

Cloud 9

Written by Caryl Churchill

Directed by Lisa Kornetsky

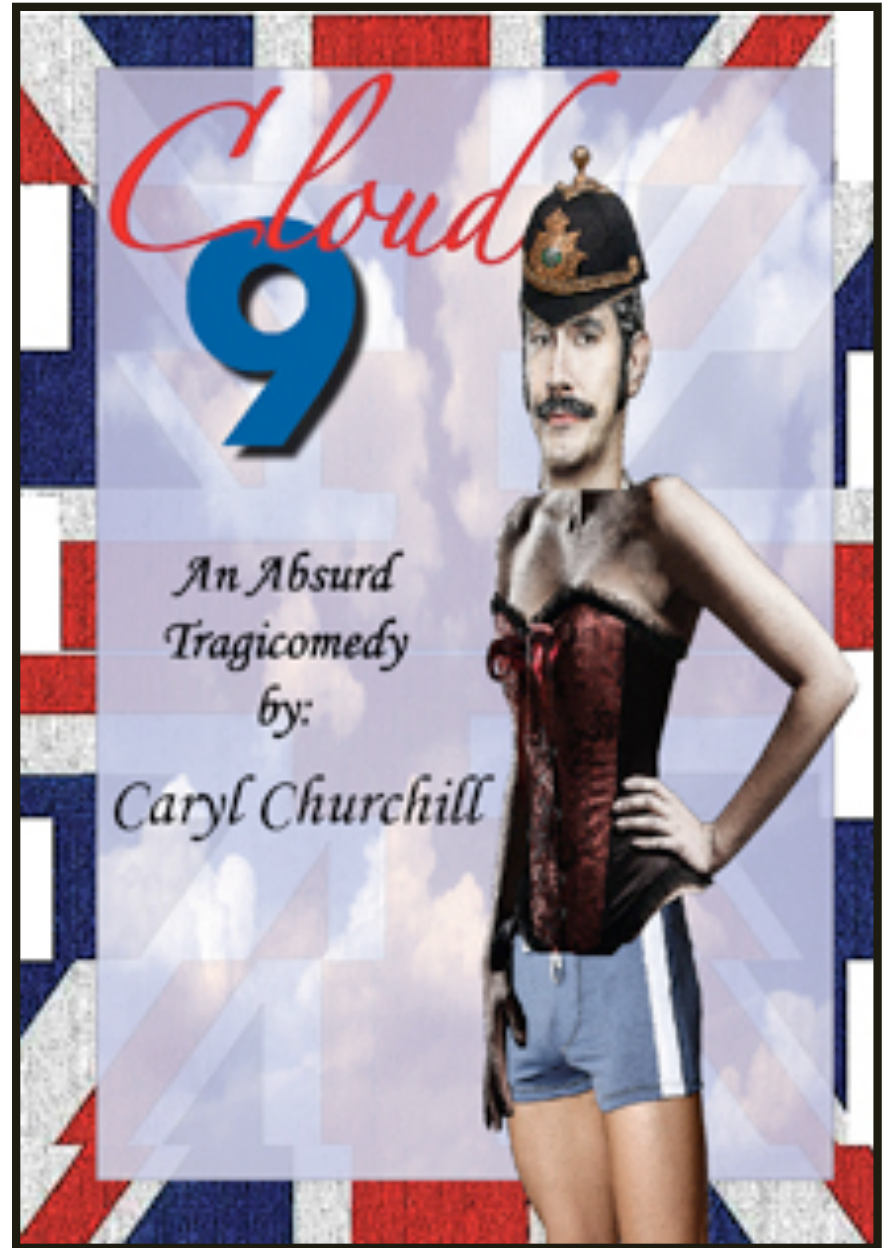
Assistant directed by Chris Baker

Audience Guide by Chad Bay

Performances:

February 26, 27 & March 4, 5, 6 at 7:30pm

February 28 at 2:00pm and March 5 at 10:00am



A Note from the Dramaturge

Putting Cloud 9 in context

Hello! And welcome to the world of *Cloud 9*, Caryl Churchill's absurd tragicomedy about life, love, sex, and individuality.

Cloud 9 is a baffling play for many reasons. The first being that viewers – theatre novices and connoisseurs alike – may feel assaulted by the play's more graphic moments and conversations and, furthermore, confused by a seemingly chaotic cast of time-traveling, gender-bending characters in search of something that doesn't seem easy to grasp hold of.

This audience guide is provided to give you the opportunity to put yourself into the historical context of this play. While seeming contemporary, *Cloud 9* was written 30 years ago. Churchill's creative process in 1979 when she wrote this play, as well as the historical content of the text itself are crucial to understanding the themes and commentary she wished to emphasize in her work.

I think it is important to note that these characters are *sexual beings* and will commit *sexual acts on stage* (thank goodness that's out of the way).

Churchill's play presents characters who are, at first, suppressed by a patriarchal society. Taking place at the turn of the 19th century, this seems only proper. But Churchill has taken these structured socialites and dropped them into the heart of the African Congo, a place that many a white man has called the "Dark Continent." The aim here, it seems, is to put characters of a highly structured society into the untamed wilderness. This juxtaposition serves as the catalyst for all of act I. Though dominated by Clive's authority, each character struggles (quite unsuccessfully) to quell their primitive,

human desires which threaten to destroy the smallest traces of 'society' they've managed to maintain while living in the jungle.

In act II, the characters continue on – over 100 years into the future while aging only 20 – free from the patriarchal confines of Clive. More specifically, they are thrown into 1979 England; the feminist movement is underway and sexuality becomes the new "Dark Continent" domestic explorers wish to conquer. The reign of Victoria is at an end and Betty, now alone, is the only one who seems nostalgic for her society. But even as these characters are given the reigns to their individuality, their desires still seem out of reach.

The themes of the play – its story, the importance of time, and the swapping of genders – revealed themselves to me one layer at a time. Each reading of the script or visit to rehearsal gave me new perspectives to consider. This idea of layers, of something being hidden underneath, has become a theme that has been harnessed by the entire production team, and I see it as being one of the most important messages of the piece. We see it in the structured Victorian costumes which, upon closer inspection, are lined with hidden folds of exotic fabrics, and in the blinds which deflect the outside world while still reflecting the vibrancy of an untamed landscape. Churchill's cast of characters are in search of something that lives within themselves – take away their clothing, sexual outbursts, and attempts to maintain decorum, and we are left with *individual human beings* with universal desires.

I hope you find this audience guide to be educational and helpful as you prepare for your theatrical experience and, of course, I hope that you enjoy the show!

Chad Bay, Dramaturge

About Caryl Churchill



Born in 1938, Caryl Churchill has been one of the most prominent female playwrights. A fervent believer in the ability of ordinary individuals to produce extraordinary change within themselves and the world around them, her works have challenged contemporary society's notions of many facets of human existence. The plays she has written over the last several decades have made a serious impact on theatrical practices, traditions, gender stereotypes, and social-economical ideals.

Churchill was an active participator in Socialist Improvisational Theatre, working with companies such as the Joint Stock Theatre Group, where she wrote *Cloud 9* in workshops during 1978 and 1979. Her works and her creative process emphasize a desire to work collaboratively and creatively with other artists in pursuit of political and social change, and the advancement of those people who might otherwise not have any way to get a leg up in contemporary society.

Caryl Churchill is the recipient of many awards, including:

1958 – Sunday Times/National Union of Students
Drama Festival Award, *Downstairs*

1961 – Richard Hillary Memorial Prize

1981 – Obie Award for Playwriting, *Cloud 9*

1982 – Obie Award for Playwriting, *Top Girls*

1987 – Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy
Serious Money

2001 – Obie Sustained Achievement Award

Joint Stock Theatre Group and the creation of *Cloud 9*

Founded in London in 1974, the Joint Stock Theatre Group focused its efforts on the development of new theatre through collaborative workshops with playwrights, directors, and actors.

Caryl Churchill reveals in her notes accompanying the text for *Cloud 9* that the basic outline for this play was based on a workshop held at the Joint Stock Theatre Group about sexual politics. Through improvisational explorations of stereotypes and role reversals, Churchill began to collect personal narratives and experiences from her actors and director.

The *Cloud 9* workshop lasted three weeks, followed by a twelve week writing period and six week rehearsal process.

What emerged most prominently for Churchill from this workshop was an idea which the collaboration had only briefly touched upon – the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression.

Notes from the Playwright:

The first act of Cloud 9 takes place in Victorian Africa, where Clive, the white man, imposes his ideals on his family and the natives.

The second act is set in London in 1979 – this is where I wanted the play to end up, in the changing sexuality of our own time. A hundred years have passed, but for the characters only twenty-five years. There were two reasons for this. I felt the first act would be stronger set in Victorian times, at the height of colonialism, rather than in Africa during the 1950's. And when the company talked about their childhoods and the attitudes of 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 lifetimes.

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.

World(s) of the Play

Victorian Africa

The Colonization of Africa began long before the turn of the 19th Century; many European countries were invested in the lucrative slave trade for many hundreds of years. At this time, coastal ports were inhabited and influenced by Western culture. It wasn't until the last half of the 1800's, however, that colonization truly began to take off and infiltrated the entire continent. The abolition of slavery in the United States (and throughout the remainder of the Western world) forced Europeans to search for new means of commerce. European explorers had to penetrate the interior of the continent, searching for goods to trade or sell; the individual governmental systems then set out to establish political control in order to assure access to the goods they wished to extort.

As time went by, missionaries began accompanying various explorers and authorities on their visits to the continent, and they supplied reports of the "hopeless fate of the Africans;" missionaries believed that these barbaric people must be Christianized in order to save them from poverty and their primitive lifestyle.

It is imperative to understand that these colonizers – powerful, white men – saw themselves as doing good for the people of Africa. Their colonies and all repercussive entities – Western doctors, the building of roads and railways, construction of Western schools and churches – were seen as praiseworthy additions to the landscape of Africa.

Life in the Congo – Colonists in Africa

Life for the colonists, as refined as they may have tried to make it, was never much more than desolate. For those who were not explorers, scientists, or missionaries, the main objective after arriving on the continent was to re-establish a sense of "home." The Victorian lifestyle, though made somewhat more "tropical" in various ways, followed colonizers from Britain without too much sacrifice of decorum or behavioral code.

Experiencing far less social restrictions than the women, men were often able to make the most of their time in Africa. They were able to find means of relaxation through tennis, cricket, and croquet, even in the tropical heat. Because *proper* ladies were required to wear full Victorian garb, they were not as apt to participate in the social sporting events as the men were.

White Women in Africa

Women appeared in Africa, for the most part, as counterparts to their husbands. As the male explorers, missionaries, and government authorities took care of business on the continent, the women were expected to stay home and take care of theirs. At the time, the expected and accepted duties of British women in Africa were to maintain homes and amenities that would mirror those of England.

Sexuality under Victoria

The repression of all things sexual in the daily life of a Victorian socialite led to the polarizing of men and women and an inability to articulate desire and personal orientation. Because of their society's fervent repression of this facet of the human condition, were unable to understand their bodies and needs.

The Victorian period presents a time when men and women in society (above, within, beneath; what have you) were easily categorized in order to keep the social order. The following list is an example of some of these categories that Victorians used to help classify and organize their social world:

- The Prostitute
- The Fallen Woman
- The Modest Woman
- The Continental Man
- The Homosexual

This list pertains to categories of sexuality, a topic that was as “hush-hush” as can be at this time, yet at the same time it was on everybody's mind (probably because it was so restricted from the public consciousness). *By bifurcating sexuality into normative and deviant identities, these categories rest on the binary between containment and subversion that, in forcing either/or evaluations of concrete phenomena, can mask their dynamic, nuanced, multifaceted quality.* Strict social codes of conduct required strict adherence to gender roles and proper sexual intercourse (which was, of course, to be had when making children. With your wife). Behind closed doors, however, these people were just as experimental with their sexualities as many were during the sexually-charged 1960's and 70's, as well as today.

Sexual permissiveness varied among classes. Those in the working and rural classes were guided by less restrictive customs and rules regarding intercourse and sexual interaction. The middle and upper classes, however, were required to adhere to strict rules regarding sexuality, love, and lust. The “Anti-Pleasure Mentality,” which aimed to condemn the sensual pleasures of sex, affected both men and women. However, sexuality was – as was every other institution at the time – *patriarchal*. This did not mean that men experienced sexual freedoms that women did not. Instead, it meant that sexuality was organized around male anxieties. *Masculinity required rigorous protection and policing: “constant self-watchfulness, self-discipline, and self-control.”* At this time, doctors saw prostitution and excessive sexual acts as being dangerous to the male character.

The largest repercussion of this mentality was a new view of femininity. *Women's bodies became a source of fascination and paranoia. Just as male continence demanded the display of virtuoso asceticism, a woman's virtue was signified by her performance of ladyhood, in which gentility and morality were, in theory, seamlessly joined. Accessible and unthreatening, the female body was expected to be a “constantly available text with nothing to hide,” framed for male consumption in a variety of ways that contained its sexuality.*

The female nude became one of the most popular ways for men to explore the female body without being corrupted by their sensual persuasions. This, however, meant that men were disconnected from women on a personal level; as they explored their sexual desires for women through outlets such as the nude (statues, paintings, photographs), women as human beings became mysterious and troublesome.

It is also interesting to note that, although women were expected to be a “constantly available text,” required to present themselves in ways that men would find attractive, professions such as acting, dancing, modeling, and writing were often charged with indecency, and appearing in public spaces might lead to “the trauma of public exposure” and contaminate women with sexual meanings.

The world of sexuality in Victorian Britain is a place of uneducated hypotheses and illness, curious exploration and contradictory practices.

Women and Hysteria

Women who became hysterical were women who strove for positions that were not considered right for them: too intellectual, too sexually indulgent, or too abstemious.

Female hysteria was a once-common medical diagnosis, which is no longer recognized by modern medical authorities as a medical disorder. However, the disease and its treatment were staples of European medicinal practices for hundreds of years. Hysteria was widely discussed in the medical literature of the Victorian era. Women considered to be suffering from it exhibited a wide array of symptoms including faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, heaviness in abdomen, muscle spasm, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, and *a tendency to cause trouble*.

A physician in 1859 claimed that a quarter of all women suffered from hysteria. One physician cataloged 75 pages of possible symptoms of hysteria and called the list incomplete because almost any ailment could fit the diagnosis. It was believed that the stresses associated with modern life caused civilized women to be both more susceptible to nervous disorders and to develop faulty reproductive tracts.

Cases of hysteria proved to be quite profitable for physicians, since the patients were at no risk of death, but needed constant treatment. The only problem was that physicians did not enjoy the tedious task of vaginal massage (generally referred to as 'pelvic massage'): The technique was difficult for a physician to master and could take hours to achieve "hysterical paroxysm (an orgasm)."

A solution was the invention of massage devices, which shortened treatment from hours to minutes, removing the need for midwives and increasing a physician's treatment capacity. Already at the turn of the century, hydrotherapy devices were available at Bath, and by the mid-19th century,

they were popular at many high-profile bathing resorts across Europe and in America. By 1870, a clockwork-driven vibrator was available for purchase. While physicians of the period acknowledged that the disorder stemmed from sexual dissatisfaction, they seemed unaware of or unwilling to admit the sexual purposes of the devices used to treat it.

Men and Spermatorrhea

Women weren't the only ones in the Victorian age to suffer from imaginary diseases. During this time, men, too, were suffering from Spermatorrhea – a disease now known to never have really existed at all. The disease itself was characterized by *excessive discharge of sperm caused by illicit or excessive sexual activity, especially masturbation; the disease was understood to cause anxiety, nervousness, lassitude, impotence, and, in its advanced stages, insanity and death*.

In the Victorian period, men were characterized as strong, firm, and powerful – this was, of course, an intentional reference to their penises as well. At this time, an erect penis was a symbol of manliness and power – and it was considered sacred; it was not to be "abused" and its seed not to be wasted. Surgeons of the day related semen itself to this symbolic hardness and strength as well, believing that in a healthy state, *semen "jets" from the penis with force*. But a man inflicted with Spermatorrhea? *Semen returns to its liquid state when the disease strikes, giving rise to images of weakness and impotence: it becomes a "thin, imperfect fluid" which no longer spurts majestically but "dribbles" from the end of the penis*.

In Spermatorrhea, the body becomes a sieve, losing vitality from every orifice. Semen leaks away not just in ejaculations and nocturnal emission but in urination; sweat oozes from every pore, creating the clammy palms of the self-abuser. Doctors imagine the body as a leaking vessel: "The violated body becomes unable to contain its treasure, and as fast as it is elaborated the seed is poured away on the slightest provocation." The man who falters in his purity will "open the floodgates of an ocean, and then attempt to prescribe a limit to the inundation."

World(s) of the Play

England in the 1970s

England in the 1970's is important to *Cloud 9* not only because act II takes place in 1979, but, also because this is when the play was written. The 1960's proved to be a radical decade overseas in the United States; the black civil rights movement and a strong opposition to the Vietnam War shook the Western world's social roots in an endeavor to unearth political and social change. During this time, the Women's Liberation Movement began to take shape, both in the US and in Britain.

Women before 1960

Modern conveniences and technological advancements aside, the social life of a woman in Britain before 1960 might seem no different than the life of the Victorian woman. It is true that women at this time did go to college and secure jobs, but, as soon as she married she was expected to give up a professional career and return to her domestic duties. In many jobs, including the entire civil service, married women were not employed. It was difficult for a woman to get a mortgage or even make large purchases on credit without a man's consent. Sex before marriage was still seen as shameful; a pregnancy was terrifyingly devastating to the life of a single woman. Abortion was illegal and many women had to risk their lives going to the back streets, or were forced to give their children up for adoption immediately after birth.

1960 – the times they are a changin'

In addition to other radical social movements of the time, the Women's Liberation Movement owed its beginnings to other

historical changes in society as well. The post-war economic boom led to increasing numbers of women in the workforce and in higher education. Between 1960 and 1965 there was a 57% increase in the number of degree-receiving women in the United States (men only rose by 25%). In 1961, the oral contraceptive pill became widely available to women in the US and England; this completely changed the way women perceived the control they had over their own personal and professional lives, and opened many doors of opportunity in the professional world.

The Struggle for Women's Liberation

In the US, universities became the focus of struggle and debate over radical social change. By the end of the 1960's, thousands of women had fought for black civil rights and opposed the war in Vietnam. Yet, they still faced sexism in their own political organizations, feeling trivialized by male leadership. Women began organizing their own activist workshops; they movement was dominated by the idea that women must organize separately. Their meetings often involved women talking about their personal lives – a process described as “consciousness raising.”

In Britain, the needs of the Women's Liberation Movement reflected those of the working class women – free abortion and contraception, equal education and job opportunities, and equal pay. On both sides of the Atlantic, however, an unfortunate pattern emerged: ideas about women needing to organize separately in order to be taken seriously divided and isolated the movement. By the mid 1970's, the climax of the Women's Liberation Movement had come and gone, as groups fragmented on questions of sexuality, race, and issues such as national liberation and imperialism.

Nevertheless, the world was changing. For the first time, women had control of their fertility and were gaining a higher level of economic, social, and personal independence.

Major Dramaturgical Research Sources:

Post-Show Synthesis

questions to consider after the show:

1. What are the greatest differences between the two time periods and locations shown in acts I and II? Are there similarities?
2. Each actor in *Cloud 9* plays at least two characters. Why do you think this is? What themes does Caryl Churchill highlight by having the same actor who plays Betty in act I play Gerry in act II, for example? What similarities and differences seem crucial to these juxtapositions?
3. Which character experiences the most growth or change in *Cloud 9*, and what themes or messages does his or her journey emphasize?

Painting Africa White: The Human Side of British Colonialism
Row Lewis – 1971

Dark Webs: Perspectives on Colonialism
Toyin Falola – 2005

Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience
Ellen Bayuk Rosenman – 2003

*Love in the Time of Victoria:
Sexuality, Class, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London*
Francoise Barret-Ducrocq and John Howe - 1991

Cloud 9
Caryl Churchill – 1995

www.wsu.edu

www.womensphere.wordpress.com