

2022-2023 Theatre Season

Magic in the Air

**Blinn College Division of Arts, Kinesiology &
Agriculture-Brenham Campus**

Vinegar Tom

Written by Caryl Churchill



Directed by Brad Nies

Technical Direction by Kevin Patrick

***Costumes, Makeup/Hair Design & Choreography by
Jennifer Patrick***



Vinegar Tom

By Caryl Churchill

2023 Texas Community College Speech and
Theatre Association Play Festiva Entry

Produced by special arrangement with
Concord Theatricals, Inc.



Resource Guide

This resource guide serves as an educational starting point to understanding and enjoying Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*. Please note that the interpretations of the theatrical work may differ from the original source content.

Synopsis

Inspired by the first woman prosecuted for being a witch in 1645, this powerful work tells the story of farm women who are unjustly accused of practicing witchcraft. The connection between the fear of female empowerment and England's 17th century witch hysteria is shown to be at the root of many societal issues.

Public Performances

February 16 & 17 *7:00 PM*

February 18 & 19 *2:00 PM*

Preview Performances

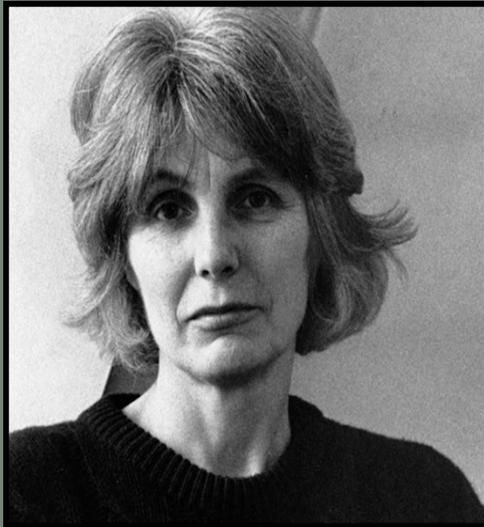
February 16 & 17 *1:00 PM*

Endowed Scholarship Auditions

February 18 *4:00 PM*

Dr. W. W. O'Donnell Performing Arts Center

Blinn College-Brenham



Caryl Churchill

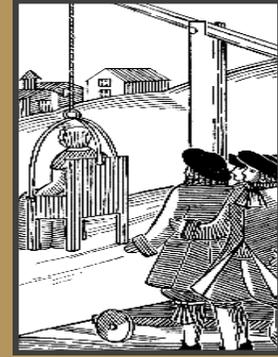
Born on September 3, 1938, Caryl Lesley Churchill was born in London, England to a fashion model and a political cartoonist. Her family moved to Canada after World War II, but she returned to England in 1956 to study at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She graduated in 1960 with a BA degree in English Literature. Four of her plays, Downstairs (1958), You've No Need to be Frightened, Having a Wonderful Time (1960), and Easy Death (1962), were performed at Oxford by student theatre ensembles. Downstairs was later performed and won first prize at the 1958 National Student Drama Festival. She has written several short radio dramas for BBC Radio, as well as several television plays for the BBC. Characterized as post-modernist, Churchill's plays focus on gender and sexuality through the modernist techniques of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, as well as the surrealist traditions of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. In 2010, she was Inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame.



The Persecution of Elizabeth Clarke

Serving as the inspiration for this play, Elizabeth Clarke (1565-1645) was the first woman to be persecuted by Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins during the mid-17th century in England. Clarke was accused by a local tailor named John Rivet of putting a spell on his wife during the winter of 1643. Aided by two assistants, Hopkins took on the role of "watcher," which included, among other things, keeping Clarke awake for several days to see if she would call upon the devil to relieve her torment. During his investigation, Hopkins reported that Clarke called upon several familiars for assistance. According to Hopkins, these imps included a white dog named Jarmana, a greyhound named Vinegar Tom, a pole cat named Newes, and a black, demonic rabbit named Sake and Sugar. Clarke eventually confessed and named other local women as witches. After this, Clarke was tried and hanged for practicing the dark arts.

Some 17th Century Methods to Tell if Someone's a Witch



The Spanish Boot

A device for getting witches to confess, the Spanish Boot was an iron casting for the leg and foot. Iron or wooden wedges were hammered in between the casing and the victim's flesh, thus, causing injuries.

Burning at the Stake

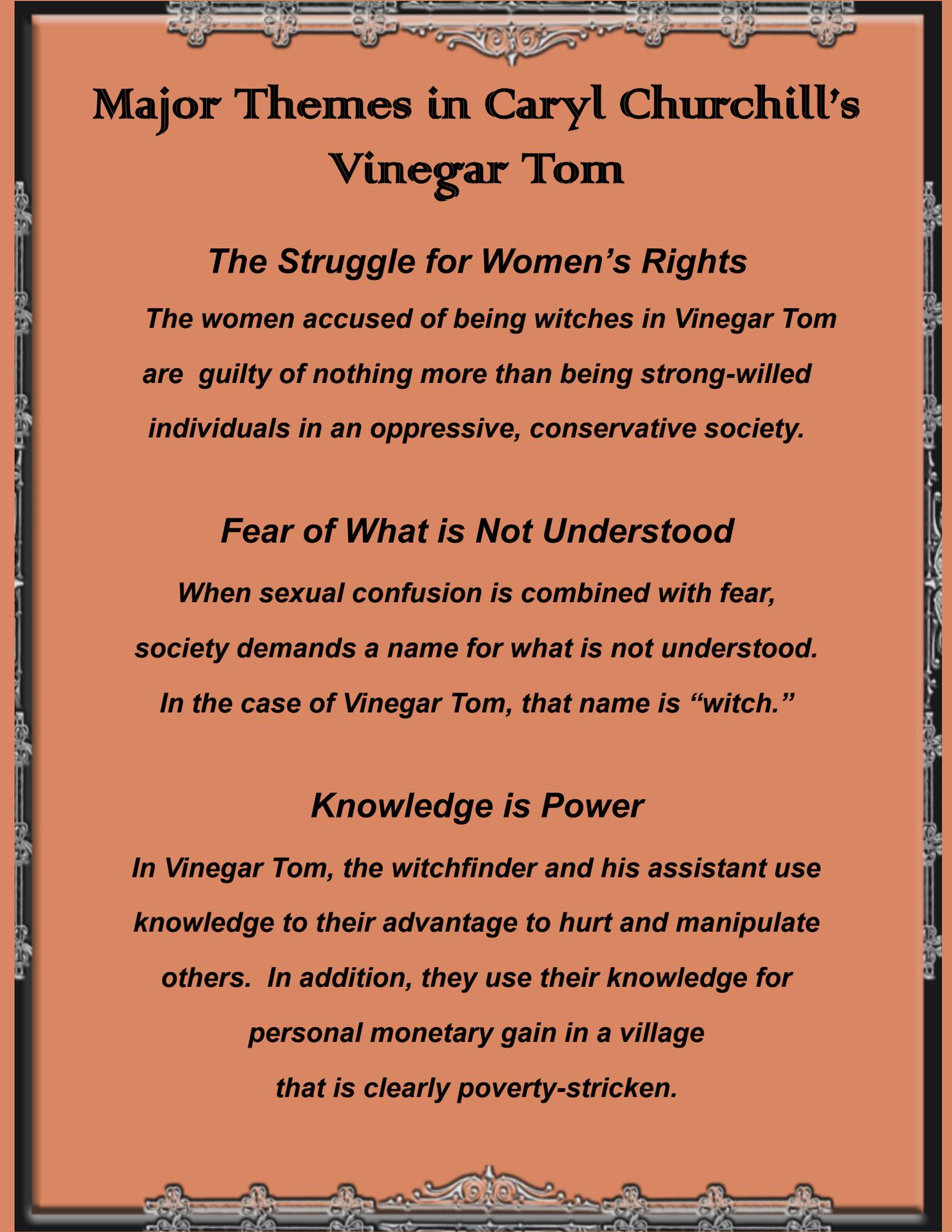
Witches were not burned at the stake in England or America, but they were hanged. Accused women in Scotland, however, were tested this way, as it was believed that a witch would be consumed quickly by fire, while an innocent would not.

Water Torture

As it was believed that witches would float due to their supernatural lightness, those accused were tied to a chair and lowered into a body of water. Unfortunately, by the time the accused was found innocent, they had usually drowned.

The Monstrous Regiment and The Birth of Vinegar Tom

*While attending an abortion march in 1976, Caryl Churchill met two actors named Chris Bowler and Gillian Hanna. The two had just founded a London feminist theatre company called The Monstrous Regiment, and they were looking for someone to write them a play about witches. A fledgling playwright at the time, Churchill was commissioned by the company and, three days later, presented them a first draft of Vinegar Tom. From there, the work came to be from a sense of ensemble between the writer and actors, as well as the need to create a story about a devastating time in women's history. Like its American counterpart, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Churchill's play appears to be about witches and witch hunts. Miller's play, however, is different in that *The Crucible* is rooted in historical records of the witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts. *Vinegar Tom*, while loosely based on the 1645 persecution of Elizabeth Clarke, is not specifically based on any real people. In addition, *Vinegar Tom* employs the use of modern language and music to help address issues that are relevant in today's society.*



Major Themes in Caryl Churchill's Vinegar Tom

The Struggle for Women's Rights

The women accused of being witches in Vinegar Tom are guilty of nothing more than being strong-willed individuals in an oppressive, conservative society.

Fear of What is Not Understood

When sexual confusion is combined with fear, society demands a name for what is not understood. In the case of Vinegar Tom, that name is "witch."

Knowledge is Power

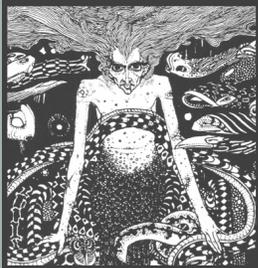
In Vinegar Tom, the witchfinder and his assistant use knowledge to their advantage to hurt and manipulate others. In addition, they use their knowledge for personal monetary gain in a village that is clearly poverty-stricken.

Some Famous Witches in Literature

Witches have been used as antagonistic characters in literature for as long as anyone can remember. The witch represents our fears, and the idea of the witch has changed in the same ways that society has changed. Here are a few of literature's best-known "baddies."



*The Weird Sisters from
William Shakespeare's Macbeth*



*The Sea Witch from
Hans Christian Anderson's The Little Mermaid*



*The Wicked Witch of the West from
Frank L. Baum's The Wizard of Oz*



*Lord Voldemort from
J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter and Sorcerer's Stone*

Sources

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