

## ***In the Office: The Top Girl's Agency***

*"I don't like coming in second."*

In the office of the Top Girls Employment Agency, Nell and Win have arrived at work. They gossip about a married man Win has been seeing while his wife is away. Nell tells Win about Howard, a co-worker who is late this morning. Howard was up against Marlene for the position of Managing Director, thinking he was a 'shoe in' for the role because his rival is a woman. When Marlene arrives, they tease her about being late and they talk about their clients for a while. Nell suggests that soon enough Marlene will be promoted even higher, perhaps with an edge of resentment or jealousy in her voice.

Later, Marlene is surprised by two unexpected visitors. Firstly, Angie drops in unannounced. Marlene is perplexed as to how and why Angie is in her office and seems too busy to take her out. Then Howard's wife pays an unexpected call on behalf of her husband who's been unwell all weekend. She tacitly suggests that Marlene should find a way to refuse her promotion – and that's when Marlene finally loses her patience.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. What does Nell want at the start of this scene?**

- (a) Roses
- (b) Coffee
- (c) Flowers
- (d) Lettuce

**2. Who did Marlene beat to the role of managing director?**

- (a) Walter
- (b) Enrico
- (c) Howard
- (d) Sofya

**3. Where does Win dream of going?**

- (a) South Africa
- (b) China
- (c) Brazil
- (d) Australia

**4. What euphemism does Nell use to describe the menopause?**

- (a) The end
- (b) The condition
- (c) The change
- (d) The time

**5. Before she takes over her new role, Marlene is filling in for which colleague who's away (presumably on maternity leave)?**

- (a) Pam
- (b) Tam
- (c) Sam
- (d) Pat

**6. How did Angie get to London?**

- (a) Train
- (b) Bus
- (c) By hitchhiking
- (d) She walked

**7. How long does Angie want to stay with Marlene?**

- (a) Just one night
- (b) About a week
- (c) Until the end of the summer
- (d) She doesn't say

**8. What is Mrs Kidd's first name?**

- (a) Heather
- (b) Rosemary
- (c) Violet
- (d) Poppy

**9. What reason does Mrs Kidd give for thinking her husband should get the job?**

- (a) He's better qualified
- (b) He's had years more experience
- (c) He's good with people
- (d) He's got three kids to support

**10. What job does Marlene predict Angie will end up doing?**

- (a) Delivery driver for Amazon
- (b) Packer in Tesco
- (c) Typist
- (d) Teacher at UWC

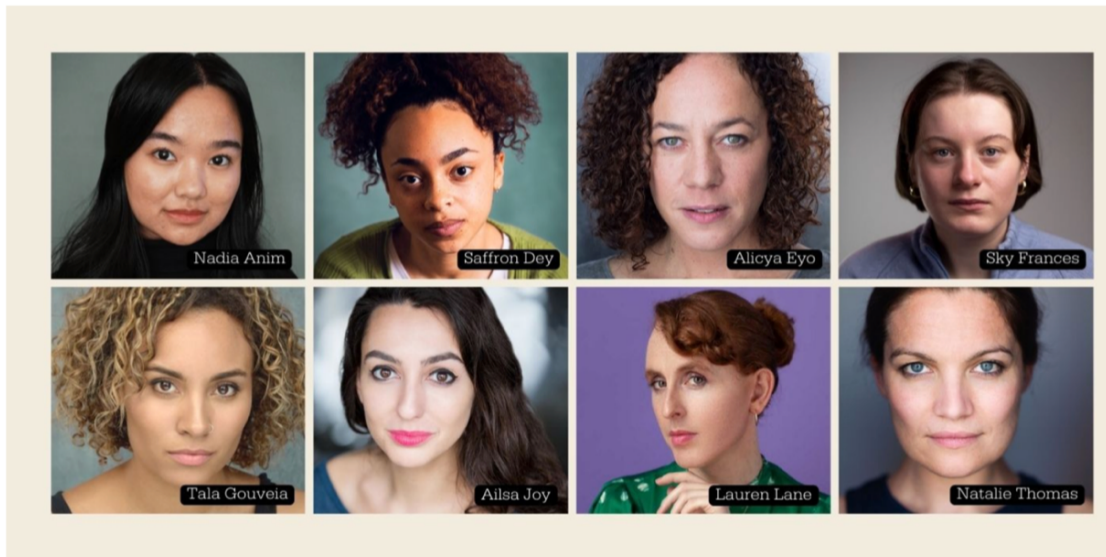
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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. How do Nell and Win relate to each other and to Marlene at the start of this scene? How would you describe their interactions?
2. Nell and Win move on to discuss their work. They mention different companies, men they know in these businesses, and women who they are trying to place in positions. What do you notice about their use of language when talking about different people connected to their work?
3. What is Mrs Kidd's role in the play? How does her interaction with Marlene develop themes such as women in the workplace, feminism, female allyship, and the like?
4. In what ways does Angie so clearly look up to and admire Marlene? What does she admire the most?
5. What is Marlene's attitude towards Angie? How does this develop the themes of the play?

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## Dramatic Study: *Double Casting*



*For the 40th anniversary of Churchill's play, and to coincide with International Women's Day, Top Girls was staged at the Liverpool Everyman playhouse in March 2022 with only 8 actors playing multiple roles.*

Despite the large number of characters in *Top Girls*, many of them appear only in one scene. Act 1 alone introduces seven characters (including the waitress), most of whom are never seen again. While Acts 2 and 3 focus on a smaller number of women, characters like Jeanine and Louise still only step on stage once. When *Top Girls* was first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1982, a small cast of actors played both historical figures and modern women. Since then, other productions have followed this trend; as a result, while never mentioned explicitly in the play script, double casting has become associated with *Top Girls*.

While exact combinations have varied by production, there have been some recurring patterns. For example, in both the Royal Court production and the Liverpool Everyman Theatre production in 2022 the actor who played Jeanine in Act 2 also played Griselda in Act 1. Isabella Bird has been doubled with Shona or Win and Joyce, while whoever plays Dull Gret has sometimes played Angie too. Thematically, double casting links the historical women's experiences to those of the women in the present day. For instance, Griselda (a historical figure) was constrained by patriarchy; Jeanine (a modern working woman) is similarly constrained by capitalism. While they are centuries removed from each other, they share the same struggle. Moreover, Jeanine, like Griselda, is polite and pliant – and therefore easily manipulated by a system that rewards obedience. Double casting encourages the audience to see patterns and systems rather than focus on individuals. They become aware of patterns repeating over time and across history as different women cycle through the same struggles in different forms.

Noticeably, one character is never doubled: Marlene. Universally she is played by a single actor only, reinforcing her centrality to the play and her dominance over the office. Additionally, being an exception to the general doubling of the play excludes Marlene (somewhat) from the collective female experience evoked by the overlapping stories of all the other characters.

### **Activity: *Be the Top Girls* casting director**

Step into the shoes of a casting director for a new production of *Top Girls*! How will you decide which roles should be double cast with one another? Match Act 1 dinner guests with characters from Act 2 and explore how Churchill uses casting options to draw connections between women from across history. Once you've decided on your pairings, choose one to elaborate upon. Below is an example of a justification for the pairing of Isabella Bird with Joyce. Choose another pair and explain your reasons behind the double casting:

#### **Isabella / Joyce**

Isabella Bird (1831-1904) is one of five real historical figures whom Marlene hosts in a celebratory dinner part in the first act. The actor who plays Isabella in the first act comes back in the second and third acts as Marlene's sister Joyce. Isabella Bird was a travel writer from Scotland in the 19th century. She spent her childhood and early adulthood trying to be the proper daughter of a clergyman by sewing and studying Latin. Though she had health issues throughout her life, Isabella had an intense desire to travel the world. The sacrifice Isabella had to live with was leaving her beloved sister behind at home. In Act One Scene One, she says: *'Hennie was happy... But I couldn't stay in Scotland...'* Although she misses her sister dearly, this didn't stop her from staying away. Later in the scene, when Nijo comments that she was homesick, Isabella replies: *'I longed to go home, / but home to what?'* Her love of traveling replaced any sense of love and duty to her old life, revealed when she admits that: *'I fell in love with the sea, there were rats in the cabin and ants in the food but suddenly it was like a new world.'* Even her marriage at age 50 is presented in the play as almost a kindness in return for his care of her sister, and after he died, she was free again to wander: *'I determined to leave my grief behind and set out for Tibet.'*

A century later, Joyce takes the opposite path, staying behind to care for family while her sister sets out into the world. They are two sides of the same woman: Isabella left and Joyce stayed. Now Joyce is raising her child by herself. In this sense, Joyce is the opposite of Isabella, as she cannot escape the pull of her own feelings of responsibility. Even though Joyce struggles to care for Angie, who doesn't seem capable of caring for herself, she puts her duty to family first. When Marlene tells her, *'You could have left'* she responds: *'How could I have left?'* Later, it is revealed that Joyce made the ultimate sacrifice; like many of the other women in the play, Joyce has lost a child (due to the stress of raising Angie she had a miscarriage). This sacrifice mirrors Isabella's sacrifice in abandoning Hennie.