

Seeing Double: Theatrical Conceits in *Cloud Nine*

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Games of self-reference, increasingly common in modern art and literature, are a long-standing tradition in the theatre. Well before physicists, philosophers, and psychologists jeopardized comfortable notions of meaning, integrity, and permanence, theatre artists were subverting these ideas through a logical extension of their own practices, ever inclining toward a view of the human condition as fundamentally theatrical. Caryl Churchill's dramaturgical strategies continue the sophistication of this trend. Her deployment of conspicuously theatrical pretense throughout *Cloud Nine* evokes a persistent double-vision that not only capitalizes on the essential quality of her medium, but also illuminates a multiplicity of issues inherent in her work.

Theatrical experiment figured even in the germination of *Cloud Nine*. Churchill's work on the play began in conjunction with members of the Joint Stock Theatre Group during a three week workshop on sexual politics.¹ She describes the nature and extent of this collaboration as follows:

. . . the starting point for our research was to talk about ourselves and share our very different attitudes and experiences. We also explored stereotypes and role reversals in games and improvisations, read books and talked to other people. Though the play's situations and characters were not developed in the workshop, it draws deeply on this material, and I wouldn't have written the same play without it.²

The script that evolved from this process moves beyond self-referential joking and the commonplace that "all the world's a stage" to rely almost exclusively on the refractions and mechanisms of live performance for its impact. Through a contrived exhibition of theatrical transparencies, it forces audience

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attention onto qualities, simultaneously artificial, elusive, and despotic, of time, setting, role, and structure.

Theatrical artifice saturates the whole fabric of *Cloud Nine*. Its two acts are separated by a century of time, but Churchill specifies that the characters who recur in Act Two have aged only twenty-five years, thereby suggesting both a figurative continuity and a continued figuration.³ Together with other evidence, stylistic and thematic, of coherence between the diverse acts, this direction implies the inaccuracy of readings or productions inspired by naturalistic promotion of the second act. Robert Asahina's complaint that ". . . the plodding realism of Act Two seems to be motivated more by political than by aesthetic considerations,"⁴ if untypical of audiences in its preference for the temporally alien first act, is typical of a widespread neglect of this unity. Certain premises, devices, and concerns of the piece connect both acts, and these indicate a fundamental covenant of imposture that persists throughout the immaterially licentious and familiar lifestyles of Act Two.

A more provocative critique of the second act, articulated by Elin Diamond in her study of narrative intervention as a rejection of romanticized identity in this play and others, argues contrarily that Churchill's Act Two capitulation to aesthetic closure and narrative teleology undermines the feminist historicist critique of Act One.⁵ Diamond's dissatisfaction with the ideological ramifications of second act developments occurs partly because she overlooks the systemic cynicism that informs the text, especially in performance. If Churchill cheats political and narrative logic for the sake of artistic integrity, she nonetheless achieves her goals of narrative and aesthetic synthesis, and she does so through an intricate manipulation of innovative conceits that merit evaluation on their own terms.

Disparities between the act settings are modulated and theatricalized through the effects of structure and image: the first act, a lampoon of colonial repression and oppression, is set against the primitive sensuality of the African jungle, while the second, a sketch of modern intemperance and volatility, occurs within the manicured, sterile confines of a London city park. Through the juxtaposition of these two milieux, Churchill implies both that the degree of social constraint varies inversely with environmental qualities and that the Act One clearing, which protected "civilization" in the midst of jungle, has become the Act Two clearing, which conserves "nature" in the midst of urban blight. Gross distinctions are thus simultaneously underlined and undermined by the pronounced artifice of their manifestation: a theme that is amplified by prescribed casting incongruities and by other aspects of Churchill's play.

The Act One Victorian outpost population includes three incongruously dressed actors and one doll, who, together with four other actors, portray the members and guests of Clive's patriarchally exemplary household. Churchill explains this casting as follows:

Betty, Clive's wife, is played by a man because she wants to be what men want her to be, and, in the same way, Joshua, the black servant, is played by a white man because he wants to be what whites want him to be. Betty does not value herself as a woman, nor does Joshua value himself as a black. Edward, Clive's son, is played by a woman for a

different reason—partly to do with the stage convention of having boys played by women (Peter Pan, radio plays, etc.) and partly with highlighting the way Clive tries to impose traditional male behavior on him.⁶

The consequent parade of character-actor incongruities operates, especially in performance, as an insidious critique of the Victorian role models and of the arbitrary nature of role-playing, while it simultaneously proclaims the fake, theatrical basis of situations and choices. In this respect, *Cloud Nine* sets in motion the same “whirligig of appearances” that Sartre describes in Genet’s *The Maids*: “the reciprocal de-realization of matter by form and of form by matter.”⁷ However convincing or momentarily transcendent the performances, they are intrinsically exposed as such, so that the audience is confronted by a parallax spectacle of mutual negation.

The dissonance between actor and role, or between posture and reality, not only acquires particular significance in specific cases, but also repeats thematically in various configurations of action and structure. Thus, Betty’s frailty, Joshua’s sycophancy, and Edward’s manliness are always ridiculed by the transparency of their manufacture. These profound incongruities predict the hypocrisy of other character stances, which, in turn, propel the intrigue of the plot. Here, the themes of betrayal and hypocrisy, so eloquently injected through the ironies of setting and casting, re-emerge as chinks in Clive’s propriety and in Harry Bagley’s heroism. In this manner, the artifice of acting pervades all levels of the story, encompassing both its subject and its themes.

The prescribed use of a single actress for the diametrical and complementary Act One roles of Ellen and Mrs. Saunders is emblematic of these effects through its confounding identification of these two characters, one of whom lusts for Betty, the other of whom lusts for Clive, and both of whom refer ultimately to the exertions of the single actress and her costume-change gamut.⁸ Churchill’s metaphor in this case is similar to the one that Pinter employed in his screen adaptation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, in which monumental differences of character and period are concomitantly pronounced and discarded by an identity of substance. In a note that accompanies *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, Churchill describes a different approach with a similar effect:

The characters are not played by the same actors each time they appear. . . . This seems to reflect better the reality of large events like war and revolution where many people share the same kind of experience. . . . When different actors play the parts what comes over is a large event involving many people, whose characters resonate in a way they wouldn’t if they were more clearly defined.⁹

Likewise in *Cloud Nine*, the strong focus on role-playing by virtue of actor eminence, however achieved, operates not only toward particular insights, but also toward universalization of the figures portrayed. The connotations of several actors playing one role and those of one actor playing several roles are, in this respect, similar.

Sexual incongruities in the casting of Act One evoke other paradoxes that emerge chiefly through performance. The homosexual attractions between

characters (Harry Bagley and Edward, and Ellen and Betty) are neutralized according to their enactment by heterosexual pairs of actors, while heterosexual affairs, both conventional and adulterous, between characters (Clive and Betty, and Betty and Harry Bagley) are skewed through portrayal by homosexual actor pairs. By reversing and complicating the audience relationship with these cross-dressed love scenes, Churchill makes clever application of theatrical *Verfremdung* that both distances and enlightens. In this case, Brecht's counsel that the theatre should make the familiar strange and the strange familiar finds an apt example.

Further refractions of character based on the conceit of role-playing occur due to casting track combinations between the first and second acts. Although Churchill has refrained from specifying role combinations, preferring that each production of *Cloud Nine* determine these according to its particular company of actors, she has expressed enthusiasm for the connotations produced by at least two solutions to this problem.¹⁰ Between the Joint Stock and Royal Court productions in London (and Tommy Tune's production in New York duplicated the Royal Court track), only one role combination, Harry Bagley and Martin, remained the same, and the Dallas Theatre Center changed even this combination. Each of the arrangements of this track connotes unique and appropriate significance, so that its configuration may be flexibly decided by circumstance and discretion.

Betty, Edward, and Victoria recur in Act Two, but, because Betty and Edward are now portrayed by actors of the correct sex and because Victoria is now animated by an actress rather than by a doll, Churchill prohibits any continuity between performer and role. Except for Cathy, who requires separate treatment, the remaining characters in the second act are the sexually congruous, newly introduced paramours of the now bisexual Edward and Victoria. Once again, the action turns on sexual intrigue, though, as the reduction of cross-dressed performers suggests, the need for disguise has diminished. As Asahina has noted, Churchill's task in Act Two lies in revealing ". . . how (or whether) sexual behavior is just as entangled with the fate of the Empire today as it was a hundred years ago."¹¹ He indicts the collapse of boundaries between public and private for eliminating "the easiest target of the satirist—hypocrisy," but he underestimates the role of transparent theatricality and the operation of the grotesque Cathy in this act as links with the satirical style of the first, particularly when he states, ". . . Churchill is seemingly stuck with presenting her characters more or less at face value."¹² Whose face does he mean? The presence of mask is accentuated by the commanding reappearance of the Act One performers, now in new roles. Through this device, Churchill retains the focus on role-playing and artifice as a continuing theme, while she achieves a specific (if variable) critique of individual characters that depends on the connotations of track casting and is comparable with the effects of cross-sexual performance in the first act.

Exemplification of the track casting operation is difficult due to its multiple possibilities for role assignment. The Royal Court doubling, which was repeated in New York, will serve, however, to illumine some effects. In these productions, the same actor portrayed the homophobic patriarch Clive in Act

One and his effeminate son Edward in Act Two, while the actress who created Edward in Act One becomes the bisexual sister Victoria, who was enacted by a doll in the first act. The actress who played diametrically complementary Ellen/Mrs. Saunders in Act One returns as the dialectically synthesized Betty in Act Two. Harry, the explorer of external territory, is now Martin, the explorer of internal territory, and Joshua the exploited black has become Cathy the exploited child.

The case of Cathy is peculiar, however, because it is the only role in Act Two prescribed for incongruous casting. Churchill states that, "Cathy is played by a man, partly as a simple reversal of Edward being played by a woman, partly because the size and presence of a man on stage seemed appropriate to the emotional force of young children, and partly, as with Edward, to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered correct behaviour for a girl."¹³ When performed by the actor playing Joshua, four year old Cathy, the daughter of Victoria's lover, Lin, obtains a connection with exploited classes, although this connection is rendered heavily ironic by the actor/role incongruity in both acts. When performed by the actor playing Clive, as was the case in the Joint Stock production, the tracking of Cathy operates chiefly to critique the Act One patriarch. Thus, the former alignment of roles serves primarily to confer meaning on Cathy, while the latter bestows retrospective significance onto Clive. In any track combination, however, the creation of Cathy by an adult male, according to Churchill's directions, hurls the second act outside the pale of naturalism and provides a stylistic link with the first. Here again, Churchill provides a firm clue that subject and style are constant between the acts.

The structural configuration of *Cloud Nine* is boldly artificial, and, as such, focuses attention on its own conceits. Aside from its conspicuous bisection, the play conforms overall with a dialectical scheme of action, and repeats this paradigm in each of its acts, which consequently trace roughly parallel developments. Act One proposes a rigidly ordered Victorian social system that is contradicted not only through its mode of presentation, but also by its subsequent development. The initial picture, already contaminated by adumbrative disguises, goes haywire as the action unfolds. Patriarch Clive molests his feminist neighbor, while his best friend buggers his houseboy and his son, and his governess (played by the same actress as his mistress) seduces his wife. Joshua's secret insubordinations reveal further ruptures in the social order, which, once betrayed (here, both by Joshua's actions and by Churchill's conceits), is doomed to collapse. Although Clive, by forcing the marriage of his homosexual cronie to his homosexual governess, manages a superficial reinstatement of the Queen's order, his authority has been weakened by its own admission of bad faith, and the act ends in his apparent assassination by Joshua.

The second act is more a study of paralysis and decay than of mutiny and rupture, but it, too, follows a dialectical pattern, however diluted by the tide of nausea that accompanied existential insights.¹⁴ In this act, the revolts are subtler, and they are largely absorbed by the sponge of liberal adaptability that characterizes our times. Once again, stable, conventional relationships deteriorate and regroup, only to take a third, synthetic configuration as the

story concludes. Victoria's marriage with Martin, already debilitated by lassitude and by Martin's self-centered, sexually trendy perorations, dissolves into a succession of menages. Edward's stormy relationship with Gerry (sometimes a pairing of the same actors who enacted Betty and Clive in Act One) serves to underscore the continuing tyranny of role models, especially when Gerry accuses Edward of "getting to be like a wife," and when Edward confesses to Victoria that he thinks he's a lesbian. These permutations of living arrangements eventually resolve into an improvised inclusiveness that is subordinated to Betty's epiphanic abandonment of the unseen Clive and to her embrace of all behaviors, present and past.

Between the two acts, a grander dialectic is shaped, testing first the corset of order and then the flabbiness of freedom. In the final embrace of Betty I and Betty II, the play concludes its movement toward harmonizing apparent polarities and incongruities through revelation of essential unity and acceptance of superficial difference.¹⁵ To the extent, however, that Churchill has exhibited these movements and revelations as the product of conspicuous artistic manipulation, they contain a sarcasm that modulates their apparent naivete.

The dialectical patterns formed within and between the two acts exhibit additional contrivances that suggest Churchill is parading her dramaturgical conceits along with those of the theatre in order to focus attention on artifice as a subject. Each act, for example, contains a scene in which the world is viewed through alternative, occult perspectives; Joshua provides a tribal version of cosmogony in Act One, and the Edward-Victoria-Lin menage holds an Act Two seance for the purpose of invoking the goddess Isis. The ghost that is summoned forth by their incantations reminds us that British colonial acquisitiveness persists today, although Ireland has replaced Africa as its principal manifestation.¹⁶ As a structural device, the ghost of Lin's soldier brother inserts vestigial themes of exploitation into the domestic apathies of the second act, while it also adumbrates future ghosts, visitors from Act One, who will connect the characters with their historical (if sometimes ironic) continuity and significance. Through the conspicuous theatricality and artificiality of these occurrences, Churchill illuminates her own artistry as a central issue of the piece, and thereby maneuvers the role of choice—artistic, theatrical, political, sexual, and existential—into primary question. The pre-eminence of her craft jibes with the visibility of the actors, and together these pronounced revelations of mechanics amount to a Brechtian critique of inevitability, exposing the acts of will beneath their systematization.

Instances of direct address, an obviously self-referential strategy, likewise occur in both acts. Act One opens with a stagey rendition of a patriotic hymn, sung by members of Clive's household whom he subsequently introduces to the audience. Both Betty and Edward's lover, Gerry, confront the audience with ribald soliloquies in the second act, and Cathy punctuates the action with one or two dirty ditty solos, depending on which version of the script is used.¹⁷ These interruptions of the story are located to proclaim its conceits at points where these might be obscured by audience expectations or sympathies. Thus, the play begins with an announcement of its artifice, and returns periodically to such open self-consciousness in Act Two, where its milieu becomes more seductively familiar and illusory.

However similar the structures of the two acts, their temporal schemes reveal significant differences. Churchill seems to attribute this shift at least partly to a change in the sexual guard: "The first act, like the society it shows, is male dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays. The uncertainties and changes of society, and a more feminine and less authoritarian feeling, are reflected in the looser structure of the act."¹⁸ Time in the first act evokes continuity, where time in the second is fractured and accelerated, captured in a montage of scenes from a much longer period. These contrasting time signatures, whatever their relationship to sexual hierarchy, reflect the natures of their eras, evoking what McLuhan termed the problem of modern "compartmentalization" of experience, or what the Madwoman of Chaillot described as the destruction of "space with telephones and time with airplanes." As sensations inherent in topical and temporal experience, the converse depictions of continuity and pace are accurately gauged. Furthermore, the dissimilarities of time, like those of setting, are partly harmonized by contrapuntal situations in each of the acts; thus, the leisure quality in Act One generates frenzy, while the kaleidoscopic pattern of Act Two produces ennui. As before, Churchill's game of artistic flamboyance calls attention to itself and serves simultaneously to pronounce and undermine the qualities of her fictional world.

Churchill's exploitation of theatricality as a metaphor in *Cloud Nine* yields a clear view of her themes and strategies. To the extent that these resemble Pinter's work on the screenplay for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which likewise contrasts Victorian and modern societies through the conceit of role-playing, the two scripts might be compared for their remarkable coincidence of subject and approach. If Pinter reproduced the temporal double-vision of John Fowles's diachronic novel by creating the self-referential film-within-a-film vehicle for the story, then Churchill's application of transparent theatricalities to her diachronic material suggests a shared sensibility. Indeed, both works focus the role of choice as an artistic, historical, and existential problem, and both feature the phenomenon of role-playing as a signification of insidious artifice. Fowles's meta-novel and Pinter's meta-movie are primarily concerned with willful fictionalization of experience, where Churchill's meta-theatre operates more toward a revelation of mask, but these themes are clearly conjunctive, and they are present in both works.¹⁹

Comparison with the screenplay for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* helps to reveal a concluding theme in *Cloud Nine*, achieved through the conceits of theatricality. The metaphor of theatre, like Pinter's metaphor of film-making, animates a view of the subject as a problem of both epistemology and ontology. Thus, our knowledge and impressions of the past are shaped quite literally by the attitudes and materials of the present, while the past is revealed, somewhat conversely, as an identical, synchronic phenomenon. This notion of the past as both present and absent is, of course, Pinter's bag, but it is equally a convention of *Cloud Nine*. However overwhelming the evidence of change between the acts, Churchill characterizes this metamorphosis as superficial; the reappearance of the same actors, the emphatic conceit of disguise or role-playing, the recurrence (if inversion) of the clearing, and the repetition of structural, thematic, and situational patterns in both acts

suggest the permanence of underlying phenomena.²⁰ The relationship between the two acts is one of simultaneous revolution and inalteration. Thus, the discomfiting juxtaposition of these two points in time contains signs, however altered, of continuity and similarity; if life has transmogrified, its precursors are recognizable in its earlier forms. Furthermore, Churchill's depiction of the two periods as the effects of conspicuous fiction renders the artifice of their envisaging. In one blow, the distance is evoked, and erased.

Existentialists have typically favored the theatre for its innate revelation of false premises and modal championship of artificial choice. *Cloud Nine*, like much of Churchill's work, applies and transcends its particular devices toward a statement of metaphysical concerns that is superior, through its exploitation of mode in combination with subject, to more conventional treatments of these themes. The presence of sexual artifice in *Cloud Nine* is primarily metaphoric, and cooperates with theatrical metaphors to reveal deeper conceits in the social fabric that are not at all limited to postures based on sex or political circumstance. Although Churchill's intention that the play reveal ". . . the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression, which Genet calls 'the colonial or feminine mentality of interiorised repression'"²¹ is evident in the text, her dramaturgical advance lies in her simultaneous critique and manifestation of both ideological issues and the conventions of the bourgeois stage. By confronting her audience with an ingeniously contrived double-vision, she effects a provocative and subversive interplay between material and mode that parades her conceits to reveal faking on a metaphysical scale.

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Notes

1. Although her earliest plays are essentially conventional socialist-feminist dramas, often written for radio broadcast, Churchill began to experiment with modes of theatricality around the time of *Vinegar Tom*, which was written in 1976 as a collaboration with Monstrous Regiment, a feminist theatre company. Her subsequent plays, including *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), which she wrote, like *Cloud Nine* (1978) and *Fen* (1982), in conjunction with Joint Stock; *Traps* (1976); *Softtops* (1978); and *Top Girls* (1982), continue this experimentation with the resources and rhetoric of theatrical modes. In her introduction to the Methuen anthology of her plays (*Plays: One* xii), she describes this period of collaboration with theatre companies as a "watershed" in her playwriting career.

2. Caryl Churchill, *Plays: One* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 245.

3. Churchill cites two reasons for this confounded time scheme: "I thought the first act would be stronger set in Victorian times, at the height of colonialism, rather than in Africa during the 1950s. And when the company talked about their childhoods and the attitudes to sex and marriage that they had been given when they were young, everyone felt that they had received very conventional, almost Victorian expectations and that they had made great changes and discoveries in their lifetime" (246). Because my approach in this argument is toward detection of the artistic integrity of the schismatic whole, and perhaps because I read a cynicism in the second act that Churchill herself does not recognize, I must, however, reject her claims about "great changes and discoveries." The theatrical conceits of the script (along with much of its matter) undermine any suggestion of progress, except as an illusion created by props and pageantry.

4. Robert Asahina, "Theatre Chronicle," *The Hudson Review* 34 (1981-2): 566.

5. Elin Diamond, "Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras," *Theatre Journal* 37 (1985): 278-79.

6. Churchill 245.

7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon, 1963) 614.

8. Diamond's discussion of the significance, thematic and theatrical, of this doubling is astute: "Despite their obvious differences, they are two versions of female marginality, virtual doubles. Sharing the same body they must never meet—the theatrical convention (of double

casting) abets the coercive narrative of female subjugation" (278). Churchill, herself, notes that, "The doubling of Mrs. Saunders and Ellen is not intended to make a point so much as for sheer fun—and of course to keep the company to seven in each act" (246).

9. Churchill, 184-85.

10. Churchill 247.

11. Asahina 566.

12. Asahina 566.

13. Churchill 246.

14. Churchill sees this act in a more positive light (246), and Diamond registers some dismay over her reading of a similar (politically rejected) optimism over political and sexual progress (279). As before, I am arguing the presence of a modal and material cynicism that both unifies the play and sabotages its invocations of progress.

15. Again, Diamond denounces this embrace for its promotion of tidy signification over a more disturbing narrativity and critique (279). While I share her chagrin over this invitation of audience complacency through a "you've come a long way, baby" emblem of political and aesthetic naivete, and while the political and artistic sensibilities of the script might have led to a different (more savvy?) conclusion, *Cloud Nine* exhibits an appropriate integrity that warrants examination of its peculiar merits.

16. I am honor-bound to note that, for whatever reason, Churchill describes the ghost's intrusion as a signal of "the bitter end of colonialism" (246). Both in the context of British politics in Northern Ireland (and elsewhere) and in the context of the play's attack on imperialism, this notion of the soldier ghost's operation seems absurd.

17. *Cloud Nine* has been published five times in slightly different versions, mostly to account for track casting variations: Pluto/Joint Stock (1979), Pluto/Joint Stock/Royal Court (1980), Pluto Plays (1983), Fireside Bookclub (1984), and Methuen, Inc. (1985).

18. Churchill 246.

19. For further discussion of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in terms of these themes and forms, see my *Making Pictures: The Pinter Screenplays* (Ohio State UP, 1985).

20. Diamond's contention (278-79) that the synchronic intrusions in Act Two imply a thematic apotheosis of change seems to overlook the modal cynicism underneath this idea. The artifice pronounced by these obvious theatrics tends also to characterize Betty II's female transcendence as a false contrivance, and provides some ironic refraction of romanticized progress.

21. Churchill 245.