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978-0-521-49322-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill

Edited by Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond

Excerpt

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I

ELAINE ASTON AND ELIN DIAMOND

Introduction: on Caryl Churchill

The scene is set for intimacy. Two men occupy a sofa on an otherwise empty stage. They talk – one with an American accent, the other English. Their conversation is elliptical. Half-formed sentences leave the spectators to fill in blanks and gaps, but offer enough to suggest a state of renewed sexual attraction, a power game that leads one man (English), to declare his intention to leave his family and join the other (American) on a grotesque spree of global domination. This is how *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, Caryl Churchill's most recent, full-length play (at the time of writing this introduction) opened at London's Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in 2006, the theatre with which Churchill has forged a close and enduring relationship, dating back to 1972 when she made her professional play-writing debut with *Owners*.

Characteristically, *Drunk Enough* is a politically charged play which evidences Churchill's unsurpassed ability to dramatize the anxieties and concerns of the contemporary moment. In this particular instance, it is the nightmare realities created by the wholesale, worldwide exportation of materialist values in which the lives of others are devalued, damaged and destroyed by a 'turbo' capitalist creed of greed. This is not, however, a new topic for Churchill. Rather, the painful realities of a world divided by those who 'own' and those who are 'owned' and the havoc this wreaks on the lives and communities of men and especially women is a subject that frequently haunts her playwriting. Hers is an oppositional, political theatre voice for contemporary times. 'Most plays', Churchill argues 'can be looked at from a political perspective' whether this was or was not what a playwright intended: '[w]hatever you do your point of view is going to show somewhere. It usually only gets noticed and called "political" if it's against the status quo.'¹ Over the years, Churchill's theatre has repeatedly argued 'against the status quo' by exploring social worlds scarred by an inability to democratize and to revolutionize, both nationally and internationally.

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Hence, wherever one looks the Churchillian landscape is ‘frightening’. At the same time, it is also highly original. For equally unsurpassed among contemporary playwrights is Churchill’s capacity for dramaturgical invention and innovation. Each time she interrogates the realities of dystopia created under capitalism she experiments with the dramaturgical form such questioning might take. For Churchill, dramatizing the political is not just a question of content, but also of form. With the renewal of form comes the renewal of the political: new forms *and* new socially and politically relevant questions. Consider, for a moment, how in *Fen*, a self-congratulatory monologue about transnational capital investment in the soil-rich fens is juxtaposed with an iconic image of peasant labour – women ‘*potato picking down a field*’.² Or how in *Serious Money*, the seventeenth-century origins of modern market speculation emerges in the bouncy iambs of sexually aroused traders: ‘I thought we’d never manage to make a date. / You’re more of a thrill than a changing interest rate’.³ In *Drunk Enough* Churchill’s critique of American imperialism takes the surprising form of a personal, romantic attachment. As the Englishman Guy⁴ embarks on his love affair with Sam/America the aggression and ‘back killings’⁵ of decades of American foreign policy become the sweet nothings each whispers in the other’s ear.

At this point in time, it is arguably significant that the personal–political landscape of *Drunk Enough* is one which takes us back over a period of twentieth- and twenty-first-century history, as it overlaps to a large extent with the years of Churchill’s playwriting career. Over this period, her commitment, through theatre, to the realization of more fully democratic futures has been unerring, while at the same time the attainability of her vision for society which she described back in 1982 as ‘decentralized, non-authoritarian, communist, non-sexist – a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives’⁶ has slipped further and further away. As *Drunk Enough*, like so much of Churchill’s recent work, shows the risks inherent in not being able to see the implications of how personal lives are woven into a bigger, political fabric, it also interrogates what role theatre as a public art form and forum plays on the political stage. As the two-man sofa rises into darkness, it is also edged by a frame of theatre dressing room light bulbs. A metaphor for the theatre in politics, perhaps, but also a framing-up and questioning of theatre’s role in the political. All in all, we might suggest, this is a moment in which Churchill, from the perspective of *Drunk Enough*, looks quizzically and self-reflexively back on the art form to which she has committed her creative labour. Similarly, from this retrospective vantage point, we can now look back at the years of Churchill’s theatre work and set the scene and contexts (social, cultural, political and theatrical) for the essays on Caryl Churchill brought together in this *Companion*.

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Looking back: politics and plays

Oxford-educated in the late 1950s, Churchill's first playwriting experiences were for student and amateur productions. Throughout the 1960s, however, her professionally produced work was mainly for radio, plays which in her own words Churchill has described as treatments of 'bourgeois middle-class life and the destruction of it'⁷ (see Chronology for early career details).⁸ While writing for radio may have had lasting effects on her theatrical imagination (see Elin Diamond, Chapter 8), it was also something she was able to manage in combination with raising three small children. At the time, Churchill explains, there were few opportunities available to playwrights. 'When I began it was quite hard for any playwrights to get started in London.'⁹ During the 1970s, and due in part to a relatively benign period of state sponsorship from the Arts Council, things slowly improved for emergent playwrights as new fringe theatre companies and studio spaces were created. A beneficiary of such openings, Churchill had her first professionally produced play, *Owners*, staged at the Royal Court Theatre's Upstairs studio space, which opened in 1969 as a response to the growing trend in new theatre writing. By 1975 Churchill had graduated to the Court's main house, Downstairs Theatre, with *Objections to Sex and Violence*, directed by John Tydeman, who had produced the majority of her earlier, professionally broadcast radio plays. She was also appointed as the Court's first woman writer in residence (1974–5).

To be labelled a first woman or woman anything can be both an honour and a dubious privilege – dubious when praise for a writer is used pejoratively with 'woman' to propose a '*lesser* category'.¹⁰ Yet it is important to understand that the feminist climate of the 1970s gave Churchill 'a context for thinking of' herself 'as a woman writer'.¹¹ Like many women in Britain and the US at that time, Churchill's gender awareness was raised through personal experience, specifically a growing discontent with the isolated conditions of her domestic life (see Janelle Reinelt, Chapter 2). Discovering feminism meant identifying the social and sexual inequalities of women's lives and seeking ways to change them. For Churchill it was 'exciting' to discover that personal 'development' was not just a question of self, but was conditioned by the historical moment.¹² Talking of this, she referred to Tillie Olsen's *Silences*¹³ – a seminal feminist text that looked at how writers, especially women writers from earlier generations, were silenced by circumstances of gender, race or class, and how transformation of those circumstances could open up new creative horizons. In the 1970s, in a climate of feminist change, theatre horizons

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presented the ‘woman writer’ with more opportunities than before. As Churchill observed: ‘For a while, a lot of writers were getting produced for the first time, though far fewer women than men. Gradually during the seventies the number of women increased, coming partly through fringe theatres and partly through women’s theatre groups.’¹⁴ In 1976, Churchill worked with the then newly formed, women’s theatre company, Monstrous Regiment, one of the UK’s most influential feminist theatre groups.¹⁵ Working in a feminist theatre context with Monstrous Regiment on *Vinegar Tom* and again on the cabaret *Floorshow*, brought Churchill ‘both artistic and intellectual stimulation and also a recognition that she belonged to a [women’s] movement’ (see Reinelt, Chapter 2).

Given the feminist and leftist climate of the 1970s it is not then surprising to find sexual politics surfacing in several of Churchill’s major plays from the 1970s through to the early 1980s, including *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls* and *Fen*. Acknowledging that ‘socialism and feminism aren’t synonymous’, Churchill was clear that she felt ‘strongly about both and wouldn’t be interested in a form of one that didn’t include the other’.¹⁶ Where socialist analysis frequently failed to recognize gender in its critique of class and labour hierarchies, the material conditions of class, history and *gender* are all determinants in the socialist–feminist analysis of women’s oppression. Taking up a distinctly anti-capitalist position in her plays, Churchill, therefore, also brought gender concerns to bear on her topics. Her dramatizations of economic and social conditions in seventeenth-century England in *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, for instance, demonstrate that poor women, punished as witches (*Vinegar Tom*), are doubly disenfranchized on account of their class and gender (*Light Shining*).

Light Shining was the first of four productions Churchill undertook with the new writing company Joint Stock.¹⁷ Just as her production with *Vinegar Tom* for Monstrous Regiment brought her into a feminist theatre community, beginning work with Joint Stock was also to prove a seminal, politicizing experience. She learned methods of making work collaboratively, of experiencing theatre-making as ‘joint’, democratized labour informing all aspects of process, practice and production. Even when she did the actual playwriting in private, her ideas and images were viscerally inspired by the labour of the actors and director in rehearsal. The experience of working with both of these companies in the mid-1970s had an important impact and influence on Churchill’s evolving dramaturgy (see Elaine Aston, Chapter 9).

How to challenge the ‘status quo’ of capitalism and/or gender oppression remains an enduring question for Churchill and it surfaces in a number of dramatizations where critical attention is paid to the material conditions

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that have underpinned Britain's organization of labour, family and capital (see Jean E. Howard, Chapter 3). In one of her lesser-known plays, *The After-Dinner Joke*, written for television, Selby, a naïve do-gooder, attempts to eschew capitalism by working for charities to solve the problem of world poverty. In due course, Selby learns that every charitable act turns out to be a political and economic transaction. As a lone woman challenging the inequities of capitalism, Selby fails to do any good. Individual acts of female kindness are not enough to save the world, as Churchill would later illustrate in her major play, *The Skriker*. In contrast to this individual act of resistance, Churchill also explored collective acts of resistance where the democratization of capital and/or social organization is the goal. In our collection, Mary Luckhurst (Chapter 4), for example, examines Churchill's staging of three revolutionary histories in *The Hospital*, *Light Shining*, and in a later play, *Mad Forest*, where each play rehearses the possibilities of egalitarian futures which fail to materialize. The failure to revolutionize can be linked to the geopolitical operations of global capital, brilliantly dramatized by Churchill in her award-winning satire *Serious Money*.

Serious Money is a play, as Jean E. Howard describes in Chapter 3, that captures the 1980s ethos of capitalist greed enshrined in the policies and values of the Conservative government under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. Elected in 1979 and remaining in power until 1990, Thatcher engineered a Britain divided by wealth and class, promoted private ownership of nationalized industries, and reduced public subsidy – especially for the arts. In theatre this meant harsh economic times: cuts rather than expansion and an active pursuit of corporate sponsorship. In short, Thatcher's Britain shored up the economic divide of rich and poor, the 'us and them' that Churchill wittily and incisively critiqued in *Top Girls*. 'Top girl' Marlene represents an individualistic style of 'feminism' (called, at the time, 'bourgeois feminism'), eager to assert her right to compete as ruthlessly as her fellow male capitalists. If the 1980s were to be a 'stupendous' decade, as Marlene predicts,¹⁸ this would obtain only for those in positions of economic privilege – male or female. Moreover, this would be at the cost of less privileged others, female others in particular, as prophesied in the play's final word/line, spoken by the disadvantaged adolescent, Angie: 'Frightening'.¹⁹

Britain would have to wait eighteen years before the Conservatives were voted out of power. Labour's return in 1997 with Tony Blair as prime minister, however, re-branded left-wing politics so that Labour 'could shed its reputation for being stuck with postwar socialist dogma and be seen instead as a youthful and forward-thinking alternative to a beleaguered, fractious and increasingly weary-looking Conservative Party'.²⁰

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New Labour, with its ‘cool Britannia’ hype, distanced itself from the ‘old’ ideologies of socialism and feminism. By now these had lost their political bite: the former in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the collapse of Soviet Russia (1991) and its Eastern European outposts; the latter as a consequence of the transatlantic backlash against feminism and feminism’s internal struggles over identity politics (see Reinelt, Chapter 2).

In consequence, in the 1990s Churchill’s vision of a society founded on socialist and feminist principles seemed increasingly ‘far away’. Questions of identity and of self-knowledge, which are mapped throughout Churchill’s plays, as R. Darren Gobert explores in Chapter 7, are acutely in flux. Philosophical and psychological questions of selfhood are at sea, unanchored in a world that increasingly seems to offer no personal or political means of self-knowing. So, for Churchill, an urgent political theatre question has become how to further our ‘selves’ democratically in the absence of any ideological base from which to challenge the status quo. Given the sustained erosion of a credible, counter-political strategy, Churchill has moved towards what might best be described as strategies of dis-identification with life under intensifying regimes of transnational capitalism. In plays such as *The Skriker*, *This is a Chair*, *Far Away* or *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* she insists on re-viewings of the ‘frightening’, terrifying and damaging consequences of our contemporary world, hurtling towards economic and ecological warfare (see Sheila Rabillard, Chapter 6) and a constant state of global terror (see Diamond, Chapter 8). Core to Churchill’s re-viewing strategies is her resolve that we re-evaluate what claims our attention – often underscoring the need to redress a blind or blinkered view of the bigger political picture, distanced by personal considerations. This is not a new consideration for Churchill, as this observation dating back to 1973 illustrates:

I’m often very conscious of the absurd things people take for granted, and the whole different systems people have for judging whether things are important or not. If I cut my finger now, for example, it would be an awful thing, but obviously much worse things are happening far away and one can’t relate to them. That kind of discrepancy, in lots of different ways, is something I’ve thought about for a long time. In fact my first radio play [*The Ants*] was really about that.²¹

That Churchill draws a through-line from 1962 when *The Ants* was first produced to 1973, and referred to it again in an interview in 1982,²² attests to a foundational conjuncture represented by that short radio play. Like all great writers, Churchill has, as we have noted, abiding concerns, and surely, weaving its way through most if not all of her plays, is the affective gap between violence and harm ‘out there’ versus a protected, if anxious,

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‘here’ (see Diamond’s discussion of *The Ants*, Chapter 8). *This is A Chair and Far Away* explore the theme explicitly. In biting contrast, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?*, with the sofa on which the global schemers sit rising into the ether, offers a satiric primer on how to *widen* the gap between what ‘we’ do here and the awful consequences out there.

Churchill’s attention to the affective gap between here and there is registered in another way – by her methods of research and writing, by her insistence that politics is both out there and within her characters. In her ‘Afterword’ to the anthologized printing of *Objections to Sex and Violence*, composed ten years after the play was first produced, Churchill reveals the organic relationship of composition to research:

I’ve looked through the notebooks in which I wrote [the play] to see where I started from and how the situations of the play gradually emerge ... Among the *notes groping towards characters and events are notes on what I was reading*, Reich on Aggression, Hannah Arendt on Violence, with quotes from Marx, Fanon, Sartre; Eric’s [the play’s would-be terrorist] quote about ‘the power to act shrinks every day’ is by Pareto at the turn of the century, via Arendt. Most of the IRA bombings in England hadn’t happened when I wrote the play, and it’s hard to unthink them and see the play without them. [Our emphasis] ²³

While reticent about her intentions or about specific meanings in the plays, Churchill is revelatory about her writing practice. Her research notebooks are her plays in embryo. Facts are not impediments to theatrical invention but a stimulant. The commentary above follows productions of *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* in which Churchill’s use of the *Malleus Maleficarum* for the former, and of Leveller and Digger pamphlets for the latter have been well documented. In other words, the historical record has not only informed Churchill’s writing, it has helped to produce the writing.

As Churchill suggests above, readings of political theorists and philosophers are equally suggestive to her writing practice and the chapters in this volume variously chart her creative engagement with political ideas: Mary Luckhurst describes Churchill’s particular dialogue with Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*; Elin Diamond examines Churchill’s inventive engagement with Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’ and technologies of discipline; and Janelle Reinelt shows how the community of feminist historiography has informed Churchill’s writing. One might say that Churchill’s use of historical texts and political critique suggests a deep interest in intervening in the historical record, not through dogma or preaching but by engaging the imagination and curiosity of her audience.

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Theatrical invention

As we noted earlier, in Churchill's work politics and formal invention go hand in hand, and if there are strong thematic tendencies in her work, her ability to reinvent theatrical technique and language from play to play seems inexhaustible. Let us begin with her torquing of time. Churchill's plays can be aggressively nonlinear, and none more so than her theatrical puzzle *Traps*, which was constructed, Churchill writes in a prefatory note, around the figure of a Mobius strip. In *Traps*, scenes are internally coherent but without logical sequence, so that while characters and discrete situations are recognizable, what *happens* is impossible to explain. The characters of *Traps*, Churchill writes, 'can be thought of as living many of the possibilities at once', occupying, in other words, multiple dimensions, multiple spatial realities, giving rise to a 'skewed ontology', as R. Darren Gobert puts it in Chapter 7. *Traps*, Churchill explains, 'is like an impossible object'; what occurs on stage 'cannot be reconciled'²⁴ with our expectations of reality – and those expectations, Churchill teaches us, are enmeshed in dramatic conventions of temporal and causal sequence. Churchill's famous *Cloud Nine*, in which, between Acts I and II, historical time leaps forward 100 years while characters are only 25 years older, offers no problems of comprehension and, suitable to comedy, carries hope for increasing human connection. But like *Traps*, *Cloud Nine* makes the larger point that if the past is never settled, the present becomes temporally unstable and indeed the play demonstrates both startling rupture and depressing continuities in sexual politics. *The Skriker* is Churchill's *tour de force* contribution to the shocks of time travel, for her eponymous goblin's 'fairy' time annihilates space by compressing linear time to an instant or by making what feels like an instant actually a passage of hundreds of years. Long before theorists of the postmodern identified 'time-space compression'²⁵ and 'radically discontinuous realities'²⁶ as the distinctive features of our 'postmodern condition', Caryl Churchill was developing a dramaturgy that translated this 'condition' into a palpable experience in the theatre.

Equally palpable, and the means by which temporal disturbances are conveyed, are Churchill's unforgettable characters – or rather the unforgettable and surprising voicings that register psychic and social disturbance. In her satiric plays, Churchill's characters have a kind of hyper-recognizability, their gender, class and historical moment telegraphed instantly through styles of speech that collide for comic and political effect. Formally unique as each Churchill production is, one may hear verbal and stylistic echoes from play to play. The disordered speech patterns of Miss Forbes, the flustered

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older woman who gives voice to the inertia that afflicts all the characters in *Objections*, might be traced back to Vivian's stuttering in the radio play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* and are heard again in Betty's speeches in *Cloud Nine*, and Maisie's in *Blue Heart*. The neurotic materialism of Marion in *Owners* morphs into the unembarrassed greed of Marlene, Nell and Win in *Top Girls* and of Scilla, Mary Lou and Jacinta in *Serious Money*. Churchill's wonderful ear for self-deluding verbal tics generates comic effects (Clive and Martin in *Cloud Nine*; Selby in *The After-Dinner Joke*; Pierre in *Softcops*; Crippen in *Lives of the Great Poisoners*) or points to darker zones of incomprehension (Vera and Lance in *Icecream*; Flavia in *Mad Forest*; Salter in *A Number*). But perhaps the most prominent figure – and language – on the Churchill stage is that of the isolated woman, sometimes a daughter or wife, often a mother, whose words are an unsentimental register of longing, confusion, fear and rage. Here are a just few representative voices:

FRANÇOISE The dress looked very pretty but underneath I was rotting away.
Bit by bit I was disappearing.

(*The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*)²⁷

IVY Sometimes I think I was never there. You can remember a thing because
someone told you.

(*Fen*)²⁸

LILY I know everyone's born. I can't help it. Everything's shifted round so she's
in the middle. I never minded things. But everything dangerous seems it might
get her.

(*The Skriker*)²⁹

ALICE I'm not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch now after
what they've done. I'd make wax men and melt them on a slow fire. I'd kill their
animals and blast their crops and make such storms ...

(*Vinegar Tom*)³⁰

Like all stage characters Churchill's are made of words, and while her words, especially in the speeches above, are redolent of emotion, they never reveal motives or present a coherent personal narrative. Indeed, Churchill stamps out continuities of personality before they can be expressed. From the writing of *Three More Sleepless Nights* to the present, she has undermined the informational and confessional nature of dialogue by having characters speak over each other's lines, creating intermittent verbal cacophonies that subvert the convention of individualized dramatic character. Double casting also undermines identity, throwing our focus not on individual agents but on the form and patterns of the whole. (See Gobert, Chapter 7, for a full discussion of identity.) And finally, as though merely human characters could no longer convey the historical resonances she seeks, Churchill has, since *Fen*, added the

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nonhuman: angels, ghosts, goblins, vampires, figures out of a shared cultural past that deliberately unsettle the present.

Which brings us back to the question of time and the part played by Churchill's audiences. 'Playwrights don't give answers; they ask questions', Churchill wrote at the beginning of her career.³¹ Her characters are incarnations of the restless questioning that informs her plays, and that questioning is not in spite of her politics but an aesthetic strategy *of* her politics. Perhaps the most startling and direct example of this occurs in the exquisitely written first scene of *Far Away* when the child Joan questions her aunt about the horrific brutality she has witnessed. The aunt deflects her questions through manipulation and intimidation, but the larger question – why, despite endless critique, despite all that we know, do we continue to tolerate unspeakable brutality all around us? – hangs in the air and in our minds long after the curtain comes down. The child Joan learns to stop asking questions; we, responding to Churchill provocations, can choose to do otherwise.

Churchill in theatre contexts

The Royal Court

While the political landscape has shifted dramatically over the decades in which Churchill has been writing and in consequence influenced the subjects of her plays, one constant for Churchill has been her association with The Royal Court Theatre. The Court's commitment to writers and its support of *new* writers has been warmly endorsed by Churchill, whose own work has, since the 1972 production of *Owners*, found a home there. As a home, the Court has provided Churchill with many important theatre 'relations'. Significant in this respect is her association with Max Stafford-Clark, who managed the Court throughout the 1980s. Churchill's first encounters with Stafford-Clark were on the Joint Stock productions, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *Cloud Nine*. Thereafter, their creative partnership flourished at the Court as, under his term of office (which lasted until 1993), Stafford-Clark directed premieres of *Top Girls*, *Serious Money* and *Icecream*, making Churchill the theatre's 'archetypal [playwright] figure' in the 1980s.³² Churchill's continued association with the Royal Court has seen her working with directors James Macdonald, Ian Rickson, Dominic Cooke and Stephen Daldry, Stafford-Clark's successor who directed three Churchill productions: *This is a Chair*, *Far Away* and *A Number*. Although her prominence among contemporary British playwrights now guarantees Churchill a main house production, 'the focus of