ZELEK Sebastian 17/11/2014

English literature

Essay on Churchill's “Top Girls”

Churchill used over-lapping dialogue in her play, where more than one character speaks at the same time. The effect, apart from realistically mimicking social conversation (in the UK), can be confusing for the audience since it is not obvious which character to listen to. Following the conversation requires effort and it could be argued that we are placed in an outsider's position: excluded and powerless perhaps like the waitress? The element of social realism counteracts Brecht's ideas on artificiality where in order to communicate anything worthwhile the audience must be in no doubt that they are watching a construct and NOT reality. Perhaps the fact that the guests are either fictional or historical is enough to reassert a sense of a construction. Brecht believed that the task of epic theatre was not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions: not to reproduce but to uncover. His belief in the fact that the dramatic structure of any situation reflects the structure of social forces at work could be applied to “Top Girls”.

What's interesting to consider is Churchill's aims in the mixing of Naturalism and epic theatre. Was she trying to “uncover” a critique of human behaviour? Is “Top Girls” an example of political theatre that seeks to change the status quo? How does she use dialogue and to what effect?

Throughout the whole play, the spectator witnesses different aspects of a woman's life in the 1970's, commencing with the social life, followed with her professional life and her work, and ending with her private and home life. In each of these aspects the viewer of the play can see a critique of both human behaviour. In Act 1, we witness a party to celebrate Marlene's promotion, to which come different women from across all centuries. It's a scene where Marlene, the main character of the play, is rather absent, letting the viewers rather concentrate on the other women on stage. And with them, we can see that conversation between women is like a normal conversation someone would have with their friends, but only more competitive. At each stage of the scene, the women depicted in the scene, except Marlene and the waitress, try to seize the initiative in the conversation so everyone focuses on them. The very first occasion the viewer sees this is when Lady Nijo and Isabella start fighting for the spotlight in the conversation, as well as they start to indirectly undermine each other, like when Nijo talks about when the Emperor and her father got drunk, Isabella said that she “certainly never saw her father drunk.” These conflicts continue as the scene moves forward, escalating as more people arrive and deepening with the amount of alcohol consumed by the women. At the end of the scene, all of the women present at the party are drunk, everyone talks over each other trying to drag attention to their character. The arising chaos confuses the viewer, because he's exposed to multiple conversations at a single time, at the same time leaving him powerless and powerful, because it is up to him to decide what he will listen to, not the author. In Act 2, we follow Marlene into her work place, where we see her with other individuals like her: Nell and Win, another women seeking success in her professional life. The viewer can see all of them talk to each other in a casual, slang-heavy language, setting them in the competitive circle of a professional life. Churchill shows in the scenes within the office the conditions in which the women were placed if they wanted to work: they often had low-grade jobs, with somewhat restricted possibilities of improvement. But Marlene could be seen as an exception, as she just got a promotion to a higher post. And this is where we can see that if women want to be successful in their professional life, they need to pretty much abandon their private life: during the interview with Jeanine, Marlene says that one of the girls who she sent to a job left it “to have a baby”, and that “you won't want to mention marriage there”. And when she's faced by a woman sent by Howard, who lost his promotion in favour of Marlene, and asks if Marlene could give up on her post in profit of her husband, Marlene coldly and bluntly responds that she will not give up on her post to satisfy Howard's needs. One woman acting for herself, concentrating on her professional life, where the other wanted to help her husband in his life. In the final act, the spectator finally sees the impact on Marlene of abandoning her private life. She is contrasted with Joyce, who chose instead a more private model, a stay-at-home mother. Both represent opposite sides of the spectrum, one choosing professional fulfilment and complaining that she has no private life, and the other staying with a more private life, and complaining about her lack of opportunities. Both of them are identifiable by their strong language, marking them out as representatives of the working class.

The realistic situations that the characters of the play face, as well the elements of the feminist and socialist theatre, counter Brecht's ideas who say that the viewers should be reminded that they are watching a play, constructs, not real life. By breaking his theory, it could be argued that Churchill reinforces her political message of the play: demystify categories of class and gender in order to contribute to the political transformation of women. We can see this already in Act 1, where Churchill  places the narratives of Act 1 in a concrete historical situation which calls into question the idea that “woman” is an inherently stable or essential category. Similarly, the final scene of the play takes place in Joyce’s kitchen and living room, which constitutes a realist domestic space. The dialogue and conflict between Marlene and Joyce reveals that Marlene has effectively internalized and now reproduces some guiding presumptions of late capitalism – an intense emphasis on the individual, the denial of class as a meaningful category, and the notion that economic freedom by way of access to the market is the greatest freedom of all. These are among the supposedly “timeless” values that Churchill’s play means to challenge from a feminist angle.

We can see that Churchill in her play Top Girls wanted to expose the true world of the women, with all the hard decisions and abandoning things, show that women are forced to chose between 2 paths, as well as comment on the rise in power of Margaret Thatcher and arising thatcherism in the UK.