

## Performance Analysis Portfolio

### Performance 1: *Glass. Kill. Bluebeard. Imp.* by Caryl Churchill

*Glass. Kill. Bluebeard. Imp.* is a selection of four short plays by Caryl Churchill performed together at the Royal Court Theatre. Whilst the four plays are not specifically linked together, they all contain similar themes that makes the overall performance cohesive. A girl made of glass, a mythical god, a fabled murderer and an imp in a bottle all work together to create an atmosphere of fantasy and unreality throughout the four stories. Furthermore, all these fantasies are portrayed with a certain ordinariness which belies the topics discussed suggesting a blending of the ordinary and the fantastical, and not often in a positive way.

*Glass* presents the tale of a girl made of glass. However, the only acknowledgement of this fact is through the way the actors speak to, and about, the glass girl. Visually, the glass girl is no different from any other actor on stage; nothing has been added or emphasised to physically show the girl is made from glass. In fact, her costume containing various shades of grey has the opposite effect, showing her to be very solid. This choice is made explicit by the author who states that no effort should be made to show that the actor is made of glass in the physical sense. Arguably, this pushes the audience to ponder the more metaphorical concept of being made of glass rather than the literal. The idea of being sheltered is further emphasised by the set of the performance. Elevated above the stage, the four cast members are positioned on a long shelf. The shelf isn't particularly large and its position in the centre of the stage, both by width and height, means the actors are effectively stranded and all four can always be seen, regardless of who is participating in the scene. The positions of the actors who are not in the scene therefore become important and are used effectively to further show the isolation of certain characters. For example, having all the other actors face away from the front when the glass girl soliloquises about the loss of her

boyfriend and her ultimate suicide. She is physically close to other people, who are the mirror images of her position on the three other sides of the shelf, yet she still feels alone. Further to this, the rest of the stage is in darkness, emphasising their isolation from the rest of the world around them. Her suicide is the only instance of any of the actors getting off the shelf, and although the audience can judge the distance is not that great the effective use of the delayed sound effect of glass shattering creates the illusion it is much farther.

The glass girl's separation from the others is also highlighted in the mantelpiece scene. This scene sees the shelf transformed into the mantelpiece of a home, where the glass girl is placed alongside a plastic dog, a clock and an empty vase. This scene shifts the perception of the glass girl as she is shrunk to the status, and size, of an ornament rather than the person she is depicted as throughout the rest of the performance. Shifting her size in this scene is quite confusing and takes away from the believability of the piece as a whole. It makes understanding the significance of *Glass* a lot harder as it is difficult to reconcile the two depictions of the glass girl into one cohesive character.

*Kill*, on the other hand, has a seemingly straight forward message for the audience. *Kill* confronts the preoccupation with myth, and the resulting deaths, directly. Floating above the stage, sits a god, or rather all the gods embodied in an individual, straight from Greek mythology. He recounts stories from the Greek myths, though omitting the names of the characters in them. This omission, to some extent, hides the identity of the stories and therefore, removes their temporality. To begin with the god tells tales of angry husbands and wives and children; these could be placed anywhere throughout history. It is only when more specifics are shared that it becomes

apparent it is a specific tale from Greek mythology – although this recognition does require some previous knowledge in the audience.

At the start of *Kill*, the god tells his tale in a languid, rambling manner, coupled with the quiet colouring of the boy on the floor. The embodiment of resignation that is the god in this piece is a masterstroke by the director. At first glance, a smartly dressed god sits comfortably on his cloud. However, closer inspection reveals the untidily rolled sleeves, unbuttoned collar and bare feet. He even smokes a cigarette, putting it out into his cloud, a symbol of his status as a god. This imagery calls on an overworked office worker, who no longer has any respect for what is keeping him afloat. As the story devolves into more and more violence in the names of the gods, the god on his cloud gets more animated, protesting with greater frequency that they “do not exist”. The god runs his fingers through his hair frequently, ultimately ending with it standing on end in an symbol of stress. The god’s animation is reflected in the child colouring on the floor as his colouring grows quicker until he ultimately tears the paper. The child is an interesting addition to the piece. The god’s monologue shows the violence modern society is built on, but the boy reveals how much that violence has permeated into how we live today. One of his few lines, the single word “Kill”, suggests a desensitisation to violence in the younger generation, his continued colouring during this emphasising his role as an innocent child.

*Bluebeard’s Friends*, similarly, shows our fascination with violence and death. *Bluebeard’s Friends* depicts a series of dinner parties where the close friends of the pirate Bluebeard discuss the recent discovery of his murders. Keeping the actors on stage at all times highlights the preoccupation with Bluebeard, but the subtle shifts in position during each blackout effectively shows the passage of time and informs the audience they are different dinner parties without the need of a costume change. As a

short piece, it is essential there is a good flow and excessive exits and entrances would detract from the poignance of the piece. Furthermore, the seamless transition between scenes strengthens the idea that the case of Bluebeard has become all-consuming for his friends. Their fascination grows as the scenes progress; starting with mild conversation sat at the dinner table and growing to elaborate schemes to monetise their relationship with Bluebeard. As they become more fascinated with the gruesome details, they become accompanied by the backdrop of the blood-stained wedding dresses of the victims. Like *Kill*, this serves as a reminder of how society capitalises on violence in order to build itself up.

Examining the perspective of Bluebeard's friends is a thought-provoking way of approaching a familiar fable. The friends offer a new light in which to view Bluebeard, one where his crimes are not his only attributes. Whilst they do not condone his crimes, they do extol his virtues as a friend and, among other things, a "great piano player". Notably, the table in the scene is still set for six people, symbolically marking the absence of Bluebeard and his latest wife. The friends discuss Bluebeard's various wives, showing their prolonged friendship with the pirate, and the characterisation of the four friends as middle-aged, middle-class wine drinkers who host dinner parties, hints at a similar characterisation of Bluebeard, who is more often depicted as barbaric. The empty chairs show the integration of Bluebeard into this company, offering a wildly different interpretation of Bluebeard's character than other depictions. In addition to this, there are revelations of secrets among the other friends suggesting that no one is perfect, and often people do not know others as well as they think.

*Imp* is the longest of the four short plays and is the most stylistically convenient play in the collection. Thematically it differs somewhat to the other plays in the

collection as it is a mostly naturalistic drama about two cousins, Dot and Jimmy, their niece and a homeless man they befriend and who begins dating the niece. It explores themes of poverty, health care, relationships, mental illness and violence. It is revealed that Dot spent some time in prison for abusing a patient whilst she was a nurse and is seen to be prone to lapsing into violent outbursts upon the slightest provocation. Her otherwise quiet demeanour in her floral dress covers these aspects of her characterisation, however the leopard print leggings and socks worn underneath may reveal her true nature.

Whilst the other plays incorporate myth throughout the whole piece, the titular imp is only revealed later in this piece. Arguably, this grounds *Imp* more firmly in reality than the other pieces, even more so due to the absence of any real proof of the imp. As suggested in *Kill*, the mythical creature doesn't seem to exist, but Dot uses the imp to channel, and therefore legitimise, her violence. Dot is the only character who believes in the imp, and her isolation on the stage shows her difference to the others. Dot sits in a red patterned armchair, alone, whereas the others all share the light-coloured sofa; the colours symbolise Dot's passionate belief as well as her separation from the plain real world. Yet Dot's violent conviction is enough to convince the others of its truth despite their previous jokes, perpetuating the cycle of blaming violence on myth – a common theme linking back across all the plays. The four plays benefit from being viewed in conjunction as similarities can be drawn between how each play presents myth, violence and reality.

## Performance 2: *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill

*Far Away*, written in 2000, is a short play by Caryl Churchill, performed at the Donmar Warehouse. The main theme of the play is the concept of fear and this performance plays on that in a number of ways. The runtime is one way fear is heightened in the audience as the quick pace and lack of an interval means there is no respite for the audience. Each scene builds the tension and the frequent blackouts keeps the audience on edge as the play progresses. The inclusion of an interval would ruin this effect. Similarly, a longer runtime may cause audience members to lose some of their focus on the drama.

The set is often dominated by a large metallic box. The layout of the Donmar Warehouse, seating arranged on three sides of the stage and the circle looking directly down onto it, means that there is no curtain to raise and the box has been visible since before the performance began. Performing *Far Away* in a theatre like this increases the fear it's supposed to generate as it provides an uninterrupted view of the action from multiple angles, yet understanding of the play still remains elusive – the fear of the unknown being one of the driving themes within the play.

The first scene sees a young girl in a white nightgown approach the box, entering from the auditorium. She holds a torch up to the box and that is most of the light that is visible. The box having a mirrored surface is particularly interesting as it creates a reflection of the girl on the surface, however there is a layer of dirt or rust on the surface which obscures this reflection. This suggests something hidden about the box, but it also tarnishes the reflection of the innocently attired child, hinting that her innocence may be stained by her discovery. This is further suggested when her aunt states that she has dirt all over her bare feet, a physical representation of the dirty secret she has uncovered contrasted with the bare feet of her unsullied innocence in

childhood. Despite the information the audience is given about what the child has seen, there is no clear idea about what it means or why it is happening, and this vein continues throughout the entire play.

The dialogue of the play assumes a knowledge of the events in the world and therefore doesn't use any form of exposition for the benefit of the audience. The audience is left largely in the dark, literally and metaphorically. *Far Away* makes good use of blackouts between scenes to further immerse the audience in the action. Not only is the stage blacked out but the whole auditorium, including turning off the emergency exit signs to make the blackout more complete. Furthermore, the production cleverly deploys a strobe light just before the black out making the contrast of the blinding flash and then darkness more striking. These blackouts were kept fractionally longer than is comfortable for the audience in order for tension to build. They also layered the blackouts with sound effects to create a further level of fear in the audience. During the blackouts between the hat making scenes, the sounds of the everyday objects about to be used in the next scene were played through the sound system. For example, the sound of stirring glue and scissors cutting ribbon were played during the blackouts just before the scenes where Joan and Todd use these items. However, the sound effects were amplified to such an extent that it becomes difficult to reconcile the monstrous noise with the simple actions taking place on stage. This is particularly poignant as the innocuous actions they are each performing are all part of the monstrous tradition of the parades. During the parade, prisoners wear the elaborate hats and only the winning hat is kept and stored in the museum. The other hats are all burned with the bodies of the prisoners. This suggests that the prisoner wearing the winning hat is also spared however that is never made clear. Potentially this means that the small actions of stirring glue or cutting ribbon directly affect the

life and death of the people who will wear their creations and are therefore not as innocent as they first appear.

The parade is a section of the play that leaves a lot of room for the director of any performance. The play text states “five is too few and twenty better than ten. A hundred?” (p. 8) which allows the director plenty of flexibility with the number of actors in the parade. This performance uses approximately fifty prisoners. Where this performance differs from the play is that the play calls for a “procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners” (p. 30) suggesting something akin to a street parade. This performance however shows stationary prisoners rather than a procession. The prisoners can be seen behind the stage, split across two levels. Previously there was a blank wall here which has been removed to reveal the prisoners. This choice of staging is significant, because, although it goes against the play text and makes this scene a lot shorter, it gives the impression that the parade is always hidden in the background. For most of the play it is not visible to the audience, but once it has been revealed, the audience is aware of its presence even when it’s hidden from view. All the prisoners are bruised and ragged looking and many begin to cry as the parade proceeds. They each face forward and are expected to turn first one way and then the other on the sound of a whistle. Fear holds some of the prisoners in place and other prisoners force them to turn or leave them to their fate, these prisoners stand out to the audience, their fear palpable. The prisoner wearing Joan’s hat pointedly faces forward for the whole parade and begins to weep, making her significance clear to the audience.

One thing that is not made clear to the audience is the passage of time. If the audience have not previously read the play, the performance does not make it clear that each scene is several years after the previous. It is also not obvious that the Joan in the hatmakers is the same little girl from the previous scene as no names are given

during the dialogue. This performance particularly thwarts the understanding of the passage of time by including young Joan between scenes 2 and 3. With the metal container centre stage, the young girl can be seen uncovering a rifle, checking it over and recovering it. She then leaves it by the wall of the box and walks off stage. When the box lifts to reveal scene 3, Todd takes the rifle and uncovers it. This suggests that young Joan is helping her aunt with the secret she has uncovered, as hinted at at the end of the first scene. This would imply that scene 1 and scene 3 are happening at a similar time rather than many years apart, and therefore it becomes impossible to reconcile the younger and older Joan's as a single person. Whilst this doesn't detract too much from the performance itself, it does take something away from the play. The growth of Joan as a character is an important aspect of the play – from an innocent young child first being given the hint of something bad happening, to the naïve hatmaker being introduced to the corruption of the government and finally to the dishevelled young woman afraid of everything around her. The descension of society as the play goes on is also an important aspect that is underrepresented in this performance. A prior understanding of the play is essential to understand the nuances of the changing years represented in the play. For example, animals are mentioned in scene 1, particularly birds. The aunt says that “people come here specially to watch birds” (p. 12), showing the world to be largely the same as reality. However, by scene 3, animals have chosen sides in the war and it is the “ospreys here who will have seen you arrive” (p. 42) suggesting a complete shift in the relationship between animals and people. Because this performance does not address the temporal shifts in the play, the increasing chaos of the world is not understood in context. The fear this performance creates is still palpable however it loses the aspect of fear that the audience's reality could also slide in the same direction as the play.

## Bibliography

Churchill, Caryl. *Far Away*. Nick Hern Books: London, 2014.