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CARYL CHURCHILL'S PROPHETIC DRAMA

By Andrew Dickson November 18, 2015

Two things are frequently said about Caryl Churchill: that she is the greatest playwright alive, and that she is one of the most elusive. While she occasionally discusses her work with researchers and fellow theatre-makers, she has not granted an interview to a major newspaper since the nineteen-nineties; her communications with the press are generally restricted to letters to the editor on political causes. Many of her works—there are now more than fifty, including libretti, dance pieces, and translations—have been published with chatty forewords that nonetheless give next to nothing away: “Top Girls” (1982), a fractured, formally experimental examination of feminism and perhaps her most famous play, “came slowly,” she writes, “it took ’80 and ’81 to work it out.” 1989’s “Icecream,” a wryly picaresque comedy about Anglo-American relations, “is simply a play I wrote.”

Churchill’s reticence is all the more striking because she does not live in Salinger-like isolation—she’s often to be seen at opening nights in London, and she is active in the protest movement. A young playwright I asked said admiringly that Churchill “puts all her swagger and gesture into the work,” then compared her to Kate Bush. Some call her (though one suspects that Churchill hates this) “Saint Caryl.” It is tempting to describe her as sphinxlike, but then

the Sphinx did occasionally speak in public.

Even so, the playwright has rarely been so visible. After a long association with the Royal Court—the elegantly appointed Chelsea theatre that has been the nucleus for new British writing since the days of John Osborne and Arnold Wesker—she has returned to the National Theatre with a major play for the first time in a decade. Two major plays, in fact: back in April, a kaleidoscopic collage of scenes from the English civil wars, “Light Shining in Buckinghamshire” (1976), was given an imposing new production by Lyndsey Turner (who then directed Benedict Cumberbatch in “Hamlet”). Later this month, Churchill opens a new work in the National’s studio space, called “Here We Go.” It is billed, with customary pithiness, as a “short play about death.”

In New York, meanwhile, a new production of Churchill’s inventive 1979 study of colonialism and sexual desire, “Cloud Nine,” has just closed at the Atlantic Theatre Company, directed by her long-term collaborator James Macdonald. Next January, another new work will debut at the Royal Court, the curtain-raiser for the theatre’s sixtieth-anniversary season. It’s called “Escaped Alone.” Details are sparse—naturally—but the theatre’s artistic director, Vicky Featherstone, hinted that it might be more autobiographical than previous works, describing it as being about four women who are roughly Churchill’s age.

“Escaped alone” might be an appropriate phrase. Since her breakthrough, in the mid-nineteen-seventies, Churchill has not only weathered changes in theatrical taste—so many of her contemporaries, particularly other women, are now neglected—she has continued to speak powerfully to the present moment. Whether in her pioneering examinations of gender and identity politics (“Top Girls,” “Cloud Nine”), cloning (2002’s “A Number”), the dizzying shenanigans of the financial markets (1987’s “Serious Money”), or terrorism and the death

penalty (2000's "Far Away"), few writers have shown such ability to needle at anxieties that trouble and fascinate us in the here and now. How does she do it?

Churchill, of course, politely declined to answer that question or any others. But James Macdonald offered to explain why she has resisted interviews. "She's not some kind of recluse," he told me. "You sometimes feel, as a writer, that you destroy the thing by talking about it." But this also gives a clue to how Churchill works. The writing is solitary, interior, and often dwells on a subject that Churchill has been chewing over for years. Only when a piece is finished does she bring it out into the open. "It's incredibly rare these days that Caryl will give anyone a script until she's quite sure it's what she wants it to be."

What she will want is difficult to second-guess. The previous project Macdonald worked on, 2012's "Love and Information," is composed of fifty-seven self-contained scenes the script has no cues as to who exactly should speak the lines, let alone how; the only clue as to the context for each is a cryptic heading (SECRET, MEMORY HOUSE, FLASHBACK, CHINESE POETRY). The one before that was "Top Girls," which begins with a scene in which a cabal of famous women from across history—including the Victorian explorer Isabella Bird, Chaucer's Patient Griselda, and Pope Joan, who was legendarily elected pontiff in the ninth century—have a drunken dinner party.

"She thinks in terms of images," Macdonald said, adding, "The scripts are open-ended—they want you to enter into that world and play and find your own conclusions." Is Churchill a major presence in rehearsals? "Oh yes: she loves every aspect of the process. But she doesn't necessarily have answers."

Once upon a time, Churchill wrote plays for the radio. She was born in London in 1938 and married a young lawyer, David Harter, in 1961; by

the end of the decade, the couple had three boys. Amid the demands of caring for young children, Churchill's working life in those years was solitary. Quick to be commissioned and cheap to produce, radio drama offered a means to get her work performed, along with a modest income. But one wonders if there was something else that opened the path to her subsequent experimentalism: unconstrained by the demands of staging and budget—a designer's whims, an artistic director's taste and crowded schedule—Churchill was free to conjure landscapes far beyond those that could be placed behind a proscenium arch. A drama about identical twins who detest each other was recorded in stereo, with the same actor playing both roles. Another is told in the garrulous voice of a schizophrenic patient, who pronounces himself, among a great deal else, “preoccupied with changing into a woman.”

Churchill's interest in mutable, shifting identities has remained a major theme—and from the perspective of contemporary debates about gender and the essence of identity, seems almost prophetic. “A Number,” written more than thirty years after “Identical Twins,” is for two actors, playing a father and son; only as the action progresses does it become clear that the son is in fact an array of sons, cloned from the original, with results that are surreal and surreally funny. “Cloud Nine,” likewise, toys with sexual identities and their confusions: it opens in a nameless portion of colonial Africa, with the wife of a Victorian administrator played by a man and with a black servant played by a white actor—because, Churchill explained, that is what the almighty British Empire expects them to be.

The playwright Sarah Ruhl, whose own brilliantly fabulist imagination brings Churchill to mind, pointed to Churchill's eagerness to push the boundaries of what theatre can do. “She recreates form with every play and asks a new formal question with every play. Each time when I sit down to write, I'm about two-

thirds of the way through, and I think, 'Is this a play?' I like to imagine that Caryl Churchill thinks the same thing—maybe not in those terms, exactly, but there's always this question, is this a play?"

Though Churchill's formal experimentation is often mischievous—distractingly so, her critics say—the real world, with all its political cruxes and compromises, is never distant. When "Far Away" was staged last year at London's Young Vic theatre, it seemed unsettlingly prescient: written before the 9/11 attacks and the calamitous war on terror that ensued, it opens at nighttime, with a girl, Joan, staying at her aunt's house. Joan can't sleep and hears noises outside; it becomes clear that the noises are coming from nameless people (deportees? refugees? prisoners? migrant workers?) being transported, by truck, to a shed nearby. There is blood on the ground; violence has apparently been committed, though the aunt denies it ("There might be things that are not your business when you're a visitor in someone else's house").

The following sections of "Far Away" are even more unnerving. Joan, now older, is working as a hat-maker, and we watch her and a colleague gossip idly about their trade ("Abstract hats are back in a big way," the colleague declares). Only gradually does it become clear that the hats are to be worn by prisoners on death row: there follows a tableau of what the stage directions describe as "ragged, beaten, chained prisoners" passing silently across the stage, each wearing a fantastically over-designed piece of millinery.

No commentary is offered and the meaning of the scene, strange, grotesque, and tragicomic, is evasive. Is Churchill satirizing societies that remain willfully ignorant of atrocities committed in their name, or pinpointing the climate of fear that pervades them? Did she somehow predict rendition flights and black sites, or is this a straightforward attack on the use of the death penalty? Is her

real subject the morally compromised role of the artist, fashioning beautiful extravagances while civilization burns? Perhaps it doesn't matter: the image of the couture-wearing detainees imprints itself on the memory. The playwright finds a way of making the gesture both intact and open to whatever feelings we pour into it.

The National's revival of "Light Shining in Buckinghamshire" was populated by figures who looked as though they could have stepped off the Occupy barricades, or been marching against cuts in government welfare. The production, which opened a few weeks before the U.K.'s 2015 general election, pushed audiences to consider whether democracy was really available to the disempowered and dispossessed, and particularly to women. In one haunting scene, a village woman tells her friend about breaking into a house that has been abandoned by a rich landowner and finding a full-length mirror; it becomes apparent that she has never before seen herself in one. "They must know what they look like all the time," she says, with what may be anger as well as wonder. "And now we do."

When "Cloud Nine" debuted, in 1979, the play was praised (and sometimes attacked) for tapping into postcolonial arguments about the British past, and for its daring echoes of "women's lib"—particularly in the second act, which leaps forward from colonial Africa to late-nineteen-seventies London and shows many of the same characters in defiantly dissimilar set-ups. Betty, the downtrodden wife, remakes herself as a liberated divorcée, while her gay son attempts to force his wild-oats-sowing boyfriend to commit. In Macdonald's recent revival, critics have been struck by quite different facets: the play's open-hearted portrayal of the fluidity of desire, its conjuring of a society in which same-sex relationships have become quite normal. One of the play's many surprises is that it seems to imagine a world which—at least in some respects, in

some parts of the globe—has come to pass. Ben Brantley, reviewing the show in the *Times*, put it simply: “1979 feels not like yesterday but today.”

Still, while the playwright’s political interests are often clear, the personality behind them remains elusive, Ruhl suggested. “The plays aren’t confessional, they’re not thesis-driven, they’re not letters to the editor, so they’re not opinion pieces. They have the austerity of a theatrical sculpture. In that sense, they don’t feel like the playwright’s out there with a bullhorn.”

Less sympathetic commentators have disagreed. Consternation greeted the London première of “Seven Jewish Children,” in early 2009, and the consternation became full-blown outrage when the play came to the New York Theatre Workshop. Writing in response to the invasion of Gaza by Israeli forces, in late 2008, Churchill offered a laconic sequence of fragments, seemingly addressed to children of different eras—at first in the shadow of the European ghettos, then during the implementation of the Final Solution (“Tell her dead or alive her family all love her / Tell her her grandmother would be proud of her”), before reaching the present moment:

Tell her the Hamas fighters have been killed

Tell her they’re terrorists

Tell her they’re filth

Don’t

Don’t tell her about the family of dead girls

Tell her you can’t believe what you see on television

Tell her we killed the babies by mistake

In *The Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg called the play “anti-Jewish agitprop,” and bristled at the possibility that the play was comparing atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis with actions taken by Israel’s government. In *The New Yorker*, James Wood called it “actually anti-Semitic.” It instigated a run of responses, including a thinly disguised cameo in Howard Jacobson’s novel “The Finkler Question.” Such was the play’s sensitivity that James Nicola, Artistic Director at N.Y.T.W., decided that it would be staged twice each night: once with a cast of eight, after which came a moderated audience discussion, followed by a read-through of the script by a single actor. (At the playwright’s request, no admission fee was charged and the performance was followed by a collection for a medical charity that supports Palestinians.) “The controversy was so baffling to me,” Nicola said. “If you really read the play, I think it’s an incredibly respectful and embracing study of humanity.”

Whatever one thinks of her politics, Churchill has been able to respond rapid-fire to current events in part because she has stayed away from the convoluted development processes of film and television: she remains committed to live forms. And it is hard to see how anything but theatre could give her the flexibility to write as she pleases. The early texts are rich, dense, often sprawling as they hop-skip across time; these days, the plays are pearlescent in their minimalism. Sometimes they’re as short as eight minutes: one sentence can be an entire scene. That, too, seems in tune with a constant-refresh, constantly connected world, where the hundred and forty characters of a tweet can have more impact than a hundred newspaper editorials. As Churchill’s plays have reduced, they also somehow have seemed to expand.

For Nicola, Churchill’s ability to stay ahead of the game is perhaps the most remarkable thing about her. “In my experience, artists tend to fall into two categories, roughly. One, somewhere in their mid-thirties, if they’re persistent,

they figure out what their thing is and then they keep refining it—essentially doing the same thing until they pass away.” Then, he said, there are those like Churchill: the chameleons, the ones who reinvent and never quite stay the same. He laughed. “She’s seventy-seven and still doing that. I’m in awe of that.”

For Macdonald, it’s even simpler. “She’s just doing the best writing, isn’t she? Why make it any more complicated?”

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Video

Teju Cole: Passport to Liberty

Teju Cole takes in the skyline from the roof of his apartment building in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and reflects on his American citizenship and Nigerian upbringing.

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