

TOP GIRLS
1984

Top ladies, top marks

CARYL Churchill's brilliant feminist play about career women *Top Girls* faltered on its opening in London two years ago. But after a triumph in New York the production returned to the Royal Court for a lap of honour and was rightly seen as one of the most important dramatised statements since 'Look Back in Anger'

with a stinging lesson for the uncaring monetary eighties.

This week the play has been receiving its amateur premiere by Teddington Theatre Club at the Hampton Court Theatre and, with the last performance tomorrow (possibly attended by the author), you should beg, borrow or steal a ticket for John Buckingham's splendid

realisation of this difficult text.

If the main theme is how career women (the "top girls" of the title) survive in a man's world, the evening explores many other layers with a curious prologue in which significant women from the past discuss how they have coped with their roles in a variety of male-dominated situations from a Japanese courtesan and nun, to Breughel's Dull Gret leading a charge of women against all the devils of hell. They meet in a Chelsea restaurant to celebrate the promotion of their hostess Marlene to the top job in an employment agency that serves only the best. But Marlene has a family secret hidden away in Norfolk, where her sister lives with lame duck Angie.

There is not a single weak link in the cast of eight women — nor for that matter in the group of four women who act as slick stage crew. But as with the professional production the actress playing Dull Gret and Angie (unimaginable double-casting) runs off with the acting honours — both as a formidable warrior woman with a giant appetite and as the sad school-leaver who still plays with younger kids and adores her auntie Marlene. Kathy Blackeby deserves a very prolonged round of applause for her achievement.

Charlotte Goddard and Linda Russell also succeed in surprising role diversification, one as the courtesan, the other as Chaucer's Griselda, both totally transformed as hard-faced agency girls in the second half of the play.

Marlene and her sister Joyce, played with sympathetic understanding by Sue Scarrott and Laurie Coombs, share the best scene of the evening as the Thatcherite realities are reviewed over a bottle of whisky in the Ipswich council house. And Lesley Hann (moving up from Youth Action Theatre) gives a fine performance as Angie's younger friend Kit as they huddle in the dog kennel at the bottom of the garden.

Anne Low dominates the table talk as a lovely Edinburgh lady, but is nicely upstaged by Davina Andres' Pope Joan describing unpon-tifical childbirth on Rogation Day in 856 AD.

John Thaxter