

CARYL CHURCHILL:REPRESENTATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS AND PROVISIONAL TRUTHS

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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**I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains
as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a
degree at any tertiary educational institution.**

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Iris Joy Lavell

Dedication

This Thesis is dedicated to my parents: to my mother Betty who, in the Depression, despite having gained a scholarship to a private girls' school, had to leave school on the day she turned fourteen and not come home until she had a job, and to my father Ernest, who, although he had to cut short his own education, always encouraged ours. It is dedicated to long discussions around the family dinner table, the encouragement to speak freely and an appreciation of ideas for their own sake.

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MacCaskill's theatre school Chimera (later Kaff) introduced me to the theatrical addiction and to a love of Churchill's plays, particularly: *Vinegar Tom*, *Fen*, *Top Girls*, and *The Judge's Wife*.

Most of all I wish to acknowledge the support of my wonderful family, and my stalwart and sensitive partner, Andrew, whose love and sense of humour throughout the past few years have kept me relatively sane.

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Abstract

*JUDGE: Go away Barbara. I've had enough. Should we all be kind? You are lukewarm and will be vomited. There are two camps, Barbara, mine and theirs. Either you are with, or you are against.*¹

Although English playwright Caryl Churchill wrote the three scripts examined in this thesis more than thirty years ago, each captures our contemporary zeitgeist in sometimes surprising ways. These works explore the shifting politics of power, revealing binary and essentialist representations that not only continue but have been strengthened on all sides in recent years, suggesting their central importance in defining and controlling culture.

This thesis examines how Churchill subverts conventional forms of representation and probes the ways in which she herself has been represented by critics and scholars at various periods of her writing career. It is my contention that these processes operate in tandem, performing an ongoing dialogue. Because of the dynamic nature of this dialogue, the aim here is not so much to provide an increasingly unified or finite understanding of the artistic milieu from which a play emerges, as it is to recognize the level of complexity underlying the mutable and political process of its interpretation.

I have undertaken a detailed exploration of three lesser-known short scripts from 1972, a 'watershed' year for Churchill, culminating in the relative success of *Owners*, her first major stage play. While many of her earlier works have been deserving of further exploration, a number of them have been largely overlooked in the broader environment of her subsequent contribution to

¹ From "The Judge's Wife" in *Churchill: Shorts* 159.

contemporary theatre. The particular scripts that I explore in the course of this thesis are: *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution*; *Schreber's Nervous Illness* and *The Judge's Wife*, an unperformed stage play, a radio play and a television play respectively. These works are worthy of exploration because of their experiments with the politics of subjectivity as it impacts on race, gender and social class, and notions of 'legitimacy' that shift with a person's changing circumstances. Each of these plays implicitly demonstrates the importance of subjectivity in relation to representational power as it places characters who have traditionally been silenced at the centre of the action.

I have titled my thesis *Caryl Churchill: Representational Negotiations and Provisional Truths*. In invoking this title I pre-empt the engagement of a subjective, strategic essentialist approach, both in critiquing this period of Churchill's work and in declaring the assumptions of the arguments contained in the pages that follow.

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