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This Girl's Got Your Back: A Review of *Girls on Top*

by Natalie Harrower

If you didn't get to see Souleppper's sold-out run of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* in 2007, or the award-winning remount with the same cast in 2008, then this film will make you wish you were better at booking your theatre tickets in advance. Or, more accurately, it will make you wish you had been a part of the production itself. For the duration of its snappy and engaging fifty-two minutes, *Girls on Top*, directed by Cassandra Nicolaou for Fighting Fish Pictures, is a pure celebration of theatre's emotional power and the heightened bond that actors create with one another when the story fits and the cast just clicks.

Generically, *Girls on Top* is a documentary about a theatre production, and, as such, it will be of wide interest to theatre and drama educators and to students considering a career in the arts. It includes scenes from the rehearsal room, and the viewer can implicitly trace the progression of the rehearsals by noting the subtle accumulation of costume pieces and performance "polish." The film takes us into the director's home for interview snippets about her motivations for mounting the play and also travels backstage to watch the actors' preparations and pre-performance rituals. The camera operates unobtrusively with no visible authorial intervention, which creates a feeling of immediacy and intimacy: we are there, as silent observers, as the actors face each stage of the process. The delivery of these stages is sharp and economical. The film knows its focus and keeps that focus front and centre. We hear only from people directly involved in the production, we learn about the actors' experiences both onstage and off, and the film steers clear of discussions about the production's design, technical requirements, or marketing approach. This is a film about theatre actors.

At times, the film also offers a meditation on Western feminism and women's lives from the early 1980s until the present, mirroring the preoccupations of the play text. When it was first produced in 1982, *Top Girls* was notable both for its direct uptake of issues faced publicly and privately by working women, set against the backdrop of powerful individualism and Thatcherism, as well as for its experimentation with formal convention, seen in the scripting of overlapping dialogue and its nonchronological act structure. Having Souleppper produce the play, director Alisa Palmer argues, grants it the status of "classic," lifting it out of its sometime designation as a dated piece of experimental feminism. In the feminist spirit of including both the domestic and public lives of women in its purview, the film interviews the actors about their careers and private lives and enters some of their homes. At one point, Liisa Repo-Martell, who plays Angie, introduces us to her preschool daughter and reflects on what it means to



Cara Pifko doing her warm-up ritual before the dress rehearsal.
Video still courtesy of Cassandra Nicolaou



Cara Pifko and Ann-Marie MacDonald prepare in the dressing room.
Video still courtesy of Cassandra Nicolaou

play a troubled teenager at this stage in her career. Her own journey as a mother has added a new layer to her professional decision-making process.

As Palmer tells us, the play succeeds in putting women's lives and concerns on stage, but even while embracing this focus, she questions the play's variety of feminism because its outlook for women seems so bleak. Instead of helping one another, Palmer continues, the play's characters ultimately create more problems for one another. The first act, which is meant to celebrate Marlene's promotion at work, is instead marked by a series of revelations about personal and professional losses by the fantastical set of historical dinner guests. Patient Griselda and Lady Nijo both reveal how they had children taken away from them, Pope Joan recalls the moments leading to her death by stoning, and Isabella Bird mourns the loss of her dear sister. The second and third acts, set in the contemporaneous 1980s, reveal challenges faced by working women and their families, and despite the humour, there are vicious fights and painful revelations. The play does have moments of female camaraderie and laughter, but overall, what bubbles most noticeably to the surface are the difficulties that women face in society, and how these difficulties are channeled into their relationships with one another.

If *Top Girls* can be seen as posing a series of problems but failing to offer solutions, then *Girls on Top* is an act of recuperation. The focus of the film is not particularly on the challenges faced by these women as actors, sisters, spouses,

and mothers, but on how well they manage to look after one another throughout the production. Where *Top Girls* stages women as combatants and competitors, the film's diegesis presents its working women as successful and supportive, seemingly in an effort to mitigate the play's lacunae for feminism. In this effort, the film's plot structure and editing play the most significant role by loosely mimicking both the narrative arc of the play and the chronology of mounting a production.

At the beginning of the film, we see the actors around Palmer's table, talking excitedly and toasting one other after a successful run. Immediately, the film cuts to act one of the production, with the characters seated around a table in the same configuration (minus Palmer), also raising their glasses in a toast. The conceit of cross-cutting moments in "real life" with excerpts from the stage production is immediately evident and works well formally, even if it does seem slightly forced when actor Megan Follows makes the toast at Alisa Palmer's table, followed by Marlene—played by Follows—making the toast at the theatrical table. Fortunately, this conceit is continued only loosely throughout the film, providing continuity and clarity, but never again announcing itself so forcefully. In the next sequence, the actors introduce themselves in one shots, with pictures of their main character framed on the wall behind them. The editing between these shots is discontinuous and energetic, and the women are often shown laughing, either self-consciously, or perhaps at the self-consciousness of the *mise en scène*. Regardless, the film's early sequences serve to lightly parallel Churchill's overlapping dialogue and nonchronological scene structure, as well as to introduce us quickly and playfully to the players. From this point forward, the camera lets the actors make the argument, and aside from a beautiful but spare musical score (by composer Lesley Barber), there is very minimal stylistic intervention in the narrative's observations.

If the film's formal structure mimics the timeline of the production—taking us from the first meeting before rehearsals begin until the actors remove their make-up and costumes on closing night—the film's message takes the exact opposite perspective to that of the play. In this regard, *Girls on Top* is an unreserved celebration of the joy and friendship created among the production's cast. Interviews are cut in like stolen moments—as if the actor can only sneak out of rehearsal for a few moments because she doesn't want to miss the fun off camera. The film does an excellent job of capturing the unique camaraderie built by a theatre ensemble, as well as the intensity of this collective experience. It also effectively shares this feeling with the film's audience, touching on moments from a wide variety of emotional registers and making appeals to the viewers' own experiences (such as when the cast literally weeps backstage as their tinny radio announces that Barack Obama has been elected president).



Liisa Repo-Martell rehearsing act 2 scene 3.
Video still courtesy of Cassandra Nicolaou



Megan Follows toasts the cast at a dinner party following the end of the remount's run. Note how Robyn Stevan is to the left of the frame, and Ann-Marie MacDonald to the right, which is the same arrangement around the table of the dinner party in *Top Girls'* act 1 scene 1.
Video still courtesy of Cassandra Nicolaou

The appeal to the film audience's sensibility, however, is possibly also one of the film's minor limitations because access to its full emotional resonance relies on a sympathetic and knowing audience. For example, Toronto theatre audiences will find special pleasure in seeing familiar actors interviewed, in immediately recognizing Balzac's coffee shop as the locale for the first informal cast meeting, and in knowing that the play's director and the actor playing Pope Joan are real-life partners—something that the film does not explicitly state, but instead nonchalantly displays. But regardless of the audience's knowledge, *Girls on Top* is a tightly constructed, delightful documentary that effectively captures the magic of making theatre. In the end, one gets the sense that the cast needed this film to be made so that they could preserve their memorable experience, and thankfully, audiences of the film will be the richer for it.

Natalie Harrower has taught theatre and film at the University of Toronto and Queen's University and will be teaching at Trinity College, Dublin, in the upcoming academic year. In her spare time, she is rehearsing a show at the Dublin Fringe Festival, hiking in the Wicklow mountains, studying Italian, and tweaking her yoga arm balances.