

# Historic Feminist Ghosts Dining in a Theatrical Landscape: Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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**Abstract** | Caryl Churchill's 1982 play *Top Girls* and Judy Chicago's 1979 art installation *The Dinner Party* might be considered 'cultural ghosts' of second-wave feminism. Yet both works endure: *The Dinner Party* is on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum and *Top Girls* is frequently revived in productions around the world. This article reads these seminal works for their ghostly inclinations and considers if it is the figure of the ghost that sustains their ongoing cultural life. This includes a consideration of the ghost's intersection with concepts of absence and presence, death, loss, and mourning. Drawing on ideas of the ghost in historiography, philosophy, sociology, and spectrality, theatre and performance studies, the article discusses how Churchill and Chicago, through the deployment of the ghost, not only offer something back to the dead through these works, but call on the living to act on behalf of their historic women.

**Keywords** | ghosts, history, dinner, Judy Chicago, Caryl Churchill, performance

Alicia Tyler notes both *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party* depict "a dinner table with places set for notable women from history" (Tyler, 2008: 37). Premiering at the Royal Court Theatre, London in August 1982, Churchill's *Top Girls* is widely regarded as "a

contemporary classic” and “still without significant equal in the feminist or mainstream canons” (Tycer, 2008: 3). Janelle Reinelt considers *Top Girls*, alongside *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Fen* (1983), as “the heart of [the playwright’s] specifically feminist writing”, noting it “tackled a bourgeois interpretation of feminism which had become prevalent under Thatcher” (Reinelt, 2000: 179).

Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* first exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March 1979 and has since attracted both acclaim as a “unique case study of US feminism as a cultural force” and substantial controversy (Chicago, 1996; Jones, 1996; Kubitzka, 1996; Levin, 2007b; Roy, 2008; Gerhard, 2013: 4). Despite Chicago’s significant achievement with *The Dinner Party*, commentary on the work takes many guises from an establishment artworld steeped in a modernist aesthetic and guarding against the perceived ideology inherent in postmodernism. There are also poststructuralist feminists dismissing Chicago’s work as essentialist, and the political right-wing declaring its plate imagery pornographic. Yet, as Chicago’s website reports: “Through an unprecedented world wide grass-roots movement, *The Dinner Party* was exhibited in 16 venues in 6 countries on 3 continents to a viewing audience of over one million people” (Chicago, 2013).

It might be argued since no one is visible or embodied at *The Dinner Party*’s table, Chicago’s dinner evokes women as unsubstantiated ghosts. The dinner guests at *Top Girls*, too, while embodied, do not exist as ephemeral ghosts. They appear as very alive figures in their eating, reminiscing and shared laughter. Yet this article, following Alice Rayner’s ideas, asserts a momentary attunement to the figure of the ghost. If “theatre (...) asks that we hear the voices of the dead in the sound of the living”, this article pleads tangibility for the ghostly intangibles within both works (Rayner, 2006: 184). It also takes its lead, after Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, to evaluate these works “through a focus on tropes of the ghostly and representations of haunting” in the hope that it illuminates new insights into the works (Luckhurst and Morin, 2014: 2). Accordingly, this article contends that Chicago and Churchill’s dinner tables are fertile sites for “history’s multi-directional ghost notes” (Schneider, 2011: 31). As both David Savran and Freddie Rokem assert, when theatre performs history the presence of a ghost as witness reminds a present-day audience of past struggles (Savran, 1999; Rokem, 2000).

The figure of the ghost expresses itself in manifold ways. In this article, there are two key ways this figure is being examined. The first is, arguably, quite simple. It involves the “reappearance of historical, and legendary, figures” in the theatre (Carlson, 2001: 7). Put another way, it is the enactment of the ghost as historical character. The

second – broader and more complicated – aspect entails the multifaceted processes of theatre that produce an effect commonly known as ghosting (Carlson, 2001). Ghosting manifests in the theatre in a number of ways. It is when a “bleeding through’ the process of reception” occurs (Carlson, 2001: 133). In other words, an audience might bring awareness of an actor’s previous work – and/or celebrity – to its reading of a current role, familiarity of a previous production of a play to a new production, or acquaintance with previous uses of a site-specific space. Ghosting can also refer to the reciprocal relationship between actor and character, and text and performance in script-based theatre, where one haunts the other. The idea of ghosting can also be applied to performance. For example, in writing about explicit body work, Rebecca Schneider invokes the “ghost of the avant-garde” to explain precedents in the work of feminist artists in the 1960s through to the 1990s (Schneider, 1997: 3). She reads “the history of racially and sexually marked primitivism as ghosting the scene of explicit body work” (Schneider, 1997: 8).

It is, therefore, both the figure of the ghost as historical character and the effect of ghosting – or impressions of past work that is haunting through reception – that are of chief interest here. Both aspects are pertinent to this discussion of *The Dinner Party* and *Top Girls*.

## **Performing History**

Rokem maintains history is an “organization of time” (Rokem, 2000: ix). The same can be said of all theatre, with or without a historical focus. Yet, theatre performing history brings sharply into focus the meshing of time in theatre practice, by bringing “the historical past and the theatrical present together” (Rokem, 2000: xiii).

The figure of the ghost is advantageous to theatre performing history, then, because it deftly emphasises the tangling of time. It immediately throws time into disarray because it begins by returning “from beyond the line that divides life from the other, from death”, thus defying the “laws of canonical logic” (Appelbaum, 2009: 43). “Only a limited view would locate the specter in the past,” David Appelbaum writes. “More precisely, its roots lie in the future, the to-come. The paradox of the apparition thus is expressed: since in arrival, it comes back, the ghost is *revenant*, the returning one” (Appelbaum, 2009: 3).

The manipulation of time, and the return of events in time, are very apparent in the theatre. Marvin Carlson, for example, states that theatre, more than most other artforms, offers an audience, “a simultaneous awareness of something previously

experienced and of something being offered in the present that is both the same and different” (Carlson, 2001: 51). Or as Rayner states, “theatre recycles the past in the present of performance” (Rayner, 2006: xxii).

Savran suggests that the liveness of theatre offers a return to life for the dramatic text. If the writer’s text is conceived as a kind of “tomb” or “memorial”, he argues, performance of it is “akin to awakening the dead” (Savran, 1999: xvii). The intersection of theatre and history also works to expand Savran’s function of text-as-memorial. Rayner posits that the “repetitions of performance” can be akin to a “living memorial” in which the “ghosts of history” are roused, “but on their exit from performance they enter the ‘sepulcher’ of the theatre’s space itself” (Rayner, 2006: 34, 59). In other words, the dark, silent, empty theatre becomes a tomb of sorts where the ghosts “return to the timeless zone of the dead and to haunt the empty space” (Rayner, 2006: 60). “Related but not identical to the raising of the dead by historical discourse,” Rayner writes, “performance brings them to life on the site of their entombment, the theater” (Rayner, 2006: 60). Indeed, ideas of sepulchre or entombment find voice in historiography that are, in turn, pertinent to theatre.

In relation to historiography, Michel de Certeau refers to the theatre when he argues the writing of history “places a population of the dead on stage” (De Certeau, 1988: 99).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur asks, “How, indeed, could one ignore the simple fact that in history one is concerned with practically nothing but the dead of other times?” (Ricoeur, 2004: 364). This being the case, Ricoeur argues, history has a responsibility to “the dead of the past”; and the “historiographical operation” enacts this responsibility through a “scriptural equivalent of the social ritual of entombment” or an “act of sepulcher” (Ricoeur, 2004: 365-499). Moreover, “death in history” becomes “sepulcher” in the historian’s hands through writing (Ricoeur, 2004: 366). As De Certeau notes, “writing plays the role of a burial rite (...) it exorcises death by inserting it into discourse” (De Certeau, 1988: 100). To be clear then, the idea of sepulchre can suggest both place and *doing*. It is the “gesture of burying” in social ritual, and “act of repeated entombment” in history, and not solely, “a place, a cemetery, a simple depository of bones” (Ricoeur, 2004: 366-499). The act of sepulchre, in making “a place for the dead”, also functions symbolically to make “a place for the living”. It offers the living “a past through language” (De Certeau, 1988: 100). De Certeau further complicates the act of sepulchre though when he observes,

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, De Certeau also refers to the museum when he compares historiography’s structure of representing the dead “along a narrative itinerary” to a guided visit at a gallery (1988: 100).

“Here the function of language is to introduce through *saying* what can no longer be *done*” (De Certeau, 1988: 101).

Returning to theatre, this notion of historiographic sepulchre as a ‘doing’, alongside the already mentioned tombs of text and site, resonates with a core idea that performance is also a ‘doing’. A line of dialogue in a play, which might first appear as a ‘saying’ in the theatre, is actually a ‘doing’. A line is an act of speech, and also one of the ways in which dramatic action, which is the internal want of character, is expressed (Spencer, 2002: 87-88). As Rayner encapsulates, in distinction to De Certeau, “In theatre space, history is done, not said, and done again, repeated by bodies in a trajectory of mortality that is identical to that done in the original instance” (Rayner, 2006: 61). In summary, if the ‘historiographical operation’ is an action of making a sepulchre, theatre performing history emphasises the *doing* in the act, rather than the saying, due to the intrinsic nature of theatre.

Ricoeur also stresses that historiography, unlike the judiciary for example, is interested in “provisional”, not “definitive” judgement. He argues this encourages a culture of revision which makes the “writing of history a perpetual rewriting” (Ricoeur, 2004: 320). This idea is particularly evident in theatre performing its own history as well as social history. For example, while Churchill’s text may be definitive, the judgement of each production may differ, offering a perpetual reconceptualising of *Top Girls* in performance. Before proceeding to Churchill and Chicago’s respective tables, however, the relationship of the living with the dead calls for a brief detour.

## **The Ghost Returns**

De Certeau’s translator argues the historian’s pursuit of truth in relation to the past can only commence when separation or “an initial act of exclusion” between past and present, dead and living is achieved (Conley, 1988: viii). Similarly, Ricoeur maintains, “The work of mourning definitively separates the past from the present and makes way for the future” (Ricoeur, 2004: 499). Yet, is time so easily divisible? Jacques Derrida suggests death does not necessarily stay in the past but implicates itself in the living present. In conversation with Bernard Stiegler, Derrida observes, “Just because the dead no longer exist does not mean that we are done with specters. On the contrary. Mourning and haunting are unleashed at this moment” (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 132).

Nancy J. Holland points out Derrida’s “hauntological discourse” is “complexly interwoven” into much of his writing in the 1990s (Holland, 2001: 65). Called on

several times to memorialise a friend or colleague, Derrida spent considerable time concerning himself with “what it means to reckon with death, or with the dead” (Brault and Naas, 2001: 2). “Derrida suggests that it is only ‘in us’ that the dead may speak,” write his editors. “That it is only by speaking *of* or *as* the dead that we can keep them alive” (Brault and Naas, 2001: 9). Derrida’s ideas on mourning the dead, then, suggest “interiorizing” them and “recognizing that if we are to give the dead anything it can now be only in us, the living” (Brault and Naas, 2001: 9). As Derrida himself puts it, “Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same (...) the completely other, dead, living in me” (qtd. in Appelbaum, 2009: 14).

To be faithful to the dead in the act of mourning, Derrida maintains the mourner must walk a fine line between letting the dead speak in their own voice through citation, and giving something back through words from the living friend. Yet, Derrida identifies a conundrum in this act. Both present as “infidelities”, insofar as citation offers no exchange and “points to death”. While the latter – words from the living friend – makes the dead “disappear again”, thus adding death to death and “indecently” pluralising it (qtd. in Brault and Naas, 2001: 24). Derrida “cites and interrupts the citation” in the hope that he will arrive at the “punctum” that reinforces the “singularity” of his colleague’s work (Brault and Naas, 2001: 24).

In her feminist reading of his discourse, Holland gently chides Derrida for its masculine emphasis. She asks, “what becomes of the daughter in this hauntology?” (Holland, 2001: 65). Yet, in introducing his extended discussion on ghosts in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida speaks of the underpinning importance of justice – “Of justice where it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer”. To bend Derrida to the purpose here, “this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*” has the capacity to encompass the feminist ghost and the oppression under patriarchy expressed by it (Derrida, 1994: xix). Moreover, Chicago and Churchill’s works provide a possible answer to Holland’s question – what of the daughter? – insofar as their ghosts present not an Other or male-determined idealisation, but a more complex representation of Woman.

It is, then, the figure of the ghost that links both the past with the present and the dead to the living. Put another way, the ghost brings death nearer to the living, and the living nearer to death. The same can be said of the theatre performing history. In a kind of ghosting of the ghost, the theatre brings a version of the past closer to a live audience, and a live audience closer to a version of the past. As Rokem contends, “The theatre ‘performing history’ seeks to (...) create a community where the events from

this past will matter again” (Rokem, 2000: xii). Theatre performing history also makes the intangible ghost more tangible.

### **Ghosts at the Table: Churchill**

In the terms argued in this article, the figure of the ghost takes on a forceful presence at Churchill’s dinner table in Act One of *Top Girls*. Joseph Marohl repeatedly refers to the women as “ghost characters” in his analysis of the play (Marohl, 1987: 376-88). Nevertheless, the embodiment by actors in performance – of the ninth century Pope Joan, thirteenth century Buddhist nun Lady Nijo, nineteenth century Scottish traveller Isabella Bird, and two figures represented in art and literature, Patient Griselda and Dull Gret – works to undermine this ghostliness. So, too, in a sense, does Churchill. She has them emphasise their corporeality by demonstrating, for the most part, a healthy appetite. As Luckhurst observes, Churchill’s characters “have nothing of the air of ghosts, their gradual collapse into drunken, chaotic discord lending them a peculiar charge” (Luckhurst, 2015: 90).

Yet, there are clues in the text that encourage a reading of Churchill’s women as ghostly figures. Firstly, the overarching premise that these characters from such disparate eras could convene at the same table in identical time with the contemporary Marlene immediately alerts the spectator to a temporal tangle and defiance of the laws of logic. Next, the three characters based on real historical figures speak of visions and ghosts, recognise the intermingling of life and death, and struggle with loss of the self. One even narrates the ultimate loss of self: her own death.

Isabella Bird spends time speaking of grief and mourning, first about her father, next for her sister, then a lover, and finally for her husband (Churchill, 1991: I. 4, 9-11). Her own mortality, and that of those she loves, occupies her thoughts. She relates, at various points throughout the dinner, that she felt her life was over at forty, that “half” of herself “had gone” after her sister’s death, that a lover who died with a “bullet in his brain” appeared to her in a vision and then “vanished”, and that her husband was “a skeleton with transparent white hands” who “faded” and left her (Churchill, 1991: I. 7, 10-11). Yet she greets the idea of Buddhism, with its implication of existential escape to new life through rebirth, with the “most profound melancholy” (Churchill, 1991: I. 6).

In Isabella’s story of her lover and the vision she had of him, Lady Nijo immediately recognises and announces the arrival of, “A ghost!” (Churchill, 1991: I. 10). This is not a surprise because Japanese culture readily recognises the existence of the ghost – the *shiryō* – and the primacy of “relationships between the living and the dead”

(Iwasaka and Toelken, 1994: 6-18). Lady Nijo's viewpoint, linked to Buddhist beliefs, sees a world where her father is delayed entry to heaven because his prayers are interrupted, and her lover is relegated to one of "three lower realms" in death because of her illicit affair with him (Churchill, 1991: I. 4, 10). Nijo states about her lover at various points, "I couldn't bear to think in what shape would he be reborn (...) In what shape would he return? (...) Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me" (Churchill, 1991: I. 10-11).

As Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken point out, the topic of death in Japanese culture "brings into focus a number of other very important elements in the Japanese worldview: obligation, duty, debt, honor, and personal responsibility" (Iwasaka and Toelken, 1994: 6). This is strongly underscored in the stories of Nijo, where the weight of obligation to her father, and then to the Emperor to whom she "belongs", determines her destiny (Churchill, 1991: I. 3). In an echo of Isabella's travels, when Nijo falls out of favour with the Emperor, she walks Japan for twenty years. The difference, though, is Isabella is only "half-gone" whilst Nijo is like a ghost already. "I left on foot, nobody saw me go," she says (Churchill, 1991: I. 12). At another point she asks of the women at the table, "Haven't you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already. You've all felt like that" (Churchill, 1991: I. 7).

Pope Joan has certainly felt like that. In fact, in one of the more memorable episodes at the table, she recounts her own death. In the description of this, her elaborate disguise as a man starkly unravels when she gives birth to a baby in the street during a papal procession. After a cardinal announces her the 'Antichrist', she informs the table that, "They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death" (Churchill, 1991: I. 17). Joan is also aware of events after and in reaction to her death (Churchill, 1991: I. 18-19). This capacity to narrate her own ending in the here and now of the dinner seems to underscore that she, along with them all, is, indeed, a revenant momentarily reliving events of the past. Furthermore, both her awareness of events after her own death and her attendance at Marlene's dinner works to suggest that she continues to ghost history, to watch its unfolding.

A consistent theme among these women is the struggle to balance historic preconceptions of obedience, duty and obligation with the desire to live their lives fully. Not to live just as daughter, mother, lover, wife, but as their own person. If any one thing, more than any other, links the stories at this dinner table it is the battle to achieve and maintain the sense of self. Here though, perhaps all that remains is a ghost. As Savran remarks, "the ghost is always the token of an intensely personal loss, a loss so great or so painful that one is loath to acknowledge it" (Savran, 1999: xviii-xix).

Whilst themes of struggle and desire are pervasive in women's biographical writing of the time, Rayner's reminder that ghosts "do not have the power of action" and that they "call upon the living to act for them" is apposite here (Wagner-Martin, 1994: x-xi; Rayner, 2006: xx). The call to action at this table is, in the first instance, to the contemporary character of Marlene and, to a lesser extent, to the witnessing audience. Ghosts "invest the living with the 'spirit' to act, but they need the living to fulfill their demands, to respond, and ultimately to set them to rest" (Rayner, 2006: xx). It might be argued that Pope Joan and the other ghostly figures at this table are sharing their tales of lived experience so that Marlene, in a very changed world, understands she has succeeded through the lessons of the past. Yet whether Marlene has the character and capacity to apply these lessons in the present and to lay these ghosts to rest is, in part, a question explored as the play unfolds.

While *Top Girls* speaks chiefly to the idea of ghost as historical character, it also addresses the broader implication of ghosting in its reception. It does this through the device of role doubling in performance. One consequence of the doubling is the historical women are, in effect, ghosting the contemporary characters. As first performed, ghosting enhances the numerous parallels in Churchill's text. For example, both Marlene's working-class daughter Angie and Dull Gret, who 'ghosts' her, link ideas of disturbance and revolution through history and its betrayal. Alternatively, Marlene's sister Joyce, ghosted by the great explorer Isabella Bird, has been compelled by circumstance to abandon adventure. Here, ghosting between characters highlights an acute difference.

There is another ghost at Churchill's table that it would be remiss not to acknowledge. It is that of British Prime Minister Thatcher. She is not an embodied character at the table or elsewhere in Churchill's drama, but her presence haunts proceedings and her politics fuel the action of the play. The play was written – and is set – at a time when debate raged about her economic rationalist policies. The play itself is regularly read as a critique of Thatcherism, and while there is no reference to her in the dinner scene, she is the figurehead for the "pivotal moment in British history" that catalyses the gathering of Churchill's ghosts (Churchill, 1991: back jacket). As Aleks Sierz points out, Thatcher and her Tory cohorts haunt recent British drama more generally. He observes, "National identity is represented as an unhappy present haunted by an unjust past" (Sierz, 2011: 124).

In her book about haunting and the sociological imagination, Avery Gordon observes that the novelists Toni Morrison and Luisa Valenzuela, "comprehend the living effects, seething and lingering, of what seems over and done with, the endings

that are not over” (Gordon, 1997: 195). The observation might equally be applied here, certainly in relation to Churchill as playwright but, especially, about her ghostly diners. For, surely, they themselves represent ‘endings’ that are not over, they seethe and linger, and seek out the living Marlene to comprehend and act on the effects of this ‘not over’.

### **Ghosts at the Table: Chicago**

Gordon’s idea of ‘endings that are not over’ might apply equally to the ghosts that assemble at *The Dinner Party*. Chicago’s table, like Churchill’s, is set for a ghostly banquet. However, if Churchill’s ‘living’ ghosts are distinguished by visual embodied presence, Chicago’s, on the other hand, are characterised as a visual absence. Yet, the figure of the ghost is stamped with variable degrees of (in)visibility. Like the operation of time in theatre, Chicago’s historical identities become invisible energies in the performance of *The Dinner Party*.

Despite the myriad ways it figures in theatre history, David Edgar claims the ghost-as-character’s “effectiveness in holding present failings and past errors to account is proved by Chairman Mao, who banned all plays with ghosts from the Chinese theatre” (Edgar, 2009: 188). Whilst it is difficult to imagine a ghost triggering this much discomfort today, Chicago might well shiver in recognition. After all, *The Dinner Party*’s attempt to make amends for the erasure of women’s achievements in the past called forth a stormy reception. Edgar further identifies the central dramatic function of the ghost, “is to exhort the living to exact revenge” (Edgar, 2009: 189). In a sense, Chicago uses her invisible *Dinner Party* ghosts as a call to the living to redress the erasure of women’s achievements through patriarchy, and, as a call to herself, to avenge art history’s assertion that there are no great female artists (Chicago, 1975; 1996). As Jane Gerhard notes, “The circulation of *The Dinner Party* became its own parable about the feminist artist, casting her as an avenging David going toe-to-toe with the Goliath of a male-dominated art establishment” (Gerhard, 2013: 3).

Yet the effect of Chicago’s table, implying the potential of women’s presence, can also be read in other, more nuanced, ways. For instance, in discussing Shakespeare, Edgar notes the playwright’s ‘hauntings’ – often in the form of “witches, fairies, sprites and phantoms” – take an audience to, “the site of love and death, of disrupted ceremony, of things made strange. It’s the liminal zone” (Edgar, 2009: 196). This ghostly zone conjures up notions of threshold, transition, and the in-between that Chicago and *The Dinner Party* found themselves in: created and received, on the one

hand, in the transitional space between modernism and postmodernism; and on the other, on the threshold of the challenge that second-wave feminism wrought to patriarchy. It is, also, arguably, the liminal zone the spectator occupies when encountering Chicago's work: with glimpses of love and death in the embroidered table runners, a banquet without food and guests, and plates that hover between representations of butterfly and vagina.

Alternatively, Carlson's idea of the 'haunted stage', configured to include not just the idea of ghost as historical figure, but multiple hauntings of text, body, production, and space, occasions a theatre that, "weaves a ghostly tapestry for its audience" (Carlson, 2001: 165). Certainly, Chicago's 'stage' is haunted by the women from history she has – and even has not – represented. Moreover, Carlson's observations point equally to the divergent artistic, feminist and political readings in the history of *The Dinner Party's* reception which haunt any encounter with Chicago's work today.

At specific points in the work's reception Carlson's idea of the 'haunted stage' comes, prominently, to the fore. For example, the ghosts of Chicago's co-workers are a palpable presence in the work's initial reception (Chicago, 1996; Davies, 1980; Jones, 1996; Levin, 2007b; Thompson Wylder, 1999). As Gerhard explains, the work's "place in feminist history and memory" is tarnished by the criticism that Chicago "exploited" the volunteer women who worked alongside her (Gerhard, 2013: 18). As one reviewer pointed out in 1980, "Although Chicago herself is internationally known, few of the women who produced the piece gained status" (qtd. in Gerhard, 2013: 228). This idea continues to circulate: even as far away as Australia in 2013 in an art gallery where a Zine depicting the tensions in Chicago's studio is exhibited as part of a survey of feminist art.<sup>2</sup>

At another moment in time, a dinner for more than a thousand women that accompanied the installation's opening in Australia as part of bicentennial celebrations in 1988 was held at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne. This is a site with many influential ghosts: from hosting the final Federation Convention of 1898, "an occasion on which women were completely absent", to the opening of the First Commonwealth Parliament of Australia in 1901 (MacNeill, 2008). Finally, the reception of the installation's plates reveal the spectre of the explicit female body in representation.

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<sup>2</sup> The work by Frances (Budden) Phoenix is titled *Our Story/Herstory? ... Working on Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party'* (1982). It was exhibited in *Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art*. Curator, Laura Castagnini. VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, 27 April - 25 May 2013.

Alongside these instances of ghosting in *The Dinner Party's* reception, Chicago's work, as with Churchill's, also addresses the notion of the ghost as historical character. Chicago's women are visually absent and present only in the imagination, yet Peggy Phelan offers a useful way of reading the ghost at Chicago's table. Writing about the death of her sister, in a work that, in part, deals with "the story of the woman as immaterial ghost", Phelan recounts a car trip with her family where they grapple with the "captivating presence" of her sister's ghost (Phelan, 1993: 6-12). Phelan calls to mind the ghostly presence of the absent women at Chicago's dinner table. In this way, they become simultaneously absent and present, conjuring, in a sense, Derrida's "ghost that is the phantom of no flesh" (qtd. in Phelan, 1993: 13).

At another point Phelan writes, "Just as we understand that things in the past determine how we experience the present, so too can it be said that the visible is defined by the invisible. Or, as Marianne Moore put it, 'The power of the visible/is the invisible.'" (Phelan, 1993: 14). In relation to *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's visibility as an artist could be said to be defined by the invisibility of the women artists who have preceded her; or, as an echo of Moore, the power of the visible aspects of *The Dinner Party* derives from the invisible histories, struggles and stories they record.

It is tempting to ask if it is the 'captivating presence' of the ghost that explains a paradox in the work's reception. As Amelia Jones notes, the general public and some "popular" feminists applaud the work for the very attributes that trigger conservative art critics to denigrate and poststructuralist feminist art theorists to censure the work (Jones, 1996: 89). Both feminist art theorists and modernist critics were very concerned to categorise and define the visible aspects of the work, particularly the plates. However, is it possible that it is the invisible aspects, Edgar's 'liminal zone', that emphasises itself more strongly in the imagination of a spectator not approaching the work through the frameworks of poststructuralist or modernist art theory?

In a discussion of trauma and embodiment, Phelan further elucidates ideas of the ghost, loss, death, mourning and the psyche that suggests theatre's potential for a "special relation to art as memorial" (Phelan, 1997: 3). To borrow from Phelan, might it also be the case that any installation of *The Dinner Party* acts as a kind of memorial site – a symbolic mass grave – and the spectator attends in the role of 'mourner'? Is it this evocation of loss and death in *The Dinner Party* that leads San Francisco Museum director Henry Hopkins to observe the "power it held" over its audience; and a reviewer to note that in Montreal thousands of spectators filed by the table "in an almost religious manner"; and for John Perreault to write in 1980 in *The Soho News*: "It is an important work; it is a key work. Certain conservative journalistic critics may call it

kitsch to their dying day, may puritanically rage against its sexual imagery, may imply over and over again that it can't be good art because it's too popular; but I know it's great. I was profoundly moved" (qtd. in Levin, 2007b: 314-330; Jones, 1996: 84).

Gail Levin asserts that, in part, the infamy of Chicago's "butterfly/vagina motifs" and their "resonance through time" might have aided *The Dinner Party* to persist and ultimately secure a home at the Brooklyn Museum (Levin, 2007a: 89). Possibly, though, it is 'the story of the woman as immaterial ghost' that will lend the work a timeless and enduring power. The dramatic ghost, in exhorting 'the living to exact revenge', signifies there is unfinished business at hand. *The Dinner Party* implies, through its ghosts, and like the ghost figures in Churchill's *Top Girls*, a potential call to action.

### **The Call of the Ghost**

As previously stated, the ghost figures in Churchill's play are visually present; whereas in Chicago's installation they are visually absent and, in part, literally objectified as plates. Similarly, it could be said the ghosts in *The Dinner Party* are more restless than in *Top Girls* because they spill outside the frame of the work itself to operate in reception. Such statements might suggest an emphasis on the differences in the deployment of the ghost between Chicago and Churchill's works, yet two important aspects work to highlight the similarities. These are the 'call to action' and the role of the 'artist as ghostwriter'.

To recall, Rokem maintains that theatre performing history attempts to "overcome both the separation and the exclusion from the past", to offer an "organized repetition" of it that positions its "chaotic torrents" in an "aesthetic frame" (Rokem, 2000: xi-xii). Furthermore, Rokem reads history for its failings and contends that theatre, with the actor functioning as a kind of "hyper-historian", attempts to "confront" and "counteract" its "destructive forces" (Rokem, 2000: 3, 24-25). "The cathartic processes activated by the theatre performing history," he writes, "are more like a 'ritual' of resurrection, a revival of past suffering, where the victim is given the power to speak about the past again" (Rokem, 2000: 205). While his comments are specifically about theatre and actor, it is proposed here that Rokem's ideas resonate with aspects of both *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party*. In this instance, the staging of a dinner party is the chosen aesthetic frame that holds the centuries together; and Chicago and Churchill act as 'hyper-historians' excavating 'destructive forces' in relation to women. They attempt to confront and counteract. They give voice, or at the

very least an invisible energy, to these women to inform the present about the past again.

In a similar vein to Rokem, Savran maintains that the ghost, while it “may not imagine itself a victim”, should be seen as a “casualty of history” (Savran, 1999: xix). He goes on to observe, “oppressed spirits roam the earth because they cannot be consigned neatly to the past. Rather, they are the sign of the interpenetration of the present by the past, of the fact that we still live with the demons, spirits and ghosts of those persons and oppressive social institutions we thought we had put behind us” (Savran, 1999: xix). This is, arguably, the impact in representation of Chicago and Churchill’s ghosts. In the presentation of individual stories the ghost itself does not necessarily present as victim, but Chicago and Churchill, in effect, ask an audience to consider the broader historical implication of the collective stories. Furthermore, they ask an audience to consider how that implication operates in the present of, for example, American second-wave feminism or Thatcher’s Britain.

Even today, encountering *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum or in an art history book, or experiencing *Top Girls* in production, the same can be said to hold true. In other words, the ghost asks an audience to consider how historical implication operates in an allegedly ‘postfeminist’ globalised world. For ghosts are “unshackled from living time”, “time doesn’t bind them” (Appelbaum, 2009: 36). In other words, they demonstrate ample capacity to operate out of time, cross time, and return in time.

In Australia, for example, two 2012 productions of *Top Girls* to mark the play’s thirtieth anniversary saw a number of ghosts circulating in reception. As might be expected, these included consideration of bourgeois feminism, capitalist economy, and the figure of Thatcher. More surprisingly, the reception of both productions became entangled in a renewed concern about the lack of creative leadership opportunities for women in Australian theatre (Brooker, 2012; Lally and Miller, 2012; Pullen, 2012). Julia Gillard, Australia’s first female Prime Minister at the time, also became a touchstone for contemporary comparisons around questions of women and power (Summers, 2013). Ironically, Gillard, too, has since become a ghost in the Australian political landscape.

The most prevalent discussion amid press reviews for both productions went to the question of the play’s relevance. In effect many of the reviewers asked, is the play dated? Does it deserve production, not once but twice, in 2012?<sup>3</sup> As Murray Bramwell pointed out in the national newspaper, some audiences find the presentation of the

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<sup>3</sup> These questions were addressed to varying degrees within all but four of the 28 reviews considered across both productions. The majority declared the play still relevant.

play's concerns too obvious, while others who seek contemporary relevance in its message find it too obscure (Bramwell, 2012). Similarly, the spectator who looks at *The Dinner Party* through a contemporary lens might think it naïve or odd, a relic of a former time. Yet Gerhard contends the work still has an “uncanny ability” to lure spectators into its imaginary community of women. Accounting for its continuing appeal, she argues, “The brilliance of *The Dinner Party* lies in its ornate, visually elaborate, riotously colorful, and simple emotional force” (Gerhard, 2013: 285).

Gordon calls the process of noticing the ghostly presence a “profane illumination” (Gordon, 1997: 205). This, too, is pertinent in relation to *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party*. She writes, “when you know in a way you did not know before, then you have been notified of your involvement (...) when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it” (Gordon, 1997: 205-06). As Appelbaum also contends, the entrance of a ghost implies “a responsibility (...) for the phantom other” (Appelbaum, 2009: 3). As a corollary, any encounter with Chicago or Churchill’s ghosts offers the possibility for ‘profane illumination’ and, by implication, an opportunity – even a responsibility as some might argue – to act on and after their ghostly appearance, and subsequent disappearance. Yet, who can say what shape this act might take in the hands of a spectator? Regardless, there is a political purpose to Chicago and Churchill’s ghosts, that, at the very least, initiates a ‘call to action’. As Gordon stresses, the ghost notifies not only a corrupted present which is “historically entangled”, but also reveals “the longing for the arrival of a future, entangled certainly, but ripe in the plenitude of nonsacrificial freedoms and exuberant unforeseen pleasures” (Gordon, 1997: 207).

At one point in his lecture on Marx, Derrida points out that part of the purpose of a spectre’s “conjunction” is to “conjure [it] away”. He observes, “One must, magically, chase away a specter, exorcise the possible return of a power held to be baleful in itself and whose demonic threat continues to haunt the century” (Derrida, 1994: 96). The feminist ghost is no exception. The ghosts in *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party* ask us to consider, after Derrida, that “the cadaver is perhaps not as dead, as simply dead as the conjunction tries to delude us into believing” (Derrida, 1994: 97). Put another way, issues of work, power, education, motherhood, systemic violence, and erasure – to name just a few represented in *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party* – are potentially as relevant for women today as ever. The discussion around these issues might have shifted but that does not mean the issues themselves are necessarily dead and buried.

In her feminist reading of Derrida, Holland also asks another question pertinent to the interests of this article: “From whom, then, am I to learn to live, finally?” After

all, she cannot learn from the masculine-conjured “ghost of a woman who never lived” (Holland, 2001: 67). In *Top Girls* and *The Dinner Party* the spectator largely encounters the ghosts of women who did live and she (or he) has the opportunity to observe and apply, to ask, in an echo of Derrida, “Whither?” (Derrida, 1994: xix).

### **Artist as Ghostwriter**

In activating the ghost, both Churchill and Chicago have participated in a kind of writing – or rewriting – of history. As such, and like the historian, they “study the shape of evidence” and “determine how its form outlines the contour of an absence, a void, or a silence” (Conley, 1988: viii). There is a contradiction in historiography, though, because while a “sense of loss” is at the heart of the consideration, the “void” is quickly crammed with the information gained in the process (Conley, 1988: viii). Put another way, historiographers – and, by extension, artists and playwrights acting as hyper-historians – deny “loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and a labor against death” (De Certeau, 1988: 5). In this sense, then, both Chicago and Churchill are implicated in a labour against death and loss.

Introducing De Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, Tom Conley asserts that the historian produces the past through “practicing arcane crafts of resurrection, animation, and even ventriloquism” (Conley, 1988: viii). As introduced earlier, the idea that the theatre performing history momentarily resurrects or revives the dead is, however, problematised by De Certeau’s consideration of the issue in historiography. Words about the dead in history books are written to be “an exchange” between the living, between writers and readers. In other words, “Whatever is expressed engages a group’s communication with itself through this reference to an absent, third party that constitutes its past” (De Certeau, 1988: 46). He further contends that, “to speak of the dead means to deny death and almost to defy it. Therefore speech is said to ‘resuscitate’ them. Here the word is literally a lure: history does not resuscitate anything” (De Certeau, 1988: 47).

The artist as hyper-historian is facilitating a similar process, an exchange among the living. Theatre and art might even be said to accentuate this notion of exchange and communication between the living. For example, reading a history book is often, but not always, a private experience. On the other hand, attendance at a theatre or museum is usually, but not always, a shared, communal experience. With the latter, the

possibility for exchange and communication among the living is immediate and palpable.

The more troubling aspect of De Certeau's observations concerns the 'lure' he identifies in history's stated capacity to 'resuscitate' the dead. By extension, is theatre's – and art's – power to 'resurrect', even in an illusory sense, also a lure? Certainly Churchill may not resurrect the real Pope Joan or Chicago the real Virginia Woolf but they do, in writing the ghost, resuscitate ideas of women's oppression, and give them oxygen among the living. There is also an implication available from De Certeau's observations that the exchange among the living gives nothing back to the dead. Yet, is not the 'call to action' discussed earlier an example of a way in which something might be given back to the dead? Surely, to learn from history – to recognise and respect its ghosts – gives something back in the present through remembering.

If, however, this is not enough, then a brief return to both the ghost of Derrida and his work on mourning, and De Certeau and Ricoeur's 'act of sepulcher', may prove fruitful. To conclude this article with a final return also seems fitting, as it recognises and honours the behaviour of the ghost. To recall, Derrida's conception of mourning involves letting the dead speak through the living and this, in a sense, keeps them alive. Further, the living speaking of the dead involves the delicate intermingling of citation – the deceased's voice – and interruption from the living voice giving something back to the dead. Additionally, the act of sepulchre in historiography is both the gesture of burying the dead in writing and the substance of writing itself. As Ricoeur notes, the writing "becomes the enduring mark of mourning" (Ricoeur, 2004: 366).

Similarly, it might be claimed Chicago and Churchill are both participating in an act of sepulchre through writing the ghost. Through the gesture of creating they find a place for the dead. *The Dinner Party* and *Top Girls* are the enduring marks of these gestures. They are also mourning, in the Derridean sense, the historic women called to their respective tables. The dead literally speak through the words Churchill has chosen and figuratively through the designs in Chicago's installation. Furthermore, the anxiety to find an optimal balance between citation and interruption in Derrida's mourning, arguably becomes, for the artist dealing with historical material, the tension to achieve a balance between research and interpretation. In this way of thinking, the act of interpretation by Chicago and Churchill can be said to give something back to their historic women.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the ghost has led itself here back to the sepulchre. There is now only one responsibility remaining in this ghost-ridden reading: to free it

from *The Dinner Party* and *Top Girls* – to let it depart – ready to return again elsewhere.

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