

ABOUT CARYL CHURCHILL



Of course it's possible to trace recurring themes in Churchill's work – alienation between parent and child, the possibility and failure of revolution. But it is the variety of her work that is most striking. As [Marius von Mayenburg, resident playwright at Berlin's Schaubühne theatre] says: "With each play, she discovers new genres and forms. She then discards them and moves on, opening up possibilities for other playwrights to explore. I think many people writing today don't even realise they've been influenced by her. She's changed the language of theatre. And very few playwrights do that."

From "She Made Us Raise Our Game," an article about Churchill in The Guardian written by playwright Mark Ravenhill (2 September, 2008)

Caryl Churchill is a British dramatist known for her plays on political and feminist themes, postmodern explorations of language, and a rejection of theatrical realism in favor of non-traditional forms and structures. She was born in 1938 in London, England, and grew up there and in Montreal, Canada. Her interest in drama began as a student at Lady Margaret Hall, the women's college at Oxford University, where she had gone to study English literature. While

still at university, Churchill wrote her first three plays: *Downstairs* (1958), *Having a Wonderful Time* (1960), and *Easy Death* (1962), all of which were produced on campus.

Churchill's early career focused on radio drama. During the 1960s and 1970s, Churchill wrote several pieces for the BBC, including *The Ants* (1962) and *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971). The focus on text and the leaps in time characteristic of radio dramas had a significant effect on her later work for the stage. *Owners*, her first professional full-length stage play, which explored our obsession with power, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972. Churchill then served as Resident Dramatist at The Royal Court from 1974-1975 and would maintain a relationship with this theatre throughout her career.

Shortly after the premiere of *Owners*, Churchill joined two more experimental, collaborative theatre groups: David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark's Joint Stock Company and the feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment. With both groups, Churchill developed work in collaboration with actors and directors in a workshop environment, which marked a turning point in her aesthetic; the plays she wrote during and after her association with these two groups would become her most challenging, boundary-pushing, and iconic work. With these groups, she created *Vinegar Tom* (1976), a combination rock musical and play about witch burning in Elizabethan England, *Cloud Nine* (1979), which explores the connection between colonization and sexuality, and *Fen* (1983), a portrait of East Anglia's poor female farm laborers, and other plays. The political, non-linear, large-cast plays that made up the middle of Churchill's career often incorporated movement, song, or dance. *Cloud Nine* was the first of her plays to receive widespread critical attention, garnering an Obie Award for Best Play in 1982. Her 1983 play *Top Girls*, which also won an Obie, brings together several famous women from throughout history

at a dinner party and explores the sacrifices women must make to succeed in the professional world. While it is more traditional in form and structure than *Cloud Nine*, it is no less incendiary in subject matter. *Serious Money* (1987) satirizes the excesses in the British stock market, while *The Skriker* (1994), which follows an ancient fairy from an underground realm, incorporates music, dance, and deconstructed language and serves as a warning about humans' relationship to their environment.

In contrast to many of these sprawling, larger cast plays, *A Number*, which won Churchill her third Obie award in 2002, is sometimes referred to as one of the playwright's "minimalist" plays, alongside *Far Away* (2000), *Blue Heart* (1997), *This is a Chair* (1999) *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006), and others written later in her career. These plays are often much shorter than her earlier works, have smaller casts, more flexible scenery, and take a blunt stance on a contemporary political issue. For example, *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* is a forty-minute play which dramatizes the relationship between Great Britain and the United States through the relationship of homosexual lovers named Sam and Guy. One of Churchill's most recently-produced play, *Love and Information*, premiered at the Royal Court in 2012. Taking place on a unit set with sixteen actors playing more than one hundred characters, it explores the effects of oversaturation of technology on interpersonal communication.

Churchill's writing has had a significant influence on both English and American writers since the 1970s. The British "in-yer-face" theatre movement of the 1990s, defined by its confrontational, brutally honest, often shocking theatre and pioneered by such writers as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Anthony Neilson, cites Churchill as a major influence. Her groundbreaking innovations in form and structure, feminist theatre, political theatre, and the

staging of sexuality have been so wide-reaching that it would be difficult to completely inventory them. However, it is abundantly clear that her legacy is strong, even as she lives on and continues to explore new challenges.

LIST OF WORKS

- *Downstairs* (1958)
- *You've No Need to be Frightened* (~1959)
- *Having a Wonderful Time* (1960)
- *Easy Death* (1960)
- *The Ants*, radio drama (1962)
- *Lovesick*, radio drama (1969)
- *Identical Twins* (1960)
- *Abortive*, radio drama (1971)
- *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, radio drama (1971)
- *Owners* (1972)
- *Schreber's Nervous Illness*, radio drama (1972) – based on *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* by Daniel Paul Schreber
- *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (1972)
- *The Judge's Wife*, radio drama (1972)
- *Moving Clocks Go Slow* (1973)
- *Turkish Delight*, television drama (1973)
- *Objections to Sex and Violence* (1975)
- *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976)
- *Vinegar Tom* (1976)
- *Traps* (1976)
- *The After-Dinner Joke*, television drama (1978)
- *Seagulls* (1978)

- *Cloud Nine* (1979)
- *Three More Sleepless Nights* (1980)
- *Top Girls* (1982)
- *Crimes*, television drama (1982)
- *Fen* (1983)
- *Softcops* (1984)
- *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986)
- *A Heart's Desire* (1987)
- *Serious Money* (1987)
- *Ice Cream* (1989)
- *Hot Fudge* (1989)
- *Mad Forest* (1990)
- *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991)
- *The Skriker* (1994)
- *Blue Heart* (1997)
- *Hotel* (1997)
- *This is a Chair* (1999)
- *Far Away* (2000)
- *Thyestes* (2001) – translation of Seneca's tragedy
- *A Number* (2002)
- *A Dream Play* (2005) – translation of August Strindberg's play
- *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006)
- *Seven Jewish Children – a play for Gaza* (2009)
- *Love and Information* (2012)
- *Ding Dong the Wicked* (2013)
- *Here We Go* (2015)

Works Consulted/Further Reading

Diane Aston and Elin Diamond, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*. Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

HYPERLINK: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/sep/03/carylchurchill.theatre>

HYPERLINK: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/caryl-churchill>

HYPERLINK:

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/29/her-work-haunts-me-caryl-by-those-that-have-worked-with-her>

HYPERLINK:

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/03/caryl-churchill-collaborators-interview>