

# The Imagination of Catastrophe

## Caryl Churchill's Natural History Lessons

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The other afternoon I heard a French political analyst on National Public Radio describe the political forces sweeping her country as the “wind of history.” That phrase called to mind Witold Gombrowicz’s *Operetta*, his post-war play in which, after two world wars and a revolution, a character observes of the new society, “It’s the wind of history.” In *Escaped Alone*, Caryl Churchill’s startling new play, the effects of wind generate unspeakable conditions:

The wind developed by property developers started as breezes on the cheeks and soon turned heads inside out. . . . Buildings migrated from London to Lahore, Kyoto to Kansas City, and survivors were interned for having no travel documents. Some in the whirlwind went higher and higher, the airsick families taking selfies in case they could ever share them.

The apocalyptic world that the play depicts in several short, narrative segments within an otherwise recognizable dramatic setting has a frightening air of reality to it, with the ecological chaos of Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000) now extended to a global scale. Churchill writes plays not about what is, but what can be. Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, caught in a wind storm called progress, pushes him unwittingly into the future while surveying the wreckage of the past. *Escaped alone* is a play whose varieties of time are wedged between possible futures and possible pasts while yet distilling the present moment.

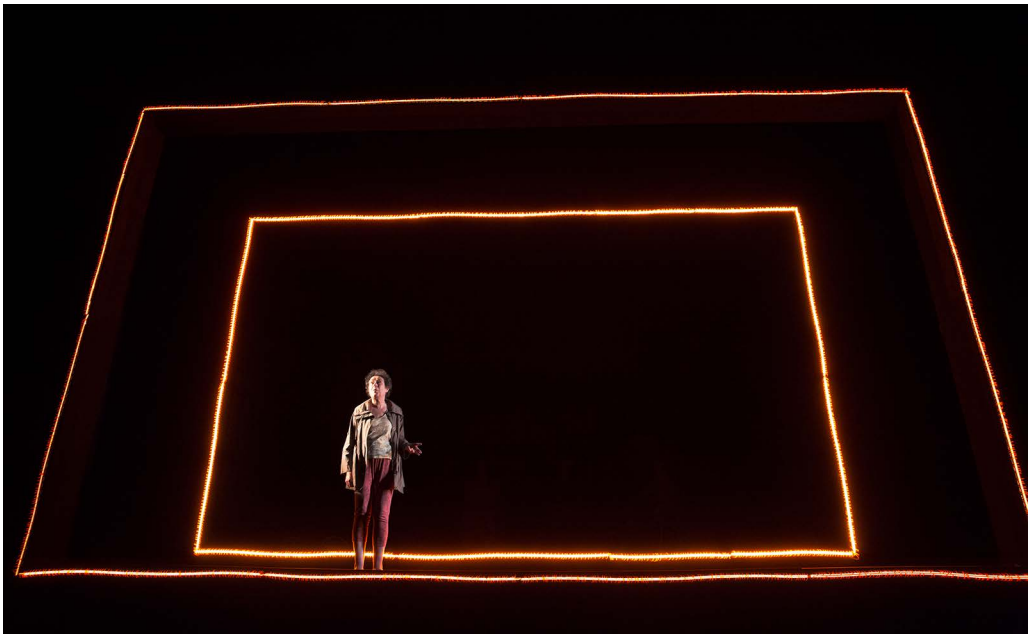
Any random number of contemporary books sitting on my library shelves project dystopian landscapes, mass murder, totalitarian societies, ecological disaster, and they are not written as science fiction—works such as Edna O’Brien’s *The Little Red Chairs*, Roberto Bolaño’s *Distant Star*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Thomas H. Cook’s *Tragic Shores*, Bernard du Boucheron’s *The Voyage of the Short Serpent*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last*, Omar El Akkad’s *American War*.

What all of these writings have in common is the portrayal of ordinary people turned killers among a deranged populace when the veneer of civilized behavior is destroyed by extreme social conditions.

*Escaped Alone* starts out friendly enough. A woman, Mrs. Jarrett, steps through an open door of a fence into a garden to join three other women in their seventies for an afternoon of tea and conversation. They are neighbors, wives, mothers. What do they talk about? The dialogue starts out on a simple range of topics: family news, changes in the local shops, dentist visits, television programs. As the eight numbered sections in this play lasting only fifty minutes get underway, Vi's murder of her husband in self-defense is revealed, someone mentions drone bombings, and another speaks about the eagle as a fascist bird. Before long, scene 6 arrives, and the four women unexpectedly break out into the sixties' girl group favorite, "Da doo ron ron." The stage direction for this humorous moment within the dark play notes, "They are singing for themselves in the garden, not performing for the audience." The choice of song is unspecified in this performance within a performance for the actors alone (even though the audience is watching), but it serves to carry the women to another dimension in James Macdonald's superbly directed production, which originated last year at London's Royal Court Theatre and was restaged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February, 2016.

For the last two sections in the play the women carry on about jobs, illness, more about the murder and prison term, Lena's depression, family updates, cooking, and seabirds. Sometimes there's a homily or rhyme or joke. Sounds of birdsong, traffic, and children playing can be heard in the background. Ordinary lives, ordinary things. Ridiculously banal conversation about animals, shopping, and more curiously, particles and waves and microbes. Little by little, the social world seeps through the subconscious. The thought crossed my mind that someone among them must be thinking of voting for Brexit. The local is inextricably tied to the global, and the political is not merely personal. Churchill has a way of giving her female characters sharp turns away from their casual banter to reveal disquieting inner turmoil, which reminds me of the technique of Maria Irene Fornes, especially apparent in *Fefu and Her Friends* and her later plays.

Something remarkable happens at the end of each brief section. Mrs. J steps out of the super-realistic garden setting to come forward into a more abstract, darkened space that is framed by orange-colored lights, the others disappearing into darkness while she speaks of increasing ecological devastation, each description more terrifying than the previous one. Mining disasters bury whole communities, floods overtake human activity when "the baths overflowed as water was deliberately wasted in a campaign to punish the thirsty"; birth defects and miscarriages are caused by "chemicals leaked through cracks in the money"; people



Top and bottom: Scenes from *Escaped Alone* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Actors (left to right): Linda Bassett, Deborah Findlay, Kika Markham, June Watson. Photos: Richard Termine.

sell or devour their own flesh as “smartphones were distributed by charities when rice ran out, so the dying could watch cooking”; a virus spreads worldwide as “governments cleansed infected areas and made deals with allies to bomb each other’s capitals”; and, lastly, fire breaks out, and “charred stumps were salvaged for art and biscuits.”

The precision of the imagery, at times tinged with grotesque humor and the whiff of life in our era, makes these digressions all the more horrifying. After each narration is completed, Mrs. J is back again at her seat in the garden and the women continue. Most notably, it is women who speak a language of destruction and pain that cracks normal conversational flow into bits and pieces. Their emotional lives now accommodate everyday occurrences alongside the absorption of the new global terrors. In the last section, Mrs. J explodes in the midst of the conversation with a virtual sound poem of existential fury, shouting “terrible rage” twenty-five times. Much of the play is *non sequiturs*, anyway. In the few lines left in the play, someone offers a joke, and Mrs. J leaves through the open fence, telling the audience she thanked everyone for the tea and went home.

Who is Mrs. J? There is something about her that seems like an older version of Joan from Churchill’s *Far Away*, a play in which a young woman describes her flight through a catastrophic war, mobilizing weather, light, water, things, animals and humans, where “there were piles of bodies and if you stopped to find out there was one killed by coffee or one killed by pins, they were killed by heroin, petrol, chainsaws, hairspray, bleach, foxgloves, the smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn’t serve.” Even things have lives in this scrambled cosmic madness, starting first with metaphor. What do nouns and verbs mean to this world? Is this catastrophe the unmasked face of the Earth?

It is important that the play has a narrator, that it is a female storyteller Mrs. J, who announces the new world order in a prolix catalogue of images and unknown syntax that rages through her consciousness. Mrs. J is the mind of the play, a figure both in and beyond the central dramatic situation. By being one of the women in the group and also the one who steps outside of it, in her bracketed monologues as chronicler, she reflects the play’s life as both drama and story, or, put another way, its sense of the present as history. She illuminates Churchill’s inscription to the play: “I only am escaped alone to tell thee,” encompassing both the *Book of Job* and *Moby Dick*. What is significant is that the audience hears a story about the human race, about cultures and continents and the artifacts of civilization that carries biographical weight in the visionary Mrs. J.

Churchill's dramatic language has entered a space that no other playwriting inhabits. A half-century after she started writing, now still exploring theatrical forms, she invents a new dramatic language because a new social reality demands one. Such developments have occurred in the last century, when dramatic literature moved toward utopian/dystopian themes, as in the texts of F.T. Marinetti, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Stanislaw I. Witkiewicz, and Vaclav Havel, to name a few. Female playwrights have moved less in this direction, if more so in the novel, though in our era Elfriede Jelinek has created a remarkably strong dramatic language of enormous political dimension.

With Churchill, on the surface, every section of *Escaped Alone* seems to start *in media res*. There is less a pattern of dialogue than a few words distributed character by character in fragmented phrases avoiding complete sentences, which is why there is no punctuation, except for the more narrative digressions. The four actresses of the Royal Court production are impeccable in transporting the play's stretto effect, seeming to speak whole sentences though the conversation and thoughts are flowing and overlapping character to character, often only two or three words at a time. Where does a sentence begin, where does it end? How to fill the spaces of the absent words? In Churchill's recent play, *Love and Information* (2012) there are no character names at all: more than one hundred characters in fifty-seven scenes are different in every scene, and scenes within a section can be played in any order. The dialogue has the sophisticated, bittersweet worldliness of Stephen Sondheim lyrics.

In the English language, Churchill is the most imaginative of dramatic writers for the stage, with her ear now tuned to the contemporary rhythms of fear, anger, humor, violence, love, terror, and the perverse adaptability of human beings. Choosing the most economical of means, she exposes the emotional lives of women without any need for highly developed psychological exploration. Her plays have the refined quality of drawing. In *Escaped Alone* the audacity of humor has characters imagining themselves flying like birds and wondering about the holy ghost as the dove of peace or musing on the birdcalls of a congregation. "Do religions have birds?" someone asks. And yet, in the same section of the play there is talk of drone bombings and a long passage by Sally about cats that masks her fear of the outside world. Elsewhere, are the jabs at the National Health Service and technological devices. That's how Churchill does it. Though her twenty-first century plays give vent to my own increasingly tragic view of the human condition, the art of Churchill's drama brings me back to what I love most about the creative mind: imagination. That is to say, the truth of poetry as more primal than fact. If Churchill has always taken for herself the freedom of the writer, now she is off the page. Nothing constrains her.

Few playwrights go where Churchill does, though one of them in equally fearless terrain, Wallace Shawn, had a play running in New York at the same time as her new production, his *Evening at the Talk House*, which bears mentioning. If Churchill's characters are ordinary working class and middle class, Shawn's are more often educated sophisticates. In his 1996 play, *The Designated Mourner*, privileged intellectuals are destroyed by a new authoritarian power. Now, in *Evening at the Talk House*, a group of theatre people meet in a private club to celebrate the tenth anniversary of a play they were all involved in once, only to reveal the barbarity of their recent activities, which are partly devoted to beating up and poisoning friends, going to foreign countries and sticking pins in people, or studying lists in order to "target" others to be killed.

It cannot go unremarked that these two authors, well into their seventies, are writing plays of a severity and apocalyptic scope that is more often associated with the novel. They are playwrights who refuse the Nietzschean option of redemption through art. In plays of uncompromising philosophical and artistic range they underscore the value of daring writers in advancing the themes of contemporary theatre. The profound crises of the times we live in call for the individual voice of the dramatic writer who can bear unrelenting witness to it.

Speaking of witnesses, I wonder if, in the godless worlds of her recent plays, Caryl Churchill is counting on the birds flying over the heads of their disconsolate souls to carry the sweet sound of paradise lost.

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