



Bassnett 1978 Notes on the Work of Monstrous Regiment

The full title of this paper by Susan Bassnett is 'Women's Theatre - Notes on the Work of Monstruous Regiment' (using the 16th spelling to indicate the link with John Knox's pamphlet).

It focuses on the company's first four productions, and discusses, amongst other things, the position of women in comedy/cabaret.

The paper was given in 1978 at a conference in Rostock (in the former GDR), and published the following year in the conference proceedings, *British Drama from the Mid Fifties to the Mid Seventies*.

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Women's Theatre - Notes on the Work of Monstruous Regiment

When I first started planning this paper I had in mind to analyse the portrayal of women by several contemporary British playwrights, to investigate what seemed to me to be the sexist and often naive treatment of women in the works of committed male writers. But on reflection I felt that such a paper would be too literary, since it would involve looking at the portrayal of women in selected plays and it would also lead me into cataloguing problems in that portrayal without attempting to offer solutions. I therefore judged it to be more fruitful if I were to focus my remarks about women and theatre on the work of what I consider to be the major British feminist theatre group, the Monstruous Regiment, and to take this opportunity to try to justify my belief in the value of this company's work.

Monstruous Regiment, a group of nine women and two men, was formed in 1975 and takes its name, with tongue in cheek, from John Knox's famous pamphlet, First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women, written in 1558 largely as an attack against Elizabeth I. The company is administered and organized by women and, unlike most small groups, has remained unusually stable, with seven founder members still together and every indication that this pattern will not change in the near future. In their publicity statement they explain the rationale behind their foundation, defining the dual nature of their struggle; they are

fighting back against the treatment of women, in the theatre and in society. Unemployment, small parts as wives or girlfriends, always serving, never acting on our own behalf. But women have always acted on their own behalf and we want to celebrate that action.

It is this emphasis on the role of the group in theatre terms as well as in political terms that makes their work so uniquely interesting. As they explained to me when we met and talked about their work at Warwick University on March 17th, 1978, they consider the work they are doing to be revolutionary.⁽¹⁾ They feel that, having originated in the established theatre and the music business, heavily male dominated areas in terms of numbers, their coming together was an attempt to try and redress the balance and to reflect what they consider had hitherto been suppressed - the portrayal of women as women, rather than as the adjuncts of men.

It should be stated quite clearly at this point that Monstruous Regiment are not an agit-prop group, like, for example, the Women's Theatre Group⁽²⁾

or Counteract,⁽³⁾ whose shows on the Nursery Action Campaign or the Women against Rape Campaign are pithy, hard-hitting and yet, in theatre terms, relatively unsophisticated and uninnovative, relying on uncomplicated staging techniques. Moreover, such groups actively involve themselves in discussion with the audience after their shows and perceive the function of their work to be part of a wider campaign in which the theatre is merely one useful practical instrument. Monstruous Regiment do not see themselves in this light, they have a policy of avoiding discussion with the audience after performances and they explicitly state that they see themselves not as Fringe Theatre, a label they utterly repudiate, or as minority theatre, but as "Counter-Cultural". When we talked I asked them how they considered themselves to be different from such consciousness-raising groups as Gay Sweatshop, for instance, and their reply clearly sets out their position:

I don't think we are to be equated with Gay Sweatshop in that we're dealing with issues which concern at least half the population and not in any way a minority. But one still gets that attitude, that somehow we are dealing with a minority because that's how women are perceived.

So although they recognize the importance of the work of other companies with a socialist bias, they do see their work as distinct and they make decisive claims:

We think ... there are lots of ways this work is at the centre of the culture.

We see ourselves as creeping out from underneath the bourgeois dominant ideology.

During our discussion I implied that they had always been concerned with the treatment of specifically feminist issues and the group denied this strongly, drawing my attention to the historical context of their first two shows and claiming that their role was rather "to bring a feminist eye to bear" on larger social issues. As they explained:

As a feminist group you are expected to do things on abortion, whereas in fact that isn't necessarily what a feminist group is all about. There are plays to be written about abortion, but there are plays to be written about everything.

Monstruous Regiment prefer to describe themselves as Socialist feminist, rather than Marxist feminist, which they feel implies a certain intellectual rigour and explained to me that the company might be best described as a kind of Broad Left Alliance, with a fair range of perspectives, from Left Labour to C.P., rather than from Liberal to W.R.P. But they were in agreement that they had learned a lot from the insights of Marxist Feminists in the theoretical

field and in particular that they had benefitted from the work done on the relationship of the family structure to capitalism. They felt, in fact, that although they spent a lot of time in political discussion it was not enough, but were also conscious of the problems of dividing their work between the theoretical and the practical, and felt that they needed to spend time in workshops for their own benefit as actors as well as in discussion.

So far Monstruous Regiment have had four shows:

Scum, death, destruction and dirty washing, by C.G. Bond, Claire Luckham and Monstruous Regiment, a musical celebration of the women laundry workers in the Paris Commune.

Vinegar Tom, by Caryl Churchill, a play about the persecution of women in the witchcraft mania of the seventeenth century.

Kiss and Kill, by Susan Todd and Ann Mitchell, a play about the nature of violence in society and in the relationships between men and women.

Floorshow, a cabaret by Caryl Churchill, Bryony Lavery, Michelene Wandor and David Bradford, with music by Helen Glavin, Roger Allam and Josefina Cupido, structured around the subject of the sexual division of labour.

In all these shows music is a key feature. Since the company are drawn both from theatre and the music business, their work reflects these different origins, and they do have one very talented musician, Josefina Cupido, outstanding in a group that has several good musicians. But whilst three of their shows have been plays with music, only Floorshow is the exception. With this show the company have moved into new areas and have tested their abilities in different ways. Traditionally, the music business and the compering of cabaret acts have been male dominated and consequently by entering the predominantly male preserve the company have been exploring new ground. The role of women in cabaret has been that of decoration or of servicing the male performers - hence the scantily dressed assistants in conjuring acts, the pretty girls in colourful costumes who assist comperes and quizmasters, the dancers whose routines serve as short interludes between the main (usually male) acts. That is not to say, of course, that there are no female comediennes, of course there are, but it is only when one sees Monstruous Regiment's Floorshow with women comperes, women comediennes, women drummers, women singers and the two men in very low-key positions that the extent of their innovation becomes apparent. In terms of costume and design, the company have striven to escape the stereotype of the women in star-spangled

bikinis and the costumes are a kind of clown's overall, in brightly coloured satin, decorative but by no means sexist.

Monstruous Regiment would like to continue their work in cabaret since they feel that this form offers potential for self-discovery and for political statement that the frame of the play does not. Using Otakar Zich's distinction between the technical and imaginary aspect of a performance, then what Monstruous Regiment are concerned with by using the cabaret form is the relationship between the actor and the stage figure of persona, rather than between the actor and the dramatic character.⁽⁴⁾ One aspect of the relationship between actor and persona that the group discussed in some detail was the question of voice. In cabaret, they felt, the personae they assumed were able to use root accents, childhood voices that had been trained out of them since they would be out of place within the confines of a given text. Moreover, the cabaret form allows for improvisations drawing on the persona that would not be permissible to the dramatic character.

The cabaret form, the comic routines and good music are the superstructure within which the statements are made about the problems facing women in the home, in employment, whether in factories or offices and, in particular, about the problem of women trying to come to terms with their own desires and capabilities in an oppressive system where even their male comrades, for all their good intentions, are still bound by prevailing hierarchical notions within that system. The essence of the women's plight in Floorshow was defined back in 1919 by Alexandra Kollontai when she said that:

If the sexual crisis is three quarters the result of external socio-economic relationships, the other quarter hinges on our 'refined individualistic psyche', fostered by the ruling bourgeois ideology. (5)

After all, as Roger Allam, in the group put it:

As men in the organized Left there is "The Women Question" and the Women Question is part of politics. For women on the left, it's not so much the Women Question, it's looking at politics in a different way simply because you are a woman and that presents different perspectives and different areas of perceptual thought. Whereas with men there's still a sense of it being another issue. For example, there's Trade Unionism, there's Racism and there's Women.

And it is interesting to note that the butt of many of the jokes in Floorshow is a male Trade Unionist, unable, though not theoretically unwilling to look after the children while his wife works, whilst in Kiss and Kill one of the two key male figures is another Trade Unionist who is unable to understand

and appreciate either his wife, whom he has driven into silence and withdrawal, or his mistress who resists his attempts to do the same and fights back.

Both Kiss and Kill and Floorshow represent a move towards a different kind of theatre, and it is significant that both the first two shows were set in an historical frame, creating both a tightness and a focus that the later shows do not have. In creating Scum and Vinegar Tom the group did a large amount of research, reading widely to learn more about the periods they were involved with and discussing their research at length. This collective method of preparatory work is something they set great store by and is obviously at the heart of their organization. Both the Paris Commune and the treatment of witches in the seventeenth century are areas of great possibility, and it is a long established successful device to use historical material in order to present a message that is both synchronic and diachronic, but whereas the Paris Commune lends itself readily to a Marxist appraisal of history, the witchcraft trials have for long been associated with the worst kind of reactionary voyeurism and in showing the appallingly callous treatment of women (by men and by other women caught up in the repressive milieu) Vinegar Tom tends at times to move close to the exploitation it seeks to oppose. In sc.xix, for example, where Goody shaves Susan to find the witches mark on her private parts, the treatment of the material is reminiscent of similar handling of such detail by a reactionary writer like Colin Wilson. Although the intention of the play is to show the correlation between the treatment of witches in the seventeenth century and the attitude of a male dominated puritanical contemporary society towards women who assert their own sexuality, I feel that it does not succeed, perhaps because the writer is herself too fascinated by those aspects of sex and violence she attacks.

But if Vinegar Tom is the weakest in terms of material of the four shows and the most clichéd, Kiss and Kill is, in my view, the strongest.⁽⁶⁾ That is not to say that there are not a number of flaws in the play - it is very long (when I saw it it ran for approximately 2 hours 45 minutes), the scenes involving the two men fishing are insufficiently integrated into the first part of the play and it does take a long time to build up enough impetus to carry the audience through the large number of changing scenes and involved relationships. In brief, it tries to encompass so much that one is aware of the effort of the trial and it takes a while for the method - a series of scenes, sometimes monologues, linked by Josefina Cupido's poignant singing - to begin to work. But having said that, I should like to note the strong points of this play that I feel represents an exciting step forward both in political and theatrical terms.

To briefly summarize the complexities of the thematic line: Louise, a woman who has left her violent husband, who continues to persecute her with cruelly destructive obscene phone calls, lives with her son Sam (never seen, thus cleverly avoiding all the clichés of the onstage mother-child relationship) and Sally, an energetic Trade Union worker who is having an affair with Carl and Pete simultaneously. Carl, an American ex-GI whose monologue on the horrors of the rape of Vietnamese women by American soldiers is one of the most powerful, terrible moments of the play, and Pete, a Trade Union official who is content to ignore his depressed wife Eileen and try to possess Sally, both learn through the course of the play that possession and love are not synonymous and that there are ideological weapons that must, in the long run, prevail over violence. Besides these characters there is Angie, the friend of Sally and Louise who is having an unsuccessful affaire with a married business man and there is Joy, Pete and Eileen's punk daughter who, with her gang of teenage girls attempts to recreate a male micro-world of violence and suppression of women until Eileen's sudden change of behaviour forces her daughter to consider her own role as a woman. The play begins with the characters locked into destructive patterns but ends with the women breaking out and asserting their rights. Louise struggles to free herself from the crushing burden of love for her violent ex-husband and finally refuses to passively sit and listen to the abuse he subjects her to night after night, Angie repudiates her weak lover and in a very funny scene relates how she destroys his most prized possessions - stereo, car, etc., Eileen leaves her husband and family and takes a temporary job at a holiday camp where she organizes people's entertainment and Sally refuses Pete's offer of a new life together because she can see that such a move would merely turn her into another Eileen. And the two men, having come to terms with the women's resistance to threats of violence, start to reappraise themselves and the play ends with Pete going off on holiday to think out his situation while Carl looks after the children.

So far I have taken rather a lot of time to outline the bare bones of the complex plot because such skeletal knowledge is essential in order to appreciate what Monstruous Regiment have tried to do with that material. The most exciting feature of the piece is the use of spatial tension between the characters, the way in which the performers play with space to focus the audience's attention on the points being made. In scene after scene - Louise alone with a telephone, Sally uneasily together with Carl and Pete, Carl delivering his Vietnam speech to Sally and Louise huddled together in a bed,

Eileen and Pete setting up physical barriers between each other with chairs - the audience is made aware of the relationships between the characters in spatial as well as thematic terms. It is easy to see how the company's exploration of performer/audience relationships in cabaret has extended also into exploration of the three sided relationship between audience/individual actor in isolation/groups of actors on a stage and has produced very exciting results. Moreover, together with this stress on physical space and the use of music as a linking device, the play contains several moments where the relationship between audience and actors is strained almost to breaking point by the weight of the emotional content of the material. In the Vietnam monologue, in the scenes with Louise on the telephone, crying silently as the voice-over of her husband attacks her to the limit of her (and our) endurance, or the scene where Louise reads over her collection of love letters in an attempt to exorcise the memory of past love from her mind the emotional impact is made even more powerful by the sustaining for longer than appears bearable of such intensity. Yet it cannot be said that the audience is being attacked - one feels that such moments strengthen the bond between actor, material and audience and that there is a genuine collective experience.

Collective activity is the key to understanding the nature of what Monstruous Regiment are trying to do. I asked them what way their work method differed from their experience in other companies and their answer stressed the unified approach to their material and their anti-hierarchical organization. They had always worked in the past, they said, with an artistic director, but the company now choose together what they would like to work on and commission writers. In this way actors and writers are involved jointly from the outset and everyone contributes. They were aware of the possible difficulties that an outsider coming to work with the company might feel, and Susan Todd summed up the most worrying aspect:

One of the major preoccupations of the group is how to work as a collective and the establishment of a proper, democratic code of conduct is continually under scrutiny.

Inevitably, during our discussion the whole question of women playwrights and the treatment of women in the works of Left-wing male playwrights came up. We discussed both Caryl Churchill, who has written for the company and may do so again and Pam Gems, on the assumption that they may be considered as the two principal new wave women playwrights, but there was general unhappiness about the latter's attitude to feminism and uneasiness about her ill-defined political position.

With regard to the treatment of women by male playwrights, the company agreed that they had discussed this issue at great length, but I should like to mention here just a few of the main points that arose from our joint discussion of this question. Firstly, they accept the premise that writers such as McGrath are conscious of the need for a feminist or pro-feminist perspective, but feel that he is unable to give that perspective because his training and experience lead him to "Feel, believe and experience women as peripheral to everything that's important." Little Red Hen, they felt, although it contained a major part for a woman (the central role, in fact) nevertheless portrayed a woman describing the way in which she had serviced and supported the men whose experiences she hands on to posterity. As Helen Glavin said:

The awful thing was not so much that (i.e. the service and support) because there were women who did that and still do, but what was bad was that in the last analysis she didn't say to the young woman "I hope you won't do what I've done, I hope you'll take the centre and push opinion forward and influence and form opinion, not just service the men around you who are forming opinion." That didn't happen and that's what really disappointed me about that play. I could have borne it if she'd said that even out of her rich experience, if she'd said "Actually get on with things I wish I hadn't done." That wasn't allowed her.

And even Yobbo Nowt was considered inadequate, on the grounds that the central character spent so much time putting herself down without anyone really contradicting her that the overall effect was that of the woman's situation being used in a patronising, if not altogether unsympathetic way.

We also discussed a number of other writers - Trevor Griffiths' dislikable women, Wesker's black/white cardboard women and the groups' conclusions on Arden and Bond seemed to me to be particularly relevant:

Some writers like Bond or Arden in the distant past are somehow more deeply sympathetic, though they don't present women in a way that would satisfy us and someone like Bond is interesting in the women he presents though they frequently carry the reactionary element of the drama. Again there's the perceptual difficulty in that yes, it is true that women are conservatised, they are often reactionary, their life makes them reactionary, dealing with the dynastic, dealing with nourishment, dealing with rearing children makes them reactionary so they may be portrayed in that way, sympathetically and with depth but you long for a woman that's not going to be carrying the reactionary of the piece.

By noting the inadequacies of the treatment of women by committed male writers Monstruous Regiment have not only drawn attention to the way in which

the feminist viewpoint affects material but have also questioned the nature of essentially male constructed theatre form. Gillian Hanna, attempting to describe the male experience of the world as "linear", notes that in Scum, Vinegar Tom and Kiss and Kill the group have been pushing towards "a kind of breaking up of things" which she sees as closer to the female experience:

For a woman, life and experience is broken backed. I think that women experience life very differently. For them life doesn't have that kind of linear overview that it seems to have for men. It's much more contradictory. And I think we've been trying to reflect that fragmented experience in what we do.

And she goes on to describe what she perceives as the limitations of the male playwright:

The male playwright's sensitivity is often like an empire builder - it wants to consume the whole world and then spit it out again in its own image. I think there's a tendency amongst male left-wing playwrights - because of their desire to write about capitalism which is a global phenomenon - to ignore the minutiae of day to day existence: the women's movement has always maintained that the personal is political. (7)

Monstruous Regiment's relationship to the Women's Movement is made explicitly in their publicity statement, where they declare that

the impetus for our group was the emergence of the Women's Movement, which has exposed "natural" roles to questioning. (8)

And Gillian Hanna takes that questioning a stage further when she considers the problem of whether a Socialist revolution must of necessity precede a feminist revolution:

I would say that in the "how" is an urgent necessity to find the dialectical relationship between socialism and feminism - to demonstrate that the two are inseparable - i.e. there will not be a socialist revolution without feminism and that a feminist revolution will not be achieved without socialism. (9)

It seems to me that the extent of the contribution that Monstruous Regiment are making, both to Feminism and to Socialism on the one hand and to theatre on the other, can be perceived in the way in which they organize and structure their work. They insist that they are not so much a feminist propaganda group as a company of serious actors and musicians (a claim that is easily substantiated when one compares their work with that of the Women's Theatre Group, for example), who are concerned with the problems facing women in theatre terms and in the wider social context. They see themselves, as I quoted previously, as "bringing a feminist eye to bear" on important issues such as the oppression of women in employment situations, or the relationship between woman as worker and woman as guardian of the home and family. As

Gillian Hanna explains succinctly:

...it is not just about politics; it's not just about the Women's Movement, but it is also about art ... (10)

Monstruous Regiment, therefore, are a company of committed theatre practitioners working both to redress what they perceive as an imbalance weighted in favour of men, and struggling to find new forms for their revolutionary material. It seems to me that the shape and structure of the company, seen together with their ability to analyze what they are setting out to do add up to a very positive picture, for here we have a group engaged and engaging in a dialectical process and offering an ultimate message of affirmation in their struggle for life and art.

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Footnotes

- (1) Gillian Hanna develops the question of revolution and theatre as follows:

There is a feeling - it is not so formal as to be a point of view - among a lot of people who work in left-wing theatre that the act of theatre itself is a revolutionary act - that doing that kind of thing you are ipso facto revolutionary. Now, I don't believe that for one minute. I don't think the theatre is going to bring about the revolution. I think that what does that is real political action, and in that sense I don't believe that theatre is a political act. Now while I say that, on the other hand, in a sense, for feminist theatre people, the act is a revolutionary act because what you are dealing with is the stuff of a revolution, which is the actual material change which occurs between men and women at a point of conflict. Now when one talks about political theatre, most left wing theatrical people always come back to the fact that the actual point of conflict is "production". In this sense you can say that that is why theatre isn't a revolutionary act, because the theatre is not comparable to producing in a factory. However, for feminists, the point of change is actually there. It is between men and women, and that is the material that we deal with, there and then, on the spot, every day.

Gillian Hanna, "Feminism and Theatre", Theatre Papers 8, 1978, p.5.

- (2) The Women's Theatre Group is a collective of seven members, all female, based in London and touring the country regularly. In their publicity statement they define their policy in these terms:

We aim to reach people who would not normally get to the theatre, and thus we play in venues such as schools, youth clubs, trade union meetings and community centres. We are concerned with presenting political issues from a woman's point of view in a thought provoking and entertaining way.

- (3) At the time of writing this paper Counteract was riven with internal problems and ideological differences finally led to a fragmentation of the group and to the setting up of a new group, Scarlet Woman, coexisting with the restructured Counteract company and both laying claim to material used in the rape show, She Asked for It. The stability and coherence of Monstruous Regiment is all the more remarkable when set against the normative pattern of short-lived small touring groups.
- (4) See Otakar Zich, Estetika Dramatického Umění, (The Aesthetics of Dramatic Art), Prague, 1931.
- (5) A. Kollontai, "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle", The New Morality and the Working Class, transl. A. Holt, Falling Wall Press, Bristol, 1972.
- (6) Whilst having doubts about the material of Vinegar Tom, it is only fair to note that the form is interesting, since naturalistic scenes are broken by very modern songs and the resulting fragmentary effect is both powerful and disturbing.
- (7) G. Hanna, op. cit., p.8.
- (8) I do not propose to discuss here at length the contradictions and problems raised when one considers the development of the Women's Movement, except to point out that although the organization is set up on a national basis and certain basic assumptions are shared, individual Women's Groups throughout Britain differ widely and there is no united political aim. At the tenth National Women's Liberation Conference, held in Birmingham on April 8/9th 1978 a seventh demand was added to the six demands at the core of the Women's Movement. In 1975 the four original demands of 1970 (equal pay now; equal education and job opportunities; free 24 hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand) were extended to include demands for financial and legal independence and an end to discrimination against lesbians together with a woman's right to define her own sexuality. The seventh demand insists on freedom from violence or sexual coercion and an end to laws which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women. The changing focus of the Women's Movement will be apparent from the way in which the demands, however exemplary, have moved from immediate practical considerations towards issues that involve lengthy processes of consciousness-raising before

they can be implemented to any satisfactory degree. The dangers inherent in the lack of a clearly defined political position and the lack of an organizational programme are all too apparent.

(9) G. Hanna, op.cit., p.3.

(10) G. Hanna, op.cit., p.13.