

Women in Theater: The Plays of Churchill, Wertebaker and Kirkwood

Syllabus

Instructor

Douglas Post

Quarter: Spring 2024

Start – end date: March 20 – May 8

Session day/time: Wednesday, 1:30 pm – 4:00 pm

Course Code and Section: HUAS79007 24S1

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Course Overview

As women writing for the theater from the 1970s to the present day, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertebaker and Lucy Kirkwood have left their indelible marks on the world stage. Their topics have ranged from the pursuit of a career in a society dominated by men to socialism to theatrics performed in penal colonies to nuclear physicists to twelve matrons deciding whether or not a woman convicted of murder who claims to be pregnant should be hung. In this course we will delve into Churchill's *Top Girls*, *Fen* and *Serious Money*; Wertebaker's *Our Country's Good* and *Three Birds Alighting on A Field*; and Kirkwood's *Chimerica*, *The Children* and *The Welkin*.

Modality

Remote learning

Required texts

- *Churchill Plays 2: Softcops, Top Girls, Fen, Serious Money (Contemporary Dramatists)* (Methuen Drama, First Edition, 2009, ISBN-13 978-0413622709)
- *Timberlake Wertebaker Plays: Plays One: New Anatomies, The Grace of Mary Traverse, Our Country's Good, The Love of the Nightgale, Three Birds Alighting on a Field (Contemporary Classics)* (Faber & Faber, 1996, ISBN-13 978-0571177431)
- *Chimerica* by Lucy Kirkwood (Nick Hern Books, Second Edition, 2013, ISBN-13 978-1848423503)
- *The Children* by Lucy Kirkwood (Theatre Communications Group, 2017, ISBN-13 978-1559365772)
- *The Welkin* by Lucy Kirkwood (Theatre Communications Group, 2021, ISBN-13 978-1559369862)

Books can be purchased online through the [University of Chicago Bookstore](#).

Course readings

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 1	Caryl Churchill	<p>Read: <i>Top Girls</i> by Caryl Churchill</p> <p>Set in the early 1980s, this play depicts the lifestyle and choices of Marlene, a successful career woman who has received a major promotion while fighting her way to the top. Using iconic historical figures such as Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Dull Gret, Pope Joan and Patient Griselda, the play explores the realities of being female and the potential price of achieving success. Nonlinear in its structure, Churchill's play highlights the multiple facets of being a thriving woman during the time of Margaret Thatcher and the potential cost of what it means to get ahead when one embodies the worst traits of the self-made man. <i>The New York Post</i> referred to this play as, "A mind lifting experience." <i>The New York Times</i> said it is, "Truly original." And <i>The Independent</i> called it, "A work of genius that will never die."</p>
Week 2	Caryl Churchill	<p>Read: <i>Fen</i> by Caryl Churchill</p> <p>A moving portrait of the lives and dreams of a group of low-paid women farm workers in England's fen country who perform the most primitive kind of rural labor, such as potato-picking and onion-grading, for a corporate agricultural company. Val wants more. Becky wants to be a hairdresser. Angela wants to escape. Shirley prides herself on keeping going. Doubly constricted by sex and class, <i>Fen</i> is a glimpse at the ways a group of people cope with poverty, grief and the hope of a better life.</p>
Week 3	Caryl Churchill	<p>Read: <i>Serious Money</i> by Caryl Churchill</p> <p>"A neo-Restoration comedy crossed with a Jacobean revenger's tale" is how <i>The New York Times</i> described this unsettling satire about capitalism running rampant and unchecked. All money corrupts and serious money corrupts absolutely in this world of shady financial deals, insider trading and get rich quick wheeler dealers of both sexes. Not only does the play capture almost every aspect of dirty dealing and money grubbing from London to Wall Street, but it does so in extremely ingenious rhymed couplets.</p>
Week 4	Timberlake Wertenbaker	<p>Read: <i>Our Country's Good</i> by Timberlake Wertenbaker</p> <p>In June 1789 in the penal colony that was later to become the city of Sydney, a marine lieutenant decides to put on a play to</p>

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 5	Timberlake Wertebaker	<p>celebrate the king's birthday. He casts the play with the English convicts who populate this distant Australian prison camp. Few of them can read, let alone act, and the play is being produced against a background of food shortages and barbaric punishments, all brilliantly juxtaposed against the civilizing influence of a theatrical endeavor. <i>The Guardian</i> stated, "<i>Our Country's Good</i> is a triumph...a tribute to the transforming power of drama...It is heartening to find someone standing up for theatre's unique spiritual power."</p> <p>Read: <i>Three Birds Alighting on a Field</i> by Timberlake Wertebaker</p> <p>This play begins as an art auctioneer attempts to sell a totally flat and white unpainted canvas to the highest bidder. Attending this bizarre auction is Bidy Andreas, an ordinary good person who is married to a wealthy Greek tycoon that desperately wants to be upper-crust English. Against a background of glib auctioneers, valueless dealers, pacesetting Americans, and a media woman for whom art is an extension of style, Bidy turns herself into a richer human being. "Wertebaker writes fluently and funnily," wrote the critic for <i>London's Sunday Times</i>, "with a fearless capacity to expand an apparently limited canvas into a portrait of the times."</p>
Week 6	Lucy Kirkwood	<p>Read: <i>Chimerica</i> by Lucy Kirkwood</p> <p>In 1989, Joe Schofield takes a picture of a Chinese civilian confronting four military tanks in Tiananmen Square – an image that would captivate the world for decades to come. In 2012, as China and U.S. relations dominate presidential election debates, a mysterious message linked to the event appears in a Beijing newspaper. In response, Joe vows to uncover the story behind the unknown hero he photographed twenty-three years ago. A deft political thriller as well as a riveting personal journey, <i>Chimerica</i> explores the intertwining fortunes of two global superpowers and put Ms. Kirkwood on the map as a playwright to be reckoned with.</p>
Week 7	Lucy Kirkwood	<p>Read: <i>The Children</i> by Lucy Kirkwood</p> <p>This black comedy concerns Robin and Hazel, two retired nuclear scientists who are living in an isolated cottage by the sea as the world around them crumbles. Then they are visited by Rose, an old friend who makes a frightening request. <i>The Financial Times</i> called this work, which was written as a response to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear explosion in Japan,</p>

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 8	Lucy Kirkwood	<p data-bbox="695 205 1430 275">“A far-reaching, unsettling play about legacy, survival and responsibility.”</p> <p data-bbox="695 300 1430 758">Read: <i>The Welkin</i> by Lucy Kirkwood</p> <p data-bbox="695 346 1430 758">The year is 1759 and the country awaits the anticipated arrival of Halley’s Comet. The daughter of Lady Wax has been murdered and the residents of this rural town are out for blood. Sally Poppy has been found guilty of the crime, along with her lover who has already been hanged. Sally’s journey to the noose is dependent on whether she is really pregnant, as she claims to be, or lying, but her fate lies in the hands of twelve women, who are gathered together to make a unanimous decision. However, there is a devil in their midst and the women must wrestle with their consciences to come to a decision.</p>

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Questions? Contact Zoë Eisenman at zme1@uchicago.edu.