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"Nobody Sings About It": In Defense of the Songs in  
Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*

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*This performance study examines the thematic relevance and theatrical potential of the seven songs interspersed throughout *Vinegar Tom*, Caryl Churchill's feminist "play about witches with no witches in it." Most critics agree that much of the play's feminist message is centralized in the songs; without them, the play is little more than a historical drama about the Essex witch trials of the seventeenth century.*

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Interspersed throughout the twenty-one scenes of *Vinegar Tom*, Caryl Churchill's 1976 "play about witches with no witches in it,"<sup>1</sup> are seven songs which serve as twentieth-century commentary on its characters and situations. Critics agree that the play's feminist message is centralized within these songs; without them, the play is little more than a historical drama about the Essex witch trials of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, despite the considerable critical attention which has been given to their literary value, a surprisingly large percentage of theatrical reviewers have dismissed the songs in performance as extraneous diversions from the plot rather than as integral Brechtian devices of "defamiliarization" or as part of an early stylistic experiment by one of the most prestigious dramatists of the past three decades. My findings as director of the play in early 1997 have led me to a performative analysis of the songs in *Vinegar Tom* which employs some commonly-overlooked concepts of Brechtian perform-

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ance theory, a close examination of the paratexts within Helen Glavin's musical score and the published production notes by Churchill and the feminist theatrical troupe Monstrous Regiment. Not only does such an investigation provide insights into the thematic relevance of the songs as intrinsic components of the play's overall message and efficacy, but it also ventures into the more subjective inquiry as to their theatrical potential in praxis.

In summary, *Vinegar Tom* relates the story of a poor single mother, Alice Noakes, who becomes the scapegoat for all of the social and moral ills of her rural English town when a jealous neighbor, Margery, falsely accuses her and her mother, Joan, of practicing witchcraft. Soon a professional witch-hunter, Henry Packer, and his capitalistic female partner, Goody Haskins, descend upon the community, whipping up hysteria and purging the perceived evil from the town through a charismatic blend of religious rhetoric and public torture. In the end, Alice and her mother are hanged, as are any other women who belong to the disenfranchised segments of the village society and whose mere presence upsets the delicate sensitivities of the emerging bourgeoisie. This storyline is complemented by a subplot involving the "cunning woman" Ellen, whose practice of holistic healing is demonized, only to be usurped and assimilated by emerging patriarchal systems of commercial medical care. Ellen, like Alice and Joan, is accused of witchcraft for her beliefs, even though every other character in the play secretly enlists her aid for various ailments.

Those eradicated include the homeless, unwed mothers, strong-willed widows, a frightened young girl who has ended an unwanted pregnancy through abortion, and healers and midwives. The only accused female character who eludes this grisly end is Betty, the young daughter of a wealthy aristocrat whose only escape from death is a loveless marriage. Concluding the play is a misogynist vaudevillian burlesque scene featuring two women in male drag portraying the historical Inquisitors Hienrich Kramer and James Sprenger, authors of the *Malleus Malleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") who engage each other in music hall patter concerning the Biblical sources for the revulsion of women as the ultimate repositories for sin, rampant lust and debauchery, and demonic powers, all simply because of their sex.

When I began to approach this play in late 1996 as a director rather than as a critic, student, or teacher, I found that my attitudes towards the play, particularly those pertaining to the songs, had changed profoundly. Understandably, when one takes the step to lift a play's action off of the page and place it before an audience in a production setting, a shift of perception is naturally going to occur. But what seemed to be brewing in my mind was more than the mere anal-retentive pragmatism of a director faced with an

impending opening night performance rather than as an abstract literary entity in the imagination. I discovered that I was grappling with a critical dichotomy that I had sensed within the literary discourse surrounding *Vinegar Tom*, one which troubled me because it threatened to stand in the way of achieving a successful production. My concern, quite simply, was that the songs did not work in performance. I found them intellectually intriguing as examples of Churchill's employment of Brechtian performance theory to achieve her political ends as a feminist dramatist. I was able to examine them in relation to the historical scenes of the play and note their coarse irony and flagrant defiance of the patriarchal traditions of Aristotelian theatrics. In all of these literary matters, a wealth of Churchill scholarship supported my academic convictions, but as I searched for the same sense of interpretive confidence regarding the place of the songs as performance texts, the voices of the critics either became silent or suddenly skeptical.

What had previously been regarded by Helene Keyssar as "Churchill's most accessible play and her most straightforwardly feminist work" (91) became a "playtext [which] is not strong enough to withstand the breaking of its rhythms and antagonism of the musical interludes . . . [and] does not override the conflict of its dramatic and musical pitches," in David Zane Mairowitz's estimation (24). Janelle Reinelt's astute observation that the song technique employed in the drama mirrored Brecht's style by "emphasising the possibilities for intervention and change" (44) was undermined by Michael Coveney's overshadowing assertion that "The music, admittedly entertaining in itself, spells out the fact that we all need to find something to burn: if not a witch, then perhaps a woman, a black, or a Jew. Such sentiment, although arguably admirable, is hardly achieved in the play itself. Or rather, it is *potentially* achieved and then tossed away in righteous overstatement." Coveney not only quotes directly from the musical number, "Something to Burn," in his evaluation, but he states his case using the same language and tactics as the songs' advocates as well. Of course, every text is going to have its defenders and detractors, but the trend which made itself evidently clear in this battle of words was that the majority of the champions of Churchill's work seemed to be basing their judgment solely on the merits of the text, yet the more hostile opposition seemed to have one very significant thing in common: they were all forming their opinions as a result of actually attending a performance of *Vinegar Tom*.

Despite the trepidation I felt as a consequence of this analytical double-speak, I was convinced that the songs could indeed work in performance and set about to validate my conviction through the approaching audition and rehearsal process. The source of my greatest fears was the blatant didacticism within the song lyrics. An interview with Gillian Hanna, not

only a founding member of Monstrous Regiment, the feminist troupe with whom Churchill collaborated to create *Vinegar Tom*, but also the actor who originated the role of Alice, reveals the political rationale behind this sermonic quality:

[W]e didn't want to allow the audience to get off the hook by regarding it as a period piece, a piece of very interesting history. Now a lot of people felt their intelligence was affronted by that. They said, "I don't know why these people have to punctuate what they are saying by these modern songs. We're perfectly able to draw conclusions about the world today from historical parallels." Actually, I don't believe that and, in any case, we can't run that risk. For every single intelligent man who can draw parallels, there are dozens who don't. It's not that they can't. It's that they won't. (9-10)

Sue Beardon, another voice from the Monstrous Regiment collective, seconds this saying, "Quite consciously, in a very perverse manner, we decided to break the form completely apart. . . . We didn't want to allow the audience to ever get completely immersed in the stories. . . . We wanted to make them continually aware of our presence, of our relationship to the material, which was combative, anguished" (qtd. in Itzin 276). Not only does this tactic make the audience aware of the "presence" of the actors, but of the "present" as well, both as a political construct in time but also in terms of its participation in the intrinsically artificial fabrication of theatre. As a scholar, I had been able to reconcile myself to the existence of the textual incongruities that the songs represented, but as a director I had to determine a way to embrace them as something more tangible. I eventually found this seemingly unnameable commodity through an application of a heightened, stylized theatricality to the songs which led to a greater sense of overall *fun*, which in turn liberated them from the mire of moralistic discourse.

The language of the songs is unrestrained, coarse, sexually explicit, and adversarial, referentially linking the events in the historical scenes to late twentieth-century feminist concerns such as reproductive rights, the dehumanizing effects of the male gaze, menstruation, and the slavery of seemingly inescapable domestic obligations. The effect of this is the conjuring up of a jarring self-consciousness that forces the audience to think about its own prejudices and inhibitions in relation to those on stage. Bertolt Brecht, the pioneer of such techniques in drama, states,

A good way of judging a piece of music with a text is to try out the different attitudes or gests with which the performer ought to deliver the individual sections: politely or angrily, modestly or contemptuously, approvingly or argumentatively, craftily or without calculation. For this the most suitable gests are as common, vulgar, and

banal as possible. In this way one can judge the political value of the musical score. (105)

Accordingly, the first song in *Vinegar Tom*, "Nobody Sings," traces the progression of the menstrual cycle from a young woman's fears and confusion surrounding her first period to an old woman's depression and anger following her entry into menopause. Churchill's subject matter, though unusual enough, is expanded to shocking proportions through its use of profanity, as in the fourth verse:

Do you want your skin to wrinkle,  
And your cunt get sore and dry?  
And they say it's just your hormones  
If you cry and cry and cry.  
Nobody sings about it  
but it happens all the time. (142)

As a girl, this reproductive capacity is an embarrassment to be hidden away in shame. As she matures, her appetite for lust grows just as her physical beauty begins to fail. Finally, when she loses the ability to bear children, she is discarded and stripped of her sexual identity. As the narrative voice of the song becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her lot in life, the language becomes angrier and more irreverent. In the end, she discovers that she has lived an entire life without ever being seen as a distinct individual, but instead as an emblem of the abstract concept of "woman."

The production notes in both the published text of *Vinegar Tom* and the acting edition provide the clearest indications of *how* the songs function with regard to temporality and sociopolitical attitude. Churchill's first and most emphatic assertion regarding the play's performance centers around the indication that "The songs, which are contemporary, should if possible be sung by actors in modern dress. They are not part of the action and not sung by the characters in the scenes before them" (133). This conforms to her admonition in the setting description that "the songs take place in the present" (132). The production note she provides in the Samuel French acting edition varies slightly from this, but only in so much as it contextualizes this position as a response to two American productions which seem to have presented the play more or less as a traditional musical rather than as a Brechtian "play with music" (Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 68–69). Here Churchill primarily objects to the performance of the songs within a historical idiom that is not temporally-removed from the seventeenth-century setting of the dramatic episodes. Thus, "modern dress" and "the present" may be interpreted as relative terms whose purpose is less to mandate that the songs take place on today's date as to distinguish the setting as a late twentieth-century one in which the feminist discourse of the lyrics may

possess their own political context. In short, it can be reasonably implied that the scenes of the play are intended to be a representation of history and historicity, while the songs are meant to be a more evocative, metatheatrical device that allows for a sense of critical distance and commentary.

In the reviews I have examined of *Vinegar Tom*, productions tend to take a prescriptive view of these notes and seek to emulate the original Monstrous Regiment performance detail for detail. The doubling of cast members tends to remain the same as it was in 1976, and the songs are generally performed by actors in their street clothes who assault the audience with direct-address, Living Theatre-esque guerrilla tactics. As Churchill does not demand either of these details specifically, I sensed a connection between such literal readings of the stage directions and the aforementioned performative dissatisfaction with the songs by reviewers. Indeed, when the singers in my production attempted this style of performance for extended periods within a song during rehearsals, the messages gravitated toward tedium and the songs lost their ability to entertain, ultimately forfeiting their ability to alter an audience's attitude about the play's issues. However, when we allowed our imaginations to wander and ventured into a heightened sense of self-conscious theatricality, the songs transcended the political message of the play and became something more integrated as an integral element of the performance, without which the power of *Vinegar Tom* would be sadly incomplete.

*Vinegar Tom* employs some of the most direct homage to the dramaturgical and theoretical techniques of Bertolt Brecht of any of Churchill's plays. The episodic nature of *Vinegar Tom*'s structure prevents the audience from developing a strong, positive emotional attachment to any of the characters or situations, thereby exemplifying the Brechtian concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Originally translated into English by John Willett as "alienation effect," this term actually owes more to the Russian appellation *ostrannenija*, which means "making strange," than to its more exclusive English counterpart. Peter Brooker suggests that Willett's English terminology "is an inadequate and even misleading translation" and proposes instead the alternate terms "defamiliarization" or "estrangement" (193). Such semantic bantering is not mere academic babble; it is legitimized by the derogatory nature commonly associated with the term "alienation" in the late twentieth century. That which alienates not only separates objectively (a hint at Brecht's meaning) but excludes as well. Thus, Brooker's attempt at reinterpretation brings us closer to Brecht's original intent, "Alienating an event or character . . . means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them" (qtd. in Brooker 191). Lisa Merrill applies this to Churchill's methodology in *Vinegar Tom*:

it is this very estrangement or alienation which Churchill intends. According to Brecht, epic-style acting, with a direct address to the spectator, and the use of songs which comment upon rather than support the action of a play, serve to awaken an audience from what Brecht regarded as a false emotional empathy with characters and theatrical illusion. Instead, these techniques encourage a critical and rational response to the conditions portrayed. (81)

Like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Vinegar Tom* examines a historically-distant and culturally-removed scenario through the perspective of a contemporary ideological debate. From her initial indication of setting at the beginning of the playtext, Churchill draws a firm dividing line between the world of the scenes and that of the songs: "The play takes place over a period of a few weeks in the seventeenth century. The songs take place in the present" (132). Thus, the setting acquires a multiplicity of possible meanings—literal, metaphorical, and sociopolitical—all intersecting simultaneously in the commentary provided by the lyrics. As in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the songs in Churchill's drama interrupt the plot at key moments of the highest suspense and dramatic climax in order to place the historical events within an ahistorical point of view, through the persona of a third party which has nothing personally invested in the course of events being played out on stage. Churchill's application of such tactics in the incongruities of *Vinegar Tom* echo Brecht's view of music's place in the epic theatre when he states, "For its part, the music must strongly resist the smooth incorporation which is generally expected of it and turns it into unthinking slavery. Music does not 'accompany' except in the form of comment" (203).

Another primary Brechtian concept which can be readily applied to *Vinegar Tom*'s stylistic melange is the idea of the *Gestus*, or "sociopolitical gesture." Brecht states, in perhaps his clearest demarcation of the term, "A language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men" (104). In other words, a metaphorical gesture accompanied by a text loses its neutrality and takes on a wider political scope when it absorbs and reflects the social attitudes of the interpersonal dynamic of man relating to the greater body of mankind. When referring to the gestic environment of *Vinegar Tom*, the critics have generally confined their examinations to the scenes and refrained from applying this concept to the songs. The most commonly cited example of *Gestus* in the play is Margery's butter-churning in scene 4, in which this act takes on a primal, ritualistic, sexual significance as she continually pumps the churn handle up and down between her legs and chants, "Come, butter, come, come, butter, come" (143). Into this act is concentrated all of

Margery's sexual dysfunction, unrequited passion, monetary greed, and sublimated jealous rage, which she looses on the community in her wild accusations of witchcraft.

Under the wise counsel of my dramaturg, Cynthia Richards, I attempted to locate the most tangible *Gestus* in each scene in order to clarify the intended sociopolitical goals of the author from episode to episode. An epiphany occurred to me late one night as I read through the lyrics of the songs and found that within each musical number, as in the scenes, existed a single, discernible gesture which could be expanded to take on social significance and also provide practical clues to blocking/choreographic possibilities. The refined gestures which resulted from this brainstorm would develop into the performative throughlines which would unify each of the numbers in the final production. For example, the central gestic image of "Nobody Sings" which we retained for the performance came from the often-deleted first verse: the image of an unblemished white sheet became the springboard for a series of archetypal gestures whose association was primarily traditionally female in nature. The two singers stylistically billowed the sheet between them, systematically folding the cloth until it was a minuscule fabric square on the ground. As rehearsals progressed, these gestures began to absorb deeper significance as the singers solidified their roles and their personal relationship to the texts of the songs. What was once the routine repetition of a mundane laundry chore became the delicate manipulation and eventual marginalization of the female identity, eventually terminating in its ultimate confinement and solitude as the old woman in the lyrics cries out,

Nobody ever saw me,  
 She whispered in a rage.  
 They were blinded by my beauty, now  
 They're blinded by my age.  
 Oh, nobody sings about it,  
 But it happens all the time. (142)

Although the notion of the *Gestus* permits a level of practical application to the integration of the songs into *Vinegar Tom's* performance, it is my opinion that the oft-neglected Brechtian conceit of *Spass*, or fun, contributes a valuable element of interpretive freedom to their ultimate success. As much as he believed that theatre should be a political art form, Brecht also believed that it should be entertaining as well as didactic. One of his earliest theoretical propositions was the idea of a "smoker's theatre," one which owed more to the venue of the sports arena than the opera hall. Two maxims from his essay "Emphasis on Sport" read, "*A theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense*" and "*nobody who fails to*



get fun out of his activities can expect them to be fun for anybody else" (7; emphasis in original). The immediate application to Churchill's work lies within feminist critic Helene Keyssar's astute warning:

The songs, written in collaboration with Helen Glavin, succeed in shifting attention from the horror of events unraveling on stage to the contemporary oppression of women, but they are *inappropriately didactic if not properly performed*. Churchill attributes the failure of the songs, in productions in Northampton and San Francisco, to their presentation by characters in seventeenth century costume. (93; emphasis mine)

The danger in presenting any kind of didactic work on stage is that you run the risk of alienating your audience from the subject matter (another reason I prefer not to use Willett's translation of *Verfremdungseffekt*). Churchill's lyrics, which are, in a word, *preachy*, point an accusing finger at the audience and demand revolutionary action, but they also possess substantial wit and poetry. The audience must remain receptive to the theatrical event they are watching if its political messages are to take root in their conscious or subconscious thinking. One may challenge the audience, disagree with the audience, provoke the audience, even "distance" the audience, but if one's thesis is to be heard, understood, and eventually integrated into the society beyond the theatre doors, one must never disengage the audience's vital connection to the performative event at hand. Brecht opposed mindless entertainment that hypnotized its audience into a false sense of security, but he also knew the value of keeping the audience connected with the theatre on a level which retains its identity *as* entertainment. Martin Esslin sums this up well in *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*:

the audience must be *discouraged* from losing its critical detachment by *identification* with one or more of the characters: the opposite of identification is the maintenance of a separate existence by being kept apart, alien. . . . To keep the audience relaxed and yet receptive, to stimulate their critical faculties and to make them think, the epic theatre employs a variety of means. (115, 117)

In order to achieve this Brechtian sense of didactic political power in *Vinegar Tom*, I attempted to create the greatest possible sense of separation between the scenes and the songs, without completely divorcing the latter from the structure of the drama. I made the choice to cast two female actors to depict the singers, but who would not appear in the "play proper" as characters. This necessity for a clearly defined physical division between these two worlds was also a primary concern for the entire production design team.

The most explicit example of this division was the decision by scenic designer Drew Williamson to divide the playing area into two parts: (1) a downstage region at ground level whose floor was decorated with a painted image of a seventeenth-century farmer's almanac calendar/zodiac—this was where the naturalistic scenes of the play were performed; and (2) a raised platform upstage with a traditional proscenium and red velvet curtain on a pulley track system—this was solely the theatrical domain of the singers. On the whole, the production employed the use of traditional vaudeville devices, such as placards set up on an easel at the upstage right corner of the “scene playing area,” decorated with woodcuts of various seventeenth-century images of witchcraft, which delineated each of the scenes thematically. In addition, an aged oleo backdrop on which were painted the larger-than-life text title “Vinegar Tom” and the classic image of the enigmatic creature labeled “Vinegar Tom” from the illustrated frontispiece of Matthew Hopkins's 1674 book *Discovery of Witches*, loomed behind the singers each time the curtain was drawn. In this way, the audience was reminded that the singers in particular were fully aware of the theatrical construct in which they existed, and therefore, their voices could not be constrained within the traditional barriers of the “fourth wall.” These devices also embody similar visual tactics used by Bertolt Brecht in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, such as titles and projections that denote time, place, and action.

Julie Ann Wagner, *Vinegar Tom*'s costume designer, also attempted to clarify the delineation between past and present, as one of the singers was costumed as a stereotypical 1970s television housewife, with a starched lemon-yellow dress and apron and a massive string of pearls, and the other as a liberated business woman in a lime-green executive suit. These costume choice reflected my reading of “the present” in Churchill's notes to mean the more general “now” of the previous two decades since the composition of the drama. It also allowed for the two characters of the singers to relate to each other satirically in terms of their predetermined role types, as well as for the actors to relate objectively to the sociopolitical context from which the play was written in 1976. By exploring the stereotypical cultural referents associated with the highly feminine Donna Reed-esque wife and mother figure and the more aggressive, bra-burning “radical feminist” cliché, I was able to openly challenge the audience's expectations and social imprinting of what it means to be a woman in today's world by thwarting certain archetypal images most commonly associated with femininity from popular media sources.

The cartoonish quality of these casting and design choices has its historical origin in the performance traditions of the British music hall, American vaudeville, and English pantomime. These standard forms revel in the comic exaggeration of physical traits, the conventions of camp, and a self-referential reliance on stereotype and cliché. Though much of the style of the songs in production was influenced by my own personal fascination at the time with the fantasy sequences of Baz Luhrmann's breakthrough film *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), its conception was sparked by a childhood anecdote from Churchill herself. In describing her family's Christmas holiday rituals, Churchill recalls that she would perform pantomimes, "leaving the bear out front to entertain my parents while I changed the scenery" (qtd. in Weintraub 119). Incorporating this model into a very practical means of developing a presentation style for the songs, I inverted it slightly so that the songs were revealed between scenes with great musical and dramatic flourish.

As with any theatrical piece which utilizes songs in its dramatic structure, one must acknowledge within *Vinegar Tom* the existence of an accompanying musical intertext which may appear to be invisible to the



Singers Melanie Hersh (left) and Ellen Ketels (right) perform "Nobody Sings." *Vinegar Tom*, directed by Robert Neblett, at Washington University in St. Louis, 23–26 Jan. 1997. Photo: Adam Simon. Copyright © 1997.

reader, but is undeniably present during the performance of the text. Composed in 1975 and 1976, the musical score by Monstrous Regiment member Helen Glavin, who incidentally played the role of Goody Haskins in the original production, is dated by its use of popular musical idioms which were prevalent at the time of its conception. The instrumentation is simple: the score calls for a piano, guitar, and congas. This particular arrangement of keyboards, strings, and percussion has the potential of being highly versatile in its ability to perform various disparate musical styles. Its composition is characteristically acoustic and resembles many of the grassroots folk bands of the early to mid-1970s, representing in musical terms the climate of feminist activism of Caryl Churchill's "present" in the opening setting description.

However, within this instrumental construct, Glavin employs the use of easily distinguishable melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic stereotypes in which to provide her own extra-textual commentary on the play's action. "Nobody Sings" is a folk ballad lullaby, complemented by a solo guitar, whose gentle melody in the verses and close harmonies in the chorus comment ironically on the profanity and sexual explicitness of the lyrics. Interestingly, the first verse in the Routledge published edition is non-existent in the Samuel French acting edition and the accompanying original sheet music:

I woke up in the morning,  
 Blood was on the sheet,  
 I looked at all the women  
 When I passed them on the street  
 Nobody sings about it  
 But it happens all the time. (141)

Churchill states her reason for excising of the lyric in the original production "because the song seemed too long. I've put it back because I like the song being about a first period as well as about getting old" (133). Thus, she acknowledges the narrative structure of the song, which serves as a microcosm of the political viewpoint of the play as a whole, is limited by the expurgation of this verse. Rather than beginning from an implicitly personal moment of self-awareness, the singer's first menstrual period, the shorter version of the song becomes more voyeuristic, focusing on a chance encounter with an old woman who rails against the onset of menopause and the consequent social erasure of her sexual persona. If we regard the musical components of *Vinegar Tom* as a contemporary song cycle interjected into the action of the larger drama, this distinction takes on added significance since it functions as the audience's introduction to the musical devices of the play. Hence, employing a subjective voice to welcome the

spectator into the act of open social critique is a much more effective strategy than situating the singers as yet another voice objectifying the women in the play via a perspective that is too removed or unaffected by the events of the historical scenes.

Beyond the narrative construction of “character” in the guise of the singers in *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill and Glavin employ structural devices that serve the play’s tone and message as well. For example, the composition of the song “Oh Doctor” is unusual because it occurs in the play in two parts: a short solo version before scene 6, the leeching of aristocratic rebel Betty, and an extended polyphonic rendition immediately following. The abrupt termination of part 1—the solo voice can barely finish a single musical phrase—foreshadows the silencing of Betty’s distinctive voice once she is victimized by the social constraints of her father’s desires to use her virginity as a commercial bargaining tool towards his own profit. Because she continues to speak her own mind and cannot be controlled through customary methods, Betty is tied to a chair and tortured by a physician who elegizes:

Hysteria is a woman’s weakness. Hysteron, Greek, the womb. Excessive blood causes an imbalance in the humours. The noxious gases which form inwardly every month rise to the brain and cause behavior quite contrary to the patient’s real feelings. After bleeding you must be purged. Tonight you will be blistered. You will soon be well enough to be married. (149)

The leeching can be interpreted as a symbolic lobotomy of Betty’s free will. It continues the themes of “Nobody Sings” as well as anticipating Alice’s public humiliation in the pricking scene in the town square that occurs after the arrival of witchfinder Henry Packer. The simple staging of this abbreviated song in my production involved the dramatic unveiling of a singer, cruelly strapped to a long bench, whose final note was interrupted by the rapid closing of the red curtains as Betty was carried onstage screaming, already tied to the chair and held aloft by doctor’s assistants in a gesture reminiscent of Jewish wedding customs.

Part 2 of “Oh Doctor” continues the debate of reproductive rights, as well as introducing graphic images of the male gaze and the objectification of the feminine persona:

Who are you giving my womb?  
 Who are you showing my breath?  
 Tell me what you whisper to nurse,  
 Whatever I’ve got, you’re making it worse.  
 I’m wide awake, but I still can’t shout.  
 Why can’t I see what you’re taking out?  
 Stop looking up me with your metal eye.

Stop cutting me apart before I die.  
 Stop, put me back.  
 Stop, put me back.  
 Put back my body. (150)

Eerie resonances of gynecological examinations, Chinese foot binding, and ritual female circumcision in tribal traditions are also present in what amounts to a savage Artaudian demonstration of the male subjugation of female emotional, physical, and psychological identity.

Moreover, the pleas to the nurse figure in the lyric foretell the vicious pact between Henry Packer and Goody Haskins, that later manifests itself in degrading physical examinations of their victims' genitalia in search of "the devil's marks." The lyrics also accentuate the stark contrast between their methods and the natural medical techniques of Ellen. The polyphonic, plaintive wails of the singers at the end of the song (juxtaposing cries of "Doctor!" with "Give me back my body" and "I can see myself" in a musical round) typify the internalized desperation of the women in the play, who are ensnared by the patrimonial customs of judging a woman's worth by her physical beauty and reproductive capacity.

The chief *Gestus* I employed in "Oh Doctor (Part Two)" was the comic, yet grotesque, evisceration of a third female singer by the two primary vocalists. Dressed in white medical lab coats and carrying oversized magnifying glasses and stethoscopes, the two main singers predatorily circled the third, who was lashed to a bench by colorful ribbons. Eventually, one pulled a large handsaw from her coat and pretended to saw the third in half, a clownish homage to the spectacle of Las Vegas magical acts. Once the sawing was completed, the first singer reached "into" the third and pulled out a variety of comical objects, including a stuffed white rabbit, a chain of scarves, a bottle of wine, and set of keys, which were judiciously and gracefully collected by the second singer, who functioned as the beautiful doctor's/magician's assistant. With the operation completed, the patient was untied and performed a robotic song and dance with her companions, blindly mimicking their every move in a hypnotic kickline that signified the ultimate enslavement of her will.

The raucous feminine vaudeville of the first few songs in *Vinegar Tom* soon gives way to a somber, terrifying masculinity that mirrors the insidious rise of Puritanism, further exposing a deliberate persecution of the women in the play who refuse to submit to emerging patriarchal political systems. The song which typifies this shift of focus is "Something to Burn," an angelic, hymn-like male solo with piano accompaniment—interestingly, the only male vocal part in the show's score—which rationalizes the violence and prejudice of the scapegoating which occurs in the play, by

expressing the psychological need for humans to look outside of themselves in order to place blame for their own behavioral faults.

Sometimes it's witches, or what will you choose?  
 Sometimes it's lunatics, shut them away.  
 It's blacks and its women and often it's Jews.  
 We'd all be quite happy if they'd go away.  
 Find something to burn.  
 Let it go up in smoke.  
 Burn your troubles away. (154)

That Glavin sets this song in a minor key and concludes it with an *unresolved* progression of notes establishes the music as a political, thematic, and symbolic link to the text. By refusing to find a harmonic, comfortable end to the final musical pattern, Glavin and Churchill create a satirical sense of irony that cautions the audience against the insidious nature of the dangerous prejudices present in the lyrics. Like "Nobody Sings," this is another example of the innate dissonance between the song's musical tone and the rhetoric of its libretto. Additionally, by its aural antithesis to the other songs in the play alone, the male voice of the vocalist should evoke a rudimentary contrast of perspective.

"Something to Burn" is thematically prompted by Jack and Margery's final lines in scene 7, in which the couple initiate their murderous accusations of Joan after their livestock suddenly fall ill:

MARGERY: It [a calf] stinks terrible.

JACK: Stink of witchcraft it is. Burn it up.

MARGERY: We must pray to God to keep us safe from the devil.  
 Praying's strong against witches.

JACK: We'll pray God help us and help ourselves too.

MARGERY: She'll see the fire and smell it and she'll know we're  
 fighting her back, stinking old witch, can't hurt us. (154)

The opportunism and vengeance implicit in their plotting masks itself beneath a pious facade of concern for the restoration of social order in the village by exposing their neighbors' sins, a return to the status quo devoid of wild women with untamed desires to upset the balance of the patriarchal model of civilization.

This religious connotation of this inciting incident was mirrored in my staging of "Something to Burn" by costuming the singer as an altar boy with a crimson cassock and surrounding him with dozens of lit candles. As he named each persecuted group in the second verse, he lit new candles until he was figuratively surrounded by the human flames that had been

snuffed out over the centuries through various holocausts. At the end of the song, he lifted a candle to his face like a cherubic choirboy mouthing a silent prayer, and with delicate sleight of hand, he produced a cigarette from his robes and lit it with the flame. Using the same breath that ended the song, he simultaneously exhaled a large puff of smoke and extinguished the candle with a wry smirk on his face and a devious wink to the audience. The aforementioned allusion to holocaust iconography was directly suggested by a pre-show reading of a list of the women sentenced to death in the Essex witch trials, culminating in the true chronicled account of the historical Alice Noakes. This memorial act was inspired by and meant to recall the annual readings of the names of concentration camp victims during the Jewish Day of Remembrance, Yom HaShoah. Completing this less-than-subtle cycle of satiric resonance, the actor who performed this ritual on a nightly basis was the same actor who would later play Henry Packer and the singer of "Something to Burn."

The female solo "If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me" is a droning patriotic anthem to unadulterated domesticity, espousing that "the country's what it is because / the family's what it is because / the wife is what she is / to her man" (160). An intriguing paratext exists in Helen Glavin's handwritten score for this piece of music: she subtitles it "Marjorie's [sic] Song." This is the only such denotation in the play's orchestration that associates an element of the historical world of the play with that of the songs. Whether this indicates that at one time the actor who originated the role of Margery was intended to sing this number, or that it is an extension of the sociopolitical motifs represented in her character, Glavin's subtitle suggests that the audience clearly should connect her persona with the lyrics. The song is a step-by-step recipe for creating a better society through undeviating obedience to husband and homeland. The singer's steady refrain of "Oh happy family" is a hypnotic mantra that reinforces her convictions, although her true motives are exposed when she admits that she adheres to the status quo so "[t]he horrors that are done will not be done to me" (161). Self-preservation, not devotion, is her driving force, and one can infer that she hopes to avoid persecution by betraying others, much in the same way as those who sought to escape the tyranny of the Nazis or as the citizens of Orwell's dystopian novels condition themselves against "thoughtcrimes."

Structurally, the contemporary commentary of this song emerges from the previous action of scene 12, in which Margery directly accuses Joan of practicing witchcraft. Joan visits Margery's cottage in an attempt to reconcile their past friendship, but is rebuffed by verbal and physical threats, along with baseless allegations that Margery has been bewitched by an evil spell. The primary *Gestus* of this scene is inherently paradoxical: when



Joan arrives, Margery is boiling a vile concoction of urine and feathers outside her cottage. Thus, Margery is endowed with the stereotypical association of the old crone stirring a bubbling cauldron of rancid fluid, while the only brew Joan is guilty of preparing is her own homemade beer. This satirical choice by Churchill clearly suggests that the subsequent song should be taken with a grain of salt and derives its core philosophy from a skewed viewpoint. Whereas the singers begin their commentary at the beginning of *Vinegar Tom* by claiming that “Nobody sings about it, but it happens all the time” that language is echoed and augmented by the lyrics in “If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me”:

Nobody loves a scold,  
nobody loves a slut,  
nobody loves you when you're old,  
unless you're someone's gran.  
Nobody loves you  
unless you keep your mouth shut.  
Nobody loves you  
if you don't support your man. (160)

Yet again, Churchill critiques the assumption that female beauty and self-worth must acquiesce to the desires of a community's male-dominated cultural constructs, which threaten to silence the feminine voice if it does not abide by the accepted conditions of the social norm.

Because of the intrinsically patriotic tone of the music, I wanted to capture a distinctly American idiom in its staging in order to lampoon its sentiments in a manner to which the majority of my audience would relate. At the beginning of the song, the stereotypically feminine singer, Melanie Hersh, stood smiling broadly at an ironing board in her yellow dress, pearls, and apron, and accentuated the steady percussive beat of the music with a mechanical back-and-forth movement of the iron. As she sang, she straightened her hair and clothes to make sure that she was the prettiest housewife she could be, as well as finding moments to march in time with the music and salute an unseen flag in the distance. Eventually, the punch line of her tedious laundry chore was revealed, as she proudly held up the object she has been pressing—an extra-large pair of heavily-starched Fruit-of-the-Loom underwear—and then tossed them into the stage wings in a moment of sheer exhaustion. This image of traditional home life was then inverted by the frantic secretarial scribbling of Ellen Ketels, the “liberated” singer who was seated on the opposite side of the stage taking dictation from an unseen executive. Finally, in a classic “the grass is always greener” moment, both women glanced longingly at each other's lives, ultimately abandoning their separate fates and joining forces in an dynamic tango of independence.

Perhaps it is the chilling song "If You Float" which exhibits the clearest indication of how Helen Glavin's original musical score impacts the interpretation of the song lyrics penned by Caryl Churchill. It is performed by a solo female voice with nothing but congas in the background; in fact, Glavin notates this piece with only a stark melody line in her orchestration. In performance, this song possesses a primal savagery about it; it is suggestive of a desperate tribal chant in supplication to spiritual forces whose meter is maintained only by the constant percussion of the vocalist's own heartbeat. The distanced critical dynamic yielded by this combination of textual content (Churchill's contribution) and musical context (Glavin's) is one of the hopeless victimization of the traditional patriarchal double-standard reflected in the text. Even though this modern woman is permitted to stand alone in a theatre spotlight, crying out through time in order to speak freely for her sisters in the seventeenth-century scenes whose voices are being suppressed, the lyrics suggest that little has changed during the intervening centuries to alleviate the Catch-22 of the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of woman's distinctive voice:

If you float you're a witch  
 If you scream you're a witch  
 If you sink, then you're dead anyway.  
 .....  
 Deny it you're bad  
 Admit it you're mad  
 Say nothing at all  
 They'll damn you to hell. (170)

The ritualistic atmosphere of Glavin's music in this song grants an immediacy to the hysteric paranoia of the surrounding scenes, but it also hints at a sense of primitive fervor lurking just under the surface of those society perceives to be powerless, a feral shamanistic rage which is mirrored in Alice's final monologue before the gallows:

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, I'd wreck their ships all over the world. I shouldn't have been frightened of Ellen, I should have learnt. Oh, if I could meet with the devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power. There's no way for us except by the devil. If only I did have magic, I'd make them feel it. (175)

It was at this moment in the narrative that I took one intentional liberty with Churchill's instructions for the staging of the songs in *Vinegar Tom*. I permitted two of the scene characters in the play to sing "Lament for the

Witches,” which posits the core question, “Who are the witches now?” (175). However, the characters I chose to perform this number were Joan and Ellen, who had just been hanged in the previous scene, after Goody Haskins signaled—in a histrionic moment of Grand Guignol scope indicating a demented glee derived from her chosen profession—the drawing of the curtain to reveal the women swaying limply from the ceiling. Their corpses came back to life and they sang from their nooses, suspended in mid-air, as if whispering from beyond the grave the lyric, “Here we are.” Following the end of the song, they returned to hanging limply in the nooses—a haunting reminder that, despite the political strides that have been made since their deaths, hanging was an irreversible fate met by hundreds of innocent women.

The unrealistic quality of such a choice, combined with its disturbing visual imagery, served to force the audience to contemplate the unhinged quality of Churchill’s feminist aesthetic. This also became a key turning point for the final moments of the play by deliberately shattering the temporal, spatial, and musical conventions that had already been established. Further, the use of these hanging women evoked one of the most basic components of street theatre and political protest by transforming them into living, breathing effigies. I saw this moment of violence as a key scene in



Alice Noakes (Melody Hallman) curses her accusers before the hanging bodies of her mother Joan (Rebecca Novak, right) and the local “cunning woman” Ellen (Elizabeth Daly, left) prior to “Lament for the Witches.” *Vinegar Tom*, directed by Robert Neblett, at Washington University in St. Louis, 23–26 Jan. 1997. Photo: Adam Simon. Copyright © 1997.

the play, not to mention the most visually jarring. Therefore, I wanted the boundary into the "song-land" of the curtained platform to be violated by the historical characters. Once this rift had occurred, the curtain was not drawn shut again for the remainder of the play. The subsequent action then existed in an ambiguous liminal space somewhere between reality and fiction, past and present, etc., a physical conceit which conforms to the innate self-aware theatrical style with which Churchill injects the final scenes of the play, culminating in the musical finale, "Evil Women."

Scene 21, which serves as an introduction to this concluding song, features a macabre vaudevillian medicine show by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (or "Hammer of Witches"). By leaving the hanging women onstage for this scene, their bodies became visual aids for their verse lecture on the flaws of the "weaker sex." Tracing the origins of witchcraft back to the Judeo-Christian theological doctrine of Eve's pivotal and destructive role in the Fall of Man, they champion the male burden of saving "flawed" women from eternal damnation. Dressed in dapper (yet dusty) tuxedos with top hats and canes, the women portraying Kramer and Sprenger delivered the satire in this scene as a series of unending punch lines, complete with canned laughter from the sound system, at one point even playfully hiding behind the bodies of Joan and Ellen in a malevolent game of "peek-a-boo."

"Evil Women" uses its ultramodern (for 1976) style to comment upon the theme of the cinematic projection of male desire onto the "blank screen" of women. *Vinegar Tom's* last song signals the audience that the play is officially over, but boldly dares to ask one final question before the spectators are at liberty to escape from the performance. Changing the focus of its political perspective from the female members of the audience to the male ones, the full cast pointedly demands that the men answer for the sins of their fathers. Essentially, the song entreats the spectators to consider that an individual must accept responsibility for one's own actions and challenges us not to view ideological differences according to gender.

Do you ever get a afraid  
 You don't do it right?  
 Does your lady demand it  
 Three times a night?  
 If we don't say you're big  
 Do you start to shrink?  
 We earn our own money  
 And buy our own drink.  
 Did you learn you were dirty boys, did you learn  
 Women were wicked to make your burn?  
 Satan's lady, Satan's pride,

Satan's baby, Satan's bride,  
Witches were wicked and had to burn. (178-79)

Here Churchill's linguistic games link the historical burning deaths of women accused of witchcraft with the "burning" of male sexual desire and expose past precedents of shifting blame from the perpetrators of persecution to the victims. Masculine sexual performance is linked explicitly to male power, and the fear of inadequacy or Freudian penis envy becomes a motivating force for the scapegoating and demonization of women.

This final song is scored as a disco funk extravaganza for the entire company, similar in sound to "Heaven on Their Minds," the opening number of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's classic rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. For this reason, I chose this moment to be the first time in the play in which the instrumentation of the music incorporated electronic amplification by using an electric guitar, which also propelled the play's context and musical into the late twentieth century. While the previous song ("Lament for the Witches") and scene (the Kramer and Sprenger vaudeville) fractured the boundary between the historical action and the physical territory of the musical commentary, "Evil Women" completed the destruction of all of the play's established theatrical conventions, which metaphorically freed the historical women in the play from the pre-existing limitations of society's rules. The performers began to remove key costume pieces so that they were finally perceived as "actor" rather than "character," in a moment of overtly Brechtian critical "defamiliarization." Then Joan and Ellen were taken down from their nooses and replaced by the cast's male actors, who appeared bare-chested and dressed in skirts. Moreover, the men were gagged so that female voices were the only ones audible. As the final repetition of "Evil women, women, women" progressed in the final twelve measures of the song, each of the female characters filed off stage one by one, leaving the actor playing Alice alone in a spotlight in front of the men in nooses to hiss the final "Women!" at the audience before retreating backstage.

The seven songs in *Vinegar Tom* comprise a musical cycle that must be fully integrated into the action of the play as a whole. By taking clues from Brecht and from Churchill herself, the music can be interpreted as a secondary means of commenting on the historicity of its characters and social constructs. The deliberately intrusive nature of the songs to the rest of the text is inescapable. Unavoidable, too, is their intentionally shocking language. What is not, however, compulsory is that they bore the audience or force viewers into a defensive or closed state of mind. Approaching the play as a director rather than as an academic, I assessed their potential for performative success based upon their ability to function as metatheatrical cabaret pieces. Thereby infusing the songs with their own self-contained

scenarios as well as a self-conscious sense of humor, derived from Churchill's lyrics and Helen Glavin's musical settings, I attempted to challenge myself, my cast, and my audience to contemplate the unsung songs in our own lives. □

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Churchill, *Plays* 130. All quotations from the play are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

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