why she hangs around with Angie, in whom she does not see much potential.

Angie has dropped out of high school and does not have any employable skills. Joyce does not believe that she is smart enough to make a life for herself at all.

## ACT II

### Scene 1.

#### London, England.

Angie goes to London to visit her aunt. She drops in Marlene's office without notice, and asks her if she can stay with her for an undetermined amount of time. Marlene agrees, with some hesitation.

### Scene 2.

#### Suffolk, England. A year earlier.

Marlene drops in on Angie and Joyce. Angie planned this visit without Joyce knowing, but Marlene is welcomed into the kitchen.

Joyce sees Marlene as someone who abandoned her family and thinks that they are better off without her. Marlene did have a baby girl at seventeen, but her career ambitions sent her to the city at a young age, and made her unwilling to raise a child. Joyce and her husband, **Frank**, were happy to adopt this baby.

Frank was soon gone, having taken a young girlfriend while still married to Joyce. Now a single mother, Joyce has a combative relationship with her daughter. They speak hatefully to each other, even threateningly.

Joyce and Marlene have very different opinions about class and politics. Marlene is in favour of Margaret Thatcher and dislikes the working class, while Joyce stayed in the country and lived a life similar to their parents'. She finds herself now a single mother with four cleaning jobs. She believes that a woman can be prime minister, but thinks it's a shame that the first woman prime minister is Thatcher.

The political argument turns personal, to family and Angie. Joyce tells Marlene that she did get pregnant while Angie was six months old, but lost the baby because she was always on her feet and didn't get any rest, ultimately blaming Angie for that miscarriage. Marlene tells Joyce that she's had two abortions and many relationships that didn't hold up because of her success. They are both unhappy in their very different lives and this bonds them, if only temporarily.

Who needs them?  
Well I do.  
But I need  
adventures more.  
So on into the  
sunset.  
I think the eighties  
are going to be  
stupendous.

-Marlene, Act II, Scene 2.

# LANGUAGE & TALK

Caryl Churchill's distinctive writing style is characterized by abrupt phrases loaded with meaning. Simple word choices cover a great deal of information.

In the case of *Top Girls* in particular, plain language is confused by interruptions and simultaneous speaking (see right), symbolizing the lack of support between women.

When Joan begins speaking Latin, it is similarly an act of isolation and alienation. In her time, women were discouraged from learning Latin as a way of keeping them out of powerful and educated spheres. By speaking it at the party, Joan is expressing that she does not care or expect to be understood by the other guests.

The language of misogyny is likewise embedded throughout the play, as in the use of words like "cunt" between family members. The reappropriation of this word fails, however, because it is used in a way that reflects the speaker's self-doubt and hurt feelings.

The general disjointedness of the language in this play creates a certainty that the characters will never unify or understand each other. The reason for it, however, is up for interpretation. Do they not want to feel connected? Do they not know how to? Or do they hang on to their narcissism, which has become so ingrained in them that it is the one thing that they have in common?



From Left: Laura Condlin, France Rolland, and Leni Parker in rehearsal. Photo by George Allister, 2014.

The script of *Top Girls* contains instructions on how to read the code of interruptions that are written in to the conversation:

- 1) When one character starts speaking before the other is finished, the point of interruption is marked /.
- 2) A character sometimes continues speaking right through another's speech.
- 3) Sometimes a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it, and continuity is marked \*.

This excerpt from the dinner party scene, contains all of those symbols:

**ISABELLA.** Of course I am a member of the / church of England.  
**MARLENE.** Gret?  
**GRET.** Potatoes.  
**MARLENE.** I haven't been to church for years. / I like Christmas carols.  
**ISABELLA.** Good works matter much more than church attendance.  
**MARLENE.** Make that two steaks and a lot of potatoes. Rare. But I don't do good works either.  
**JOAN.** Canelloni, please, / and a salad.  
**ISABELLA.** Well, I tried, but oh dear. Hennie did good works.  
**NIJO.** The first half of my life was all sin and the second / all repentance.\*  
**MARLENE.** Oh what about starters?  
**GRET.** Soup.

**JOAN.** \*And which did you like best?  
**MARLENE.** Were your travels just a penance? Avacado vinaigrette. Didn't you / enjoy yourself?  
**JOAN.** Nothing to start with for me, thank you.  
**NIJO.** Yes, but I was very unhappy. / It hurt to remember the past.  
**MARLENE.** And the wine list.  
**NIJO.** I think that was repentance.  
**MARLENE.** Well I wonder.  
**NIJO.** I might just have just been homesick.  
**MARLENE.** Or angry.  
**NIJO.** Not angry, no, / why angry?  
**GRET.** Can't we get more bread?  
**MARLENE.** Don't you get angry? I get angry.  
**NIJO.** But what about?  
**MARLENE.** Yes let's have two more Frascati. And some more bread please. (*The Waitress Exits.*)

**What was difficult about reading this dialogue?**

**What effect does this device have on the perceived meaning of this conversation?**

**How does it establish character traits?**

# QUESTIONS OF MORALITY

The characters in *Top Girls* are morally ambiguous, and spend much of the play justifying their actions based on motivation as opposed to their results.

By using historical figures in the first scene, Churchill is illustrating how morality changes over time. For example, Patient Griselda (Page 15) was a role model in her time, an allegory of perfect wifedom, but today seems negligent and pathetic. Dull Gret (page 13), on the other hand, is a character created in her time to be a parody of a woman who doesn't know her place, but to a modern audience might be a model of bravery, protectiveness, and leadership.

The "real" characters in the play are similarly multifaceted. The family - Joyce, Angie, and Kit - are a dysfunctional group, to say the least.

We first meet Joyce in her role as an attentive mother, calling to her daughter and her daughter's friend to come in for tea and cookies:

"You there, Angie? Kit? You there Kitty? Want a cup of tea? I've got some chocolate biscuits. Come on now I'll put the kettle on. What a choccy Biccyy, Angie?" This invitation is caring, even saccharine. When they don't answer, however, she turns, saying "Fucking rotten little cunt. You can stay there

and die. I'll lock the door." This is a good example of how Churchill creates two-sided characters, opening with one personality and switching it immediately, ingratiating Joyce to the audience first, then villainizing her, but framed as this shift is in the rebellion of her teenaged daughter, it remains somehow sympathetic.

Likewise, Angie is offensive and rude to her friend Kit, but as Kit begins to fight back, that first impression is tempered somewhat, and even further when we hear the unkind things her mother says to her.

The women at the Top Girls Employment Agency, Notably Win and Nell, start their morning talking about people, and not in a particularly kind way, such as when Nell calls one of her clients, "that poor little nerd I should never have said I could help. Tender heart me." She later mocks her boyfriend for wanting to marry her. The ethical shift occurs when this mockery becomes serious, and it is revealed that Nell's concern is not that she would be married, but that she would not be able to keep her job if she were.

As the interviews take place, the brutal honesty of the Top Girls begins to border on hostile.

Marlene's moral ambiguity can be seen as the driving conflict of the play. In the first scene, we celebrate with her, for her own sake and on behalf of womankind. She is interested in what her guests say and sympathetic to their stories.

Later, at the office, she is professional but friendly, if a little haughty. When Angie arrives, she is kind to her, but we begin to realize that she has neglected her sister and niece to the point that she barely knows them, and is unwilling to be the role model that Angie wants her to be.

She is, understandably, unsympathetic to Howard's condition, but behaves imminently tactfully to his wife, Mrs. Kidd, until she calls him "a shit".

The power of this script is how Churchill reveals each character's backstory a little at a time, allowing the audience enough time to become entrenched in their first impression, and then their second, only offering a rounded perspective at the end. Despite a somewhat pessimistic worldview, there is subtext in the stories of these women that none of them were born bad, but rather have grown thorns to protect them from forces that are outside of their control.

**Is it better to choose good action based on motivation or on consequences?**

**Can past trauma justify present behaviour?**

**Are there good and bad characters in *Top Girls*?**

**What makes them behave the way they do?**

**Do you think this is true to life?**

# QUESTIONS OF FEMINISM

**First-Wave feminism** is largely associated with basic rights for women as citizens, including voting and property rights. When a huge portion of the male population, particularly in the US and Great Britain, went to fight in the World Wars as soldiers, women, on the tail of these successful policies, filled the public sector in roles that had been dominated by men.



"Rosie The Riveter" is a cultural icon, so called from a pop song from the 1940s. She is a symbol for all of the women who went to work in factories during the war, both to support the war effort and the US economy. Above: "We Can Do It!" poster for Westinghouse by artist J. Howard Miller, closely associated with Rosie the Riveter, although not the cultural icon itself. Pictured Geraldine Doyle (1924-2010), at age 17.

**Second-Wave feminism** may have begun in 1963 with the publishing of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, which insisted that women be considered as members of the whole population, instead of specially and secondarily. She argues that relegating female tasks to the domestic sphere limits the potential of women in general

It was largely a reaction to the post-war baby-boom and mass movement to the suburbs, which cemented gender roles in the traditional context of the nuclear family. The issues of Second-Wave feminism were of reproductive rights, sexual assault legislation, employment opportunities, and wage equality. The Women's movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Student Movement worked closely together as many of their central issues overlapped.

Significant milestones of Second-Wave Feminism include:

- **Title IX** (non-discrimination in applications for employment, sports, and education)
- **Title X** (access to preventative family planning resources)
- **No-fault divorce**
- **Reed v. Reed** (eliminated mandatory male preference)
- **Roe v. Wade** (right to abortion)



Rebecca Walker, pictured above, is credited with starting the Third-Wave Feminist movement as a writer and speaker. Photo: David Fenton, 2003.

**Third-Wave Feminism** is generally considered to have begun in the early 1990s. It asks questions concerning how a female identity works in tandem with other marginalized identities. For example, a woman who is heterosexual, feminine, caucasian, and middle-class, might believe that she can achieve true independence by rejecting traditional marriage, because of the history of women's financial dependance on men. For an inner-city woman of colour, however, a domestic partnership can be a conduit to independence because it is contrary to a cycle of single-parentdom.

**How do you feel about the term "feminist"?**

**What feminist issues are important to you?**

**In what ways have these social movements affected your life?**

**How do you think feminism differs between social, cultural, and national identities?**

# QUESTIONS OF FEMINISM

## Women In media.

In 1985, an American cartoonist named Alison Bechdel drew a comic strip where she laid out three criteria for judging a movie:

- 1) It has to have at least two women in it.
- 2) Those women need to talk to each other.
- 3) Those women need to talk to each other about something other than a man.

This is now referred to as the Bechdel test.

It is general knowledge what is meant by the term “chick flick.” Stereotypically-speaking, it is a movie with a woman at the centre, surrounded by friends with a romance-driven plot. Even those movies, however, do not necessarily pass the Bechdel test. The test does not determine how feminist or empowering a movie is, but rather illustrates the ways in which men are seen as the *actors*, the people who make things happen, while women are seen as accessories to that action.

A 2010 article in *Forbes* cited a survey in which only 5% of people interested in seeing a “chick flick” were men, but 42% of the people interested in seeing “a testosterone laden action flick” were women. It concludes, “Women are fine going to see male-oriented movies. Women go to movies all the time. It’s men who...refuse to see chick flicks.” The action of *Top Girls* takes place in the context of second-wave feminism, which has its origins in the fight to make women’s conversations mainstream.



Above, a panel from *The Rule* in Alison Bechdel's comic *Dyke to Watch Out For*, c. 1985

**How often are women expected to participate in a male-dominated conversation, versus men in a female-dominated conversation?**

**What elements do you think make a movie, book, play, or other work of art appealing to women?**

**What are some ways in which producers and executives target women?**

**To the women: is this targeting effective to you? Are there elements that you would like to see in art, media, or pop culture that are difficult to find?**

**To the men: Do any of these targeting methods appeal to you?**

**Would you ever go to a “chick flick”? Why or why not?**

**What are some reasons that a producer or executive would make work that targets one gender group and not another?**

**How are these issues relevant to other aspects of identity, i.e., race, religion, age, sexual orientation?**

# QUESTIONS OF FEMINISM

## Women in Power.

When we think of leadership, we may tend to think of aggressive negotiations, firm discipline, and a dominant physical presence, all of which are characteristics associated with masculinity. On Page 15, you will read about Margaret Thatcher, who was called the “Iron Lady” for her uncompromising personality, and how she distanced herself from the women’s movement, perhaps to distance herself from womanhood itself.

The corporate structure has been built on these characteristics of leadership as well, expecting a CEO to be firm and distant. When a woman is in that position, those qualities can run contrary to what is expected of her gender, so it will be perceived as cold, or even mean, instead of an effective leadership style.

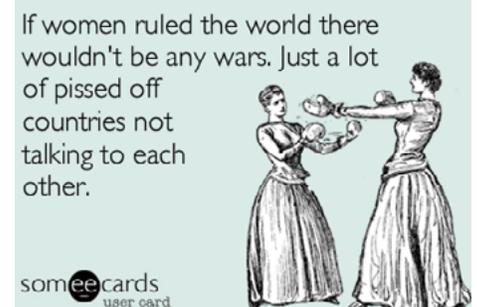
The question of women<sup>1</sup> in power is a loaded one, inspiring jokes (see

right) that are very telling about what struggles a woman who wants to be in charge might face, and why those assumptions exist. In the top panel, a book cover jokes that gender roles would be not just reversed, but reset to an earlier time. The title, *If Women Ran The World*, coupled with this picture implies the subtitle “...And Men Lose All Their Power.”

The next two jokes, “If women ran the world we wouldn’t have wars, just intense negotiations every 28 days,” and “just a bunch of pissed-off countries not talking to each other,” are both good examples of how generalizations about the feminine personality type are expected to translate to work habits and leadership styles.

<sup>1</sup> I employ the word “woman” as a short hand for “not of the gender who has historically enjoyed positions of power.” Likewise, “man” here means “the gender who has historically enjoyed positions of power.”

## If women ran the world...



**What differences do you see in the way that women are treated differently than men in positions of power?**

**Do you have different expectations of women than men in power?**

**What might the origin of these discrepancies be?**

**What considerations would someone in a position of power need to make about how they present themselves?**

I don't care greatly for working with women, I think I can pass as a man at work ... I have had to justify my existence every minute ...

-Louise, Act II Scene 1.

# THE PARTY

The opening scene of *Top Girls* is well-known, as a group of women, fictional and non-fictional alike, converge from all corners of the globe at a restaurant to celebrate Marlene's promotion.

While it is a surreal scene because these women could not have been in a room together, it is still grounded in the reality of the play. By never explaining or justifying the existence of this scene, it becomes the building block of the questions that are subsequently presented.

## What do these women have in common?

Each woman's personal narrative is the story of how they gave up some aspect of their womanhood in order to fulfil their destiny. These womanly traits, from frailty to fertility, were forced upon them by other people or by societal pressures and normative values. When these were taken away, by autonomous decision or uncontrollable circumstance, their journeys began.

## What does success mean to them?

For some of the dinner guests, success means adventure. For others, it means being appreciated for what they are. Most of their stories conclude with the satisfaction of having stood up for themselves.

We asked the actors in *Top Girls*, **"What does success mean to you?"** Click anywhere to the right to see their answers, or visit [youtube.com/segalcentre](http://youtube.com/segalcentre).

Success  
is...



THE GUESTS:

# ISABELLA BIRD

Mrs. Isabella Bishop, the well-known traveller and author, has died in Edinburgh. The eldest daughter of the Rev. Edward Bird, rector of Tattenhall, Cheshire, she was born on October 15, 1832, at Boroughbridge Hall, in Yorkshire. She was only eleven when her father was appointed rector of St. Thomas's, Birmingham, but after about three years there Mr. Bird was obliged owing to ill-health to take the country parish of Wyton in Huntingdonshire. It was with a Huntingdon bookseller that Isabella Bird, when she was only 16, published her first work, a pamphlet descriptive of a trial between Free Trade and Protection, the latter being the conqueror. She was encouraged by the success of this first effort to write regularly for various periodicals. Miss Bird was obliged to become a traveller by continued ill-health. For some time she suffered terribly from spinal disease—indeed, the variety and extent of her travels are extraordinary in view of the ailments from which she suffered at various times. She was ordered sea voyages to the Mediterranean, America, Australia, and New Zealand. She returned by way of the Sandwich Islands, where she spent some months, and she also visited the Rocky Mountains. She has done a remarkable work in connection with medical missions, and she has built five hospitals and an orphanage in the East. For the purposes of her travels she made herself acquainted with minor surgery, and sometimes found this sort of first-aid knowledge invaluable.

The Northampton Mercury – Friday 14 October 1904

...I always traveled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was anything other than feminine.

-Isabelle, Act I, Scene 1.

PLUCKY LADY TRAVELLER.

The London newspapers have not done justice to the wonderful career of Miss Isabella Bird (Mrs. J. L. Bishop), who has just died in Edinburgh. She was one of the pluckiest travellers of either sex that this country has ever known, and her books were peculiarly rich in fresh, direct observation. They began with letters to her sister. Miss Bird started her travels at the age of twenty-two, and, with the exception of about seven years, continued them until a year since, when, on reaching the age of seventy-one, she had to retire to Edinburgh on account of ill-health. The late Queen frequently sent for her for information, and she also enjoyed the friendship of the King in a special degree. Her last serious journey was a tour of 1,000 miles on horseback in Morocco, including the Atlas Mountains. That was made at the age of seventy. But it was in regard to the East that she was specially an authority. She anticipated all the modern writers about Manchuria and Tibet. Round and about, she spent quite a number of years in Russia and Japan. Of the administration of the former country she wrote much more generously than many people do. "Russia," she wrote, "is firm where firmness is necessary, but outside that limit allows extreme latitude."

Gloucester Citizen – Wednesday 12 October 1904  
Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

Isabella Bird (1831-1904) lived in Edinburgh, traveled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70.



Bird was the daughter of a clergyman, born and educated by her mother in numerous homes in the north of England. She was outspoken from an early age, and also quite frail, suffering from back problems. On her doctor's advice, she began favouring outdoor activities, ultimately taking the long sea voyage to America in 1854. Her first book, *An Englishwoman in America* (1856) is an anthropological travel memoir that includes tales of her adventures, discussions of American culture, and critical examinations of stereotypes. When she returned to Great Britain, she continued to write, often about the Scottish crofters, or tenant farmers. When her health began to decline again in the 1870s, Bird took off traveling again, to Australia, Hawaii, and back to the United States, which she chronicled in *The Hawaiian Archipelago*.

In the US, she met Jim Nugent, a mountain climber, and with his guidance she climbed Long's Peak in the Rocky Mountains. The years she

spent in the American West provided the content for her third book, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), which was a huge success.

She continued to travel and chronicle her life, eventually taking the royalties from the sales of her book to support immigration to the US by the crofters she championed in her youth.

If the spirit of adventure was beneficial for her health, the Victorian expectations she was born into may have been what threatened her in the first place. It has been said that her writing was a way to legitimize a journey of self-discovery. She had to find her voice, learn how to speak, or as it has otherwise been put, "[To unlearn] to not speak."<sup>1</sup>

Bird also visited East Asia and the Indian subcontinent, reporting on Japan, China, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Tibet, Persia, Kurdistan, Turkey, Korea, and Morocco. In her later years, she traveled with a missionary doctrine.

She was the first woman to be inducted into the Royal Geographical Society.

"I could rough it, and enjoyed doing so, but I was very sorry for the young men, who, I knew, would be much embarrassed by the sudden appearance of a lady for an indefinite time. But the difficulty had to be faced, and I walked in and took them by surprise as they were sitting smoking by the fire in the living room, which was dismantled, unswept, and wretched looking."

-I. Bird. "Estes Park, November 20," from *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*

THE GUESTS:

# LADY NIJO

I had to live  
for myself,  
and I did live.

-Lady Nijo, Act I, Scene 1.



Above: Wakamiya of the Kasuga Shrine, Kamakura period (1185–1333), 13th century, Unidentified artist. Hanging scroll; ink, color, and gold leaf on silk; 29 3/4 x 15 in. (75.6 x 38.1 cm)  
Promised Gift of The Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation Inc., and Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 1997 (1997.113)

**Lady Nijo** (b. 1258), was a courtesan to the Japanese Emperor before she was thrown out of court, who later travelled Japan on foot as a Buddhist nun.

She is remembered from a memoir she wrote which covers her adventures from about 15 years of age to about 45, called *The Confessions of Lady Nijo*. It is a story of her becoming humble, of the journey from a decadent and vain life to a life of compassion. This manuscript was discovered in the Library of the Imperial Household in Tokyo in 1940.

She was born to a high-ranking and influential father, and was raised by imperial officials. She would have likely risen in the ranks of the court had her father not died, and had she not lost the child of the Emperor at a young age. Her interests not being secure in the court, she was unable to rise above the level of a concubine.

She was undoubtedly beautiful, and had many lovers within the court, bearing children for many of them. Eventually, rivalries and jealousies within the court marginalized Lady Nijo, and obliged her to leave.

She took religious vows, and began to travel the country. She met a diverse selection of people, from prostitutes to warlords, musicians and Shinto priests.

She learns the difference in meaning and value between superficial and genuine emotions, and looks back at

past relationships with wisdom.

There is very little discussion of the politics of the time in *Confessions*.

The Kamakura period in Japan (c. 1185-1333) was centred around a militaristic governmental structure, and the role of women was limited. The previous period (Heian, c. 974-1185) held poetry and artistic expression in high esteem, and women were encouraged to practice it, therefore legitimizing so-called “feminine sensitivities.” Lady Nijo makes great reference to this past era, but was writing in a context that was much less supportive.

“In this life I think  
constantly of salvation,  
petitioning the gods  
to dissolve my sins  
that I may be reborn in  
paradise.”

-*The Confessions of Lady Nijo*  
tr. Karen Brazell, 1973.

THE GUESTS:

# DULL GRET



Above: Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/1530–1569) *Dulle Griet* c.1562. Right: detail.

**Dull Gret**, aka Dulle Griet, or Mad Meg as her name is translated in English, is a figure of Flemish folklore, and stands in farce as a symbol for all women who don't know their place. Her name is used in a derogatory way, as she is "shrewish" and sexless, and thus does not fulfill her role as a woman. In the context of modern feminist thinking, however, this is not derogatory, but rather a symbol of the possibilities that open up to a woman who does not fulfill expectations to be deferential or submissive.

The Flemish proverb goes, "She could plunder in front of Hell and come back unscathed."

She is most well-known for figuring in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's mid 16th-century painting by the same name. It is replete with miniature, surreal scenes and allegory that can only be guessed at.

She holds a sword in her right hand, and money, food, and kitchen utensils

in her left. She wears a helmet and breastplate, and seems to be a giantess.

She runs directly towards the mouth of hell, leaving behind a brawl led by women in peasant clothes, jumping over gruesome figures who scamper at her feet like squirrels. Her expression is focused and shows signs of exertion. The sky is fiery and the landscape is built as much from crumbling and surreal structures as from natural topography.

In *Top Girls*, Gret describes many of the creatures from this painting when she describes her trip to hell: "a bum with a face, a fish with legs..." She goes on, "...we'd had worse, you see, we'd had the Spanish." She is likely referring to the Sack of Antwerp (1576) during the Eighty Years War. The pay due the Spanish soldiers who were fighting the Dutch had been seized by England, so the soldiers collectively decided to loot the

"One woman makes a din,  
two women a lot of trouble,  
three an annual market,  
four a quarrel, five an army,  
and against six the devil  
himself has no weapon."

-Netherlandish Proverb.



commercial hub of Antwerp. They did so with the rage and discipline of the military, and the civilians, though they tried, were no match.

Gret says that she rallied the women of her village to storm hell, to go "where the evil come from and pay the bastards out." They did so, and were successful.

THE GUESTS:

# POPE JOAN

**Pope Joan** posed as a man in order to gain the papacy anywhere from the 9<sup>TH</sup> century to the 12<sup>TH</sup>, before giving birth and subsequently being executed for her deception. The general belief today is that she is a fictional character, operating as a satire or allegory more than a historical figure.

The earliest confirmed mention of her is from a Dominican monk's chronical, from the early 13<sup>TH</sup> century, called the *Chronica Universalis Mettensis*. It was adapted and spread around Europe for the next century, all the while adjusting her age, motivation, name, and nationality.

What is consistent in all the versions is the intellectual rigour and unequalled proficiency of the woman who would be Pope, and that she was promoted in the traditional way through the Catholic hierarchy.

The similarities end there. In one version, she dresses as a man of her own accord in order to pursue her schooling, in another, she is disguised and brought to Rome by a lover (which is the version used in *Top Girls*.)

The stories of her death range from gruesome to respectable. The earliest story claims that immediately upon

giving birth, while on horseback, she was tied by the feet to that same horse and dragged through an enraged populace for three kilometres while they stoned her. Another says that she did not die immediately, but lived many more years in hiding, doing penance. Some say she is buried in the side street where she died, other say in St. Peter's cathedral. A few chroniclers hold her accountable for plagues like bloody rain and locusts. One even says her illegitimate son grew up to be a cardinal as opposed to being immediately killed.

It wasn't until the late 16<sup>TH</sup> century that the veracity of the story came into question. With this question comes another: what purpose would a fiction like this serve? Enemies of the Papacy did not take up this fiction to support their views until the 15<sup>TH</sup> century, when it was used as an argument against the necessity of the institution, that there was essentially a non-pope on the throne for several years. Catholic history has no issue in acknowledging figures who claimed to be Pope without official support, called Antipopes, but Pope Joan is not on this list.



Above: *Pope Joan*. Unknown Artist, 15<sup>TH</sup>-16<sup>TH</sup> century. Cognac, France.

There are also a few theories that this rumour began like tabloid celebrity gossip, to divert or diminish related rumours about reigning emperors, such as Charlemagne, who may have disguised his niece as a eunuch in order to make her capable of succeeding him.

In *Top Girls*, Pope Joan speaks English when she is in conversation, but Latin in her monologues, the official language of the Catholic church.

I always enjoy  
a theological  
argument.  
But I won't try  
to convert  
you, I'm not  
a missionary.  
Anyway I'm a  
heresy myself.

-Pope Joan, Act I, scene 1.



Above: *Pope Joan giving birth*. By Jakob Kallenberg (1500-1565). Engraving from Giovanni Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, chapter XCIX, "De Ioanne Anglica Papa," 1353.

THE GUESTS:

# PATIENT GRISELDA

**Patient Griselda** is the obedient and subservient wife of a Marquis in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. Before Chaucer told this story, the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio concluded his *Decameron* (c. 1350), which in turn inspired Plutarch to write a version in Latin, popularizing it for a wider Christian audience.

In the story, Griselda is handed in marriage to the Marquis of Saluzzo by her father. The Marquis is unsure that he wants a wife, so he asks



Below: Spalliera Panels of the Story of Griselda, Part I: Marriage. About 1494. Master of the Story of Griselda. Above: detail.

that she promise to obey all of his wishes, and he embarks on a decade-long campaign to test this promise, beginning with forcing her to strip in public.

She bears him two children, who he takes from her, and claims that they have been killed. Later, he pretends that he has taken another wife, kicks her out of her home in her undergarments, and dresses his daughter, who he had taken from Griselda years earlier, as a bride. He sends her back to her father's cabin, calling on her only to prepare the nuptial bed for his new wife.

Griselda is not only forgiving of each of these horrid acts, but grateful for the

privilege of being the victim of them. Having fulfilled her duty as an obedient wife, the Marquis takes her back home and returns her (now grown) children.

“  
My lord, do with me as thou  
mayst deem best for thine  
own honour and comfort,  
for well I wot that I am of  
less account than they, and  
unworthy of this honourable  
estate to which of thy courtesy  
thou hast advanced me.”

FROM DECAMERON

Thanks to  
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Click to view.

When she had heard all this, she not amev'd<sup>1</sup>  
Neither in word, in cheer, nor countenance  
(For, as it seemed, she was not aggriev'd);  
She saide; "Lord, all lies in your pleasance,  
My child and I, with hearty obeisance  
Be youres all, and ye may save or spill<sup>2</sup>  
Your owen thing: work then after your will.  
"There may no thing, so God my soule save,  
Like to<sup>3</sup> you, that may displease me:  
Nor I desire nothing for to have,  
Nor drede for to lose, save only ye:  
This will is in mine heart, and aye shall be,  
No length of time, nor death, may this deface,  
Nor change my corage<sup>4</sup> to another place."

<sup>1</sup> changed  
<sup>2</sup> destroy  
<sup>3</sup> be pleasing  
<sup>4</sup> spirit, heart

FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES

# THATCHER'S ENGLAND



She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. She just needs to hang in there. This country needs to stop whining. Monetarism is not stupid, it takes time, determination. No more slop. And who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces.

-Marlene, Act II, scene 2.

Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England from 1979 until 1990, as the leader of the Conservative Party. She is the only woman who ever held that post in the United Kingdom, and the longest-serving Prime Minister of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century.

In 1978, widespread union strikes followed pay caps implemented by the Labour Party, in a period called the "Winter of Discontent." Simultaneously, a harsh winter made some jobs impossible to perform and reduced retail spending significantly. When the Labour Party was unable to control these strikes, the Conservative Party was able to take over.

In order to control strikes and still reduce inflation, Thatcher closed the factories and yards that were deemed the most inefficient. While this slowed inflation, it also increased unemployment to 3 million by 1982- the highest number seen since the early 30s. Ireland, Scotland, and Northern England were the hardest hit, with rates of about 20% lasting for years.

These closures also meant that the UK, once a force in manufacturing, was importing more than it was exporting. The approval ratings of the Conservative government fell to as low as 25% in the first three years of Thatcher's office.

Thatcher also aggressively privatised businesses and deregulated banks. By attributing these powers to herself as Prime Minister, she was able to govern what had been seen for years as an "ungovernable" nation. By making herself powerful as an individual, she was also subject to much personal criticism.

A soviet captain and journalist called her the "Iron Lady" first in 1979, and it stuck. The daughter of a grocer, Thatcher was a good student and earned her way into Oxford University, where she got a degree in Chemistry. She worked as a chemist for several years, before running for a Parliamentary seat in Dartford. She did not win, but earned the respect of her peers.

Despite the social innovation of being a Prime Minister and a woman, Thatcher decidedly did not include women's issues on her platform, insisting that any women who was as qualified as she would have achieved the same success. She has been quoted, "I owe nothing to Women's Lib," an assertion that has garnered criticism from feminists since.

In this production, Micheline Chevrier gives Thatcher a role through styling in the first scene. Keep an eye out for her silent presence!

"Margaret Thatcher is a major character in *Top Girls* even though she is hidden. The lives and identities of each character is infused by her presence. As the seven actors on stage transform from character to character, they chose at every stage what kind of woman they mean to present to the world, as Thatcher did. Through her speech, dress, and styling, she turned herself into the icon, for better or worse, who defined an era."

-Micheline Chevrier

# TRANSFORMATIONS



From left: Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al-Missned, Yulia Tymoshenko, Angela Merkel, Samantha Cameron



From left: Silvio Berlusconi, Dmitry Medvedev, Angela Merkel, Gordon Brown, Yasuo Fukuda, George W. Bush, Stephen Harper, Nicolas Sarkozy, José Manuel Barroso

*Top Girls* specifically asks for seven women to play all 16 characters. This means that each actor (except for the one who plays Marlene) will inhabit several personalities and mannerisms. As such, the theme of transformation is placed at the forefront of this production. As the audience enters the space, they are met with the cast as actors, humans preparing for the performance. They are putting on their costumes at lit mirrors (below), literally transforming into the characters they will play.

This emphasizes the daily rituals that we all employ, in which we make decisions about how we intend to present ourselves to the world. In the theatre as in real life, clothes, makeup, hair, posture, and speech are all variable, and each have a message that they communicate. This is perhaps more true for women, as there is less than a century of precedence for “professional” formal women’s clothes (see left).

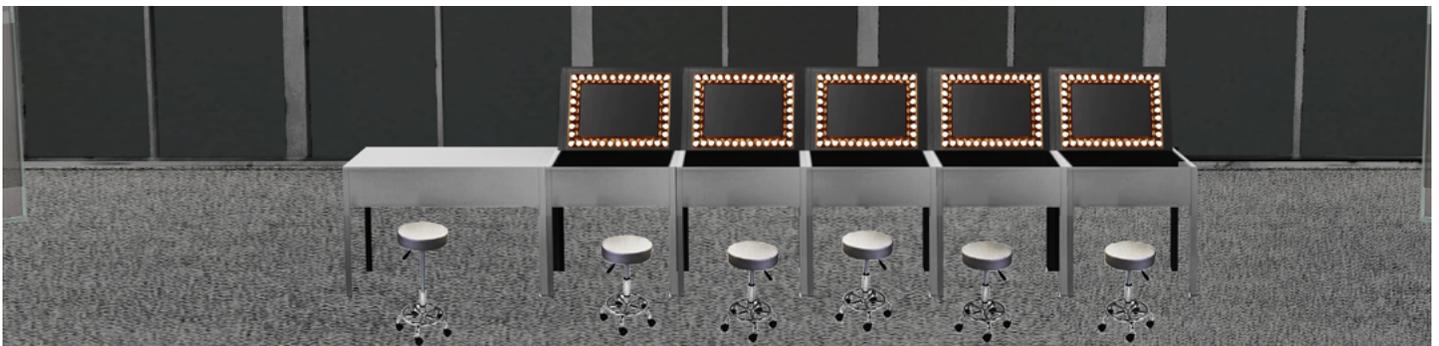
This is a fundamental theme in the play. The characters recount their biographies from their perspective, writing their own history. When new perspectives are introduced to those personal narratives, we see how fallible first-person accounts can be. The introduction of a new opinion shapes the audience’s opinion of the characters, and the characters’ opinions of themselves.

The stage and lighting design make similar transformations. The audience is given the rare treat of seeing the Segal Theatre nearly bare. Even the windows, framed by Phyllis Lambert’s original steel ribs, are illuminated like a curiosity cabinet that transitions as the emotional content of the play goes through its own changes.

**What are some decisions that you make regularly to affect the impression you give others?**

**Has your mind of memory of an event ever been changed when someone else’s perspective was explained to you?**

**Have you ever made a concerted effort to change yourself? Were you successful?**



Above: A detail of the set design for Act I, scene 1, by Max-Otto Fauteux.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

# AFTER SEEING THE PLAY



### I.1.

Why do you think those particular women were chosen to be at the dinner table in scene one?

What do they have in common?

Which six guests would you invite to dinner if you could invite anyone, and why?

### I.2.

What do you think the women at Top Girls Employment Agency think of their customers?

### I.3.

What do you think of Angie and Kit's friendship?

What about their age difference? Do you think Angie is immature, or that Kit is mature?

Why are they so hostile to each other?

In what way is Joyce's treatment of Angie different from her treatment of Kit?

Do you think that Joyce's attitude alters or informs the way Angie behaves?

### II.1.

What role does gossip play in the workplace?

Do you think Win and Nell are equals?

What hierarchies do you perceive in the staff?

What insights does Nell's refusal to marry Derek offer the audience about the working climate for professional women?

What do Win and Nell's reactions to Marlene's promotion say about the position of women in society at this time?

How does their treatment of the applicants reflect their feelings towards women?

Do you think they are motivated by honesty, competition, or malice?

How does Marlene's countenance change as she talks with her coworkers, niece, and Mrs. Kidd? What does that say about her?

### II.2.

How does the giving of presents reflect the characters of the giver and of the receiver?

Why would Joyce choose to visit her father's grave and why would Marlene choose not to?

Why do Joyce and Marlene fight? What perspectives are they trying to get the other to understand?

How do the sisters' disparate political views mirror their varied lifestyle choices?

How do the sisters' views on their parents differ? How did their family situation affect them individually?

How much effect do you think family and upbringing has on adulthood?

INNOVATIVE, INTERACTIVE

# WORKSHOPS

Workshops are customizable by age and group size, and can be delivered in three styles:

- Performance-Oriented;
- Writing-Oriented;
- Or a Mix of Writing and Performance Activities.

These dynamic workshops encourage participants...

- ... to engage with the ERA and the ARTIST.
- ... to learn about a FAMOUS THEATRE PIECE and better understand the STYLE AND FORM.
- ... to gain experience as EMERGING CREATORS and PERFORMERS.
- ... to share a POWERFUL and PERSONAL group-art experience.



**LED BY JESSE STONG, the Segal Centre's 2013-2014 Teacher-in-Residence!**

Jesse Stong is trained as a Playwright/Director (National Theatre School of Canada, 2013) as well as a Social Worker (Ryerson University, 2004) with over ten years of experience creating and delivering dynamic Writing and Performance workshops for youth/adults from all walks of life.

Currently his play about online bullying and suicide, *Shared Account*, is touring Quebec and East Coast High Schools with Geordie Theatre.

As well as being passionate for his Teacher-in-Residence position at Segal Centre, Jesse is also currently Project Manager at ELAN (English Language Arts Network) for the Quebec Youth Resource Centre.



Jesse Stong

In the famous dream sequence of the play *Top Girls*, the audience is invited to witness a dinner party with a whole table of famous females from history, but how does one create a character out of somebody who already exists?

In this innovative, interactive workshop participants will be guided through activities to help them understand how to alter truths, use facts for fiction, and make theatre based on real historical figures that inspire and interest them.

The workshop will include exciting activities that guide young creator/performers with tips on capturing the voice and mannerisms of historical figures, writing dynamic new pieces based on true historical happenings, and staying true to what we know about people from the past while adding theatrically to their story.

We will also explore the question WHY and discuss the examples of how the past can be an excellent tool for commenting on the present.

Who do you imagine meeting? Who would you want to be on stage? How can theatre be a tool for keeping people from the past alive?

**The Segal Centre is committed to making arts education accessible.**

**RESERVE TODAY!**

Contact Lucie Lederhendler at 514.739.2301 ext. 8360 or [llederhendler@segalcentre.org](mailto:llederhendler@segalcentre.org) to reserve or for more information.

# THE DIRECTOR



## Micheline Chevrier

For over thirty years, Micheline has worked across Canada as a director, dramaturg and artistic director. As a director she has worked in a variety of theatres ranging from major festivals to creation-based companies, from major regional theatres to theatre for young audiences.

Her directorial credits include works by Molière, Sophocles, Chekhov, Virginia Woolf, Dario Fo and Edward Albee; several Canadian playwrights such as John Murrell, David French, Colleen Murphy, Ann-Marie Macdonald and Judith Thompson; as well as numerous Quebecois writers such as Michel Tremblay, Michel Marc Bouchard, Carole Fréchette, Jean Marc Dalpé and François Archambault. Most recently, she directed *The Iliad* for Geordie Productions and *If We Were Birds* for Imago Theatre.

From 1995 to 2000, Micheline was the Artistic Director of the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, and is presently the Artistic Director of Montreal's Imago Theatre.

She has directed and taught at the National Theatre School, Concordia University, Dalhousie University and University of Alberta to name a few.

She is the recipient of several awards including Calgary's Betty Mitchell Award, Ottawa's Capital Critic's Award and Toronto's Dora Mavor Moore Award. Micheline is thrilled to be working for the first time with the incredible team at the Segal.

Below, from left: Laura Condlin, Elana Dunkelmann, Lauryn Allman, France Rolland, Julie Tamiko Manning, and Leni Parker in rehearsal. Photo by George Allister, 2014.



# THE PLAYWRIGHT

## Caryl Churchill



Widely considered to be one of Britain's greatest living playwrights, Caryl Churchill's witty, powerfully intelligent dialogue and her imaginative sense of dramatic structure saw her at the forefront of British playwriting in the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps her best-known work, *Top Girls* was first staged at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1982. The play keenly predicted the rise of bourgeois 'post-feminism' in the Thatcherite 1980s, raising thought-provoking questions, notably in its legendary opening act where the stories of six women from history overlap and connect over a restaurant meal.

Other notable works from this period include *Serious Money*, *Mad Forest*, *The Striker*, *Cloud Nine* and *Softcops*. Churchill's plays have been performed on international stages, on the BBC radio, and adapted for BBC television and frequently deal with feminist issues, abuses of power and sexual politics.

She is the recipient of a number of awards including an Olivier Award, several Susan Smith Blackburn Prizes, and multiple Obie and Evening Standard Awards. Caryl Churchill lives in London; her latest play, *Ding Dong the Wicked*, premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2013.

**Born in 1938 in London, playwright Caryl Churchill immigrated with her family to Montreal after World War II, at the age of ten years old. She attended the Trafalgar School for Girls from 1948-1955, and returned to England to attend Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford University.**

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# THEATRE ETIQUETTE

1. *Top Girls* will be performed in the main theatre of the Segal Centre. Performances at the Segal are for both groups and the general public. It is important that everyone be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance, so that others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Please do not unwrap candy, play with zippers, or play with your programme.
2. Do not put your feet on the back of the seat in front of you and please do not climb over seats.
3. If you plan to take notes on the play for the purpose of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the performance. Seeing you do this can be distracting for the actors. Please wait until intermission or after the performance is finished to write your reflections.
5. **Absolutely no photos or video may be taken** without the express consent of management. Violators’ devices will be seized and they will be removed from the theatre.
5. Use of cell phones, iPods, tablets, or other self-illuminating electronics is **strictly prohibited** in the theatre. The light from these devices is visible from the stage and in the audience. It is extremely distracting to the artists on stage and inconsiderate to your fellow audience members. Composing or reading text messages is **forbidden**.
6. Your seat is only guaranteed until the moment the theatre doors close. Late entry is very disruptive; if a patron is tardy we ask that they please follow the instructions of our front-of-house staff.
7. ENJOY THE SHOW!

# THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK

Please take a moment to tell us about your experience organizing an educational outing at the Segal Centre. Use the rubric below or contact me at any time with any comments or concerns you might have.

Reply to:  
Lucie Lederhendler,  
Educational Programs Manager  
Segal Centre for Performing Arts  
llederhendler@segalcentre.org  
groups@segalcentre.org  
Tel: 514.739.2301 ext. 8360  
Fax: 514.739.9340

Thank you,



1. How would you rate your experience?  
Extremely positive      1      2      3      4      5      Extremely stressful
  
2. How much do you feel your group benefited from the experience?  
Very much      1      2      3      4      5      Very Little
  
3. Would you recommend the experience to other group leaders?  
Wholeheartedly      1      2      3      4      5      Never
  
4. Will you consider bringing a group to the theatre again?  
Wholeheartedly      1      2      3      4      5      Never
  
5. What did you enjoy most about coming to see the play?

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6. What aspect of coming to the theatre did you find problematic?

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We welcome all additional comments.

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# CREDITS

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This Study Guide was created for the Segal Centre for Performing Arts on the occasion of its production of *Top Girls*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Micheline Chevrier, and running from April 27 - May 18. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

It was compiled by Lucie Lederhendler, Educational Programs Manager, with contributions from Jess Fildes.

For information or citations, please contact Lucie Lederhendler at the coordinates below.

## THE THEATRE AND YOU:

**Encouraging critical participation from your students.**

Encourage students to think about the idea of engagement with a work of art. Upon attending the theatre, notice the demographics of the audience. Think about how the theatre is different from a concert, a movie, or a comedy show. Do you attend performances often? Which kind?

Are there art forms that you relate to more than others?

What does it mean to you to “relate” to something?

Theatres in particular often struggle with an aging audience, focusing much effort on bringing a young audience in, through choices in programming, activities, and partial or even total price reduction. What do you think the reason is that theatre audiences are older, and what would you do to counter that?

[Click here](#) for a pre-addressed printable handout of these questions.

[Click here](#) to send an email to the Educational Programs Manager at the Segal Centre.

If your students would like to address a specific member of the Segal staff or of the *Top Girls* production team, please specify to whom the communication should be forwarded.

**The Segal Centre for Performing Arts**

**c / o Lucie Lederhendler**

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