Reinelt 1993 The School of Hard Knox

The full title of this paper by Janelle Reinelt is: 'Resisting Thatcherism: The Monstrous Regiment and the School of Hard Knox'.

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Chapter 8

Resisting Thatcherism: The Monstrous Regiment and the School of Hard Knox

Janelle Reinelt

> . . . of necessitie it is that this monstriferouse empire of Women (which amongest all enormities that this day do abound upon the face of the whole earth, is most detestable and damnable) be openlie reveled and plainlie declared to the world
>
> —John Knox

It has been over twenty years since a group of young female theater professionals decided to form a company dedicated to women's writing, to women's artistic production, and to rethinking women's role in relationship to history. Taking their company name from John Knox's 1558 pamphlet and turning an insult into a banner, this company has become one of the most durable and long-lasting of Britain's fringe theaters. Joint Stock has not fared as well (the company closed its doors in 1989), nor has any other political theater group, not even 7:84, John McGrath's Scotland-based touring company. As for feminist theaters, the Women's Theatre Group preceded the formation of Monstrous Regiment by a year but has not been nearly as consistent nor as successful. These observations are not intended to set up ill-advised comparisons between groups that are all too often placed in competition for funds but, rather, to point out that, in spite of the various difficulties often besetting the company, Monstrous Regiment has made an important and lasting contribution to feminism and to the British theater in general.[1]

This contribution is even more commendable in light of the steadily deteriorating subsidies and the privatization of the arts occur-

ring during the Thatcher years. When the company was first formed, in the comparatively "fat" years of the mid-1970s, it was able to employ eleven people full-time as the core of what was then considered—by the company—to be a collective.[2] Michelene Wandor has documented that, at the time of the formation of Monstrous Regiment, the Arts Council had already begun the series of attacks and adjustments, which have had dire consequences for alternative theater since.[3] As this book goes to press, Monstrous Regiment's personnel number four, only one of whom is employed full-time, and a radical reorganization of the company is underway, one that maintains some of its traditional goals and commitments while adapting to the fiscal pressures of the present historical moment of post-Thatcher crisis.

Mary McCusker and Gillian Hanna are the originary members of Monstrous Regiment; they are both primarily performers. Chris Bowler has been a writer/director with the group off and on since its inception and is counted among the four permanent members as is general manager Rose Sharp. Monstrous Regiment has always been dedicated to developing new work: over the years various well-known writers such as Caryl Churchill, Claire Luckham, Bryony Lavery, and Michelene Wandor have worked on projects for the company. A number of the plays produced by the "monsters" over the years have appeared in print (*Vinegar Tom, Origin of the Species,* and *Teendreams,* for example).[4] Equally important are the productions that, while not quite requiring the label "performance art," have been based on improvisation and imaginative visual and aural work in conjunction with a developing text. Chris Bowler has devised two of these, *Enslaved by Dreams* and *Point of Convergence*. Another aspect of the company's work is the translation and performance of "foreign" material. Gillian Hanna is a gifted translator, allowing the company to introduce French and Italian work by Théâtre de l'Aquarium and Franca Rame and Dario Fo. During this past year the company produced Hanna's translation of Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux's *The Colony*.

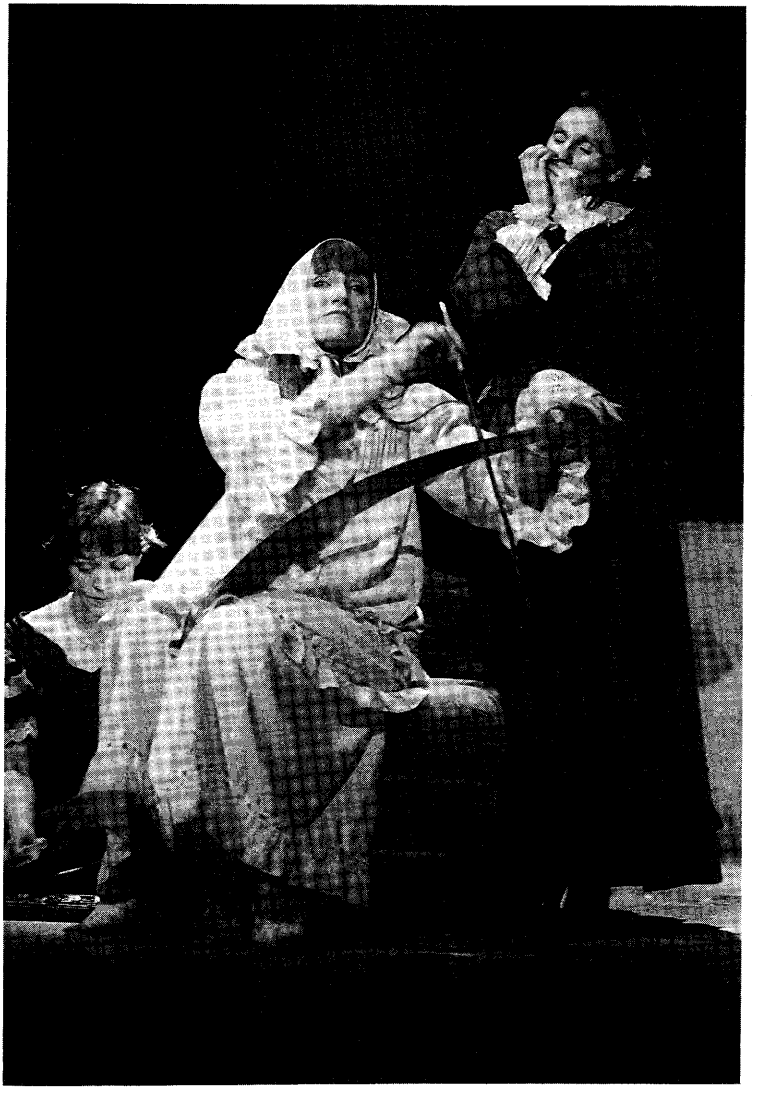
In the short space of this essay it is impossible to do justice to the range of feminist theater practice displayed in the history of the Monstrous Regiment. The early years of the company have been discussed and documented by Michelene Wandor and Catherine Itzin and also by American scholars Sue-Ellen Case and Helen Keyssar.[5] My purpose here is to examine some of the contradictions facing the Mon-

strous Regiment by very reason of their longevity and success and thereby to understand what is required to maintain a materialist feminist theater practice in an inhospitable sociopolitical climate over the inevitable changes of fifteen years. In the last part of the essay I will document and discuss some of the specific projects of the Monstrous Regiment from the last decade.

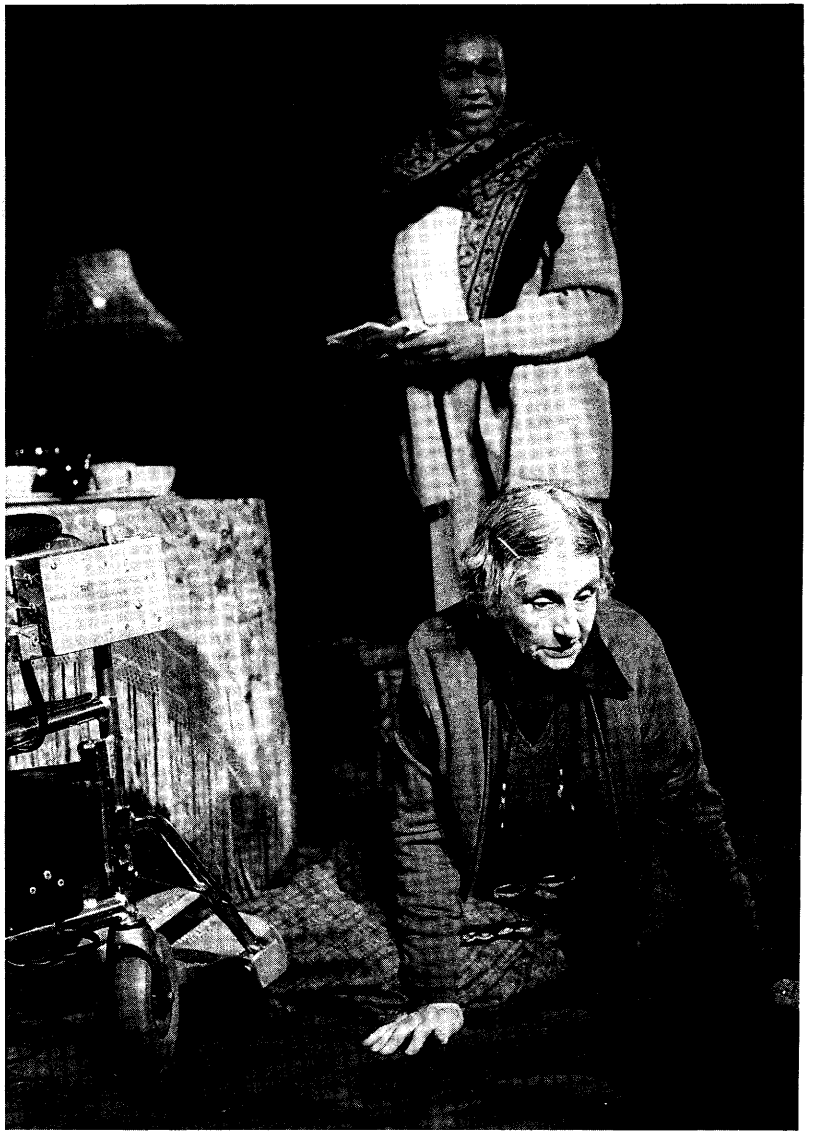
As Loren Kruger has observed in a perceptive essay, "the marginalization of women and the *legitimation* of that marginalization is central to the question of subsidy."[6] Kruger's argument is that subsidy traditionally shows preferment to those "stable" institutions, such as the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), whose permanent buildings combine with middle-class subscriber audiences and literary playscripts to ensure their legitimacy. Touring groups, performing for various local audiences in scattered spaces, often featuring plays that are neither fully "literary" nor fully performance art, are assumed to be unstable and their quality inferior. Of course, lack of adequate subsidy helps to produce the very conditions being faulted in Arts Council thinking.

The impact of the realities of subsidy politics can be seen graphically in the case of the Monstrous Regiment. The monsters are a touring group, usually performing on the road throughout England and Scotland and also in various London venues, as available. Since they are committed to developing new writing, their "scripts" often go through extensive workshop and preparation stages, taking several years to progress from first idea to finished production. Much of their work consists of playwrights' first plays or else pieces that have evolved, through improvisation and directorial experimentation, into scripts that are partly performance pieces and partly traditional literary playscripts. And, although they have achieved a good deal of critical acclaim, even among traditional critics, they are definitely perceived as being politically suspect, linked (correctly enough) to the identity politics of feminism, and therefore "marginal." Sometimes the language of male theater reviewers belies just how little progress beyond misogyny has been made: "Bryony Lavery's latest farce is a complete confusion. Miss Lavery belongs to that modern breed of bellyaching feminists who protest the role of women in what is believed to be a male-dominated world, which is nonsense. The plays are naturally propagandist material."[7]

The results of dwindling subsidies and the general inflationary



Left to right: Sally Cranfield, Celia Gore-Booth, and Tamsun Heatley in *Enslaved by Dreams* by Monstrous Regiment. Photo by Roger Perry, © Impact Photos.



Marcia Tucker as Kate and Joanna Field as Sophia in *Island Life*, by Jenny McLeod, directed by Jane Collins, designed by Iona McLeish. Photo by Mary Tisserand.

spiral, especially with respect to touring costs, have inevitably made an impact on the company. Salaries for fewer permanent members have resulted in less continuity in the overall direction of the company. Similarly, diminished support has meant fewer projects undertaken, smaller casts, less time for development of the material. Out on the road touring venues have also been affected as Thatcher policies have caused some borough councillors to cut subsidies to their small theaters. When these theaters consider bookings, they too often make first choice of RSC or repertory company offerings, rather than booking new, "untested" material from a women's group, which, while noted for its solid work, may or may not have Mary McCusker or Gillian Hanna featured in its current offering, may or may not have a "name" playwright or director or other cast members, may or may not stimulate reviewers' hostility because of its feminist slant.

A critical example of the way these aspects of producing under Thatcherism affect the future of the company is the 1990 production of *More than One Antoinette*.[8] This project began as an idea of director Debbie Shewell's, stimulated by *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's novel about the first Mrs. Rochester, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette is a Creole woman growing up in the West Indies just after the Emancipation Act, while Jane is the poor relation of a northern English family. In 1988 Monstrous Regiment used part of their Arts Council Revenue Grant, originally earmarked for commissions, to enable preliminary workshops for three possible projects. Of the three only Shewell's has been produced, although Chris Bowler's Cruelty/Isolation Workshop is still being developed toward a possible script.[9] In 1990 *Antoinette* was produced at the Young Vic Studio but did not go out on tour because it had an unknown author and play, and the cast of five was cost prohibitive. The revenue from touring, however, was, consequently, also not forthcoming. From one perspective the company's objectives were well served by the project: feminist material about historical matters, with a multicultural slant, developed into the work of a new writer. The "costs" of the show, however, included contributing to a financial crisis of significant proportions. The Arts Council, unhappy at the level of income being produced by the company, announced that it would not guarantee funding beyond September 1991. This act precipitated the extensive self-study and reorganization undertaken by the Regiment in recent months and ultimately, the decision to engage an artistic director for the company. It is certainly

not the case that *Antoinette* was the project that "caused" this crisis; it merely contributed, and illustrates through its combined circumstances both the necessary financial risks attendant upon Monstrous Regiment's work and also the possible results.

These various financial constraints entail dire political, or, more precisely, *ideological* consequences beyond pinching the scope and level of productions. Three of the most serious involve casting, the notion of the "collective," and the content of "feminism."

When finances determine casting one, two, or three actors, the tendency is to produce small-cast shows. (Although one alternative is to double, usually shows that use doubling have larger, not smaller, casts.) During the later part of the 1980s most of the Monstrous Regiment's shows have featured between one and three performers. Especially successful have been the 1989 one-woman shows, Ian Brown's *Beatrice* and Fo and Rame's *A Common Woman,* in which McCusker and Hanna, respectively, have appeared. Under these circumstances, however, McCusker and Hanna become ever more defined as constituting the company, which contradicts the notion of plurality and collectivity associated with the group. Furthermore, small-cast shows tend to throw the emphasis on individual experience, at the expense of the social group.[10] This happenstance cannot be completely otherwise, not even when the playwright is particularly concerned to represent social positions in the context of the flux of history, such as the highly political Chilean play *My Song Is Free* (1986). The presence on stage of a small number of characters tends, under most circumstances, to highlight internal psychological experiences and unique aspects of personality, rather than the social scope of a community or the dialectical nature of social life among diverse groups. Early Regiment plays such as *Vinegar Tom* and *Scum* were especially notable for these features—what Brecht called historicizing the narrative—and, while some recent work, including especially *Origin of the Species,* partially achieves these effects without the scope of a large cast, there is an unmistakable theatrical relationship between the size of the cast and the politics of representation.

Monstrous Regiment had continued to operate as a collective over the past fifteen years, if this means that the various decisions have been taken in common and the tasks shared among the permanent company members. But, like casting, that permanent company shrunk, and for much of the time McCusker and Hanna have been

the company, with some other women contributing to several projects over the years. Only Chris Bowler has maintained a relationship from the beginning, which still gives her company status, and even she has taken various breaks from active involvement from time to time. A number of others, such as Bryony Lavery, Susan Todd, and Nona Shepphard, have worked on multiple projects but cannot be said to be part of the collective. In choosing to hire an artistic director the company is acknowledging that, given the artistic/financial climate of the 1990s, it needs to have an identifiable person who sets the company's artistic agenda and who can be consistently accountable for its work. This change is not necessarily a bad thing nor a hands-down political loss for feminism, but it is a necessity directly tied to the arts management policies of the Thatcher era, which make it difficult if not impossible to continue alternative nonhierarchal modes of theatrical organization, which used to be a significant part, if always contested, of the feminist agenda.

Feminism itself has always been a contested terrain—definition and practice alike. As the Monstrous Regiment moved away from employing anything like a permanent company of women committed to the same goals and values, however, it is understandable that what the company's feminism means has become somewhat blurred. Not all actresses or directors, employed for one show, have explicitly feminist ideas. Younger women who have grown up after the second-wave struggle of feminism have a different relationship to it as a movement.

An example of the contradictions that emerge can be seen in the case of *Island Life* (1988). Author Jenny Mcleod is a young black woman who came to the Monstrous Regiment's attention when she won a prize with her first play, produced at Nottingham Playhouse in the mid-1980s. In interviews she makes it clear that she does not want to be expected to write plays about blacks nor about women. She does, however, have a point of view: "I think that what gets me going is that people should get on with their lives and not sit back and hope for the best. Make a go of the things that they've got, try their best. I'm trying. I want to be able to write the best play I possibly can one day, but I'm not in a position to write it yet."[11] On one hand, this is not the language of a committed identity politics person. On the other hand, Mcleod is twenty-five and has grown up under a different set of historical circumstances than the generation

of McCusker and Hanna. Her play, *Island Life,* is an intriguing drama of four older women, who are struggling with their personal histories and with the realities of aging and includes representation of black experience. The play is a clear demonstration that the personal is political. Yet the identity of the company blurs out of focus when the people who create the work do not share a specific feminist agenda. Comparing the loss of collectivity under an artistic director to the previous methods of employing free-lance directors for Monstrous Regiment's productions, McCusker commented: "If we still were a real collective, it would be a handing over of power to an artistic director, but it might even be seen as an enhancement since you hand over a great deal of power to individual directors, and it can be far more distressing with them. In a way they are responsible to you, but in a way they are out the door once the production is on.[12]

If the past decade has seen the Monstrous Regiment maintain the structure and goals of its original materialist feminist project, but also suffer some erosion in terms of the three issues noted above, the reorganization of the company under an artistic director may actually provide some positive trade-offs, of which continuity of vision is one. McCusker and Hanna will not hire someone who differs strongly in values and views from their own politics. And, while wanting to encourage and support the work of new younger women, they are also especially committed to representing the problems and situations of middle-aged women.

Since McCusker and Hanna are "middle-aged," part of their commitment reflects their own desires for challenging roles, as they readily point out. But, of course, this age group is also traditionally underrepresented, and, thus, encouraging work in this area is part of a larger feminist goal: "This is a definite preoccupation that we have and that we'd like to see reflected in the work and we don't always want to choose some new young writers. New exciting young writers come up, and must be discovered and nurtured, and we shouldn't ignore them, but we can also make a conscious choice to encourage older women."[13] In the past year the Regiment held workshops for which it explicitly encouraged older and disabled women to send in scripts. In a related move it offered public workshops on "writing plays with a socio-political agenda without writing polemic," "moving theatre out of the kitchen"—on writing in an epic form in order to broach "greater historical themes."[14] Thus, the political work of

the company has continued in spite of Tory restraints and will continue beyond reorganization.

The situation of the Monstrous Regiment in the context of a hostile government is exemplary of the situation of diverse groups struggling to resist the ruling hegemony. Gillian Hanna provides the long view of this predicament: "During the last thirty years, there has been a tradition of public support, which has allowed 'alternative' work to develop. But capitalism pushes everything into a commodity—water is a commodity, so why should art be treated any differently? For Thatcher, it has been terribly important to cut subsidies, important from a philosophical-political point of view. So socialists have to resist; we have to put up an articulate defense of the 'commodities' that should not be put up on the market place."[15]

In the remaining pages of this essay I will discuss several productions that embody various aspects of the work of Monstrous Regiment. In the first part of this piece the emphasis has been on the difficulties of producing materialist feminist theater during an era of repression; in this second part I would like to pay tribute to the achievements of Monstrous Regiment in the face of formidable constraints.

My Song Is Free (1986) is perhaps the most overtly political play Monstrous Regiment has produced in recent years, if "political" is understood as an explicit protest against the injustice of a specific contemporary situation. Set in Chile just after the coup, which replaced Salvador Allende with military dictatorship, the play was written by Jorge Diaz, from the personal accounts of four women who were "desaparicida," disappeared. The front of the playscript carries the notation: "The play is based on events which happened in Santiago, Chile, in the autumn of 1974 inside a secret detention centre belonging to the D.I.N.A. (today C.N.I., Chilean political police)."[16] When the play was performed, both in London and on tour, the company carried Amnesty International information on conditions in South America and led discussions after the play. Thus, the production itself participated in Solidarity work in a direct way. McCusker says they felt that "must do this play" and that, through "integrated casting," they were able to include South American women whose cultural experiences as women and as South Americans contributed to the research necessary for the production.

The play is, on the surface, a realistic thriller, which has some superficial resemblance to *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* insofar as both plays are set in prisons where prisoners of different political and class backgrounds struggle with issues of trust, friendship, and love. *My Song Is Free,* however, concerns itself only with heterosexual women and involves four, not two, prisoners in a complex web of interrelationships. One of the women, Rosario, works for the underground and has been told to expect a contact in the prison. Olga, the most likely contact, is also the most suspicious since she claims to be a double agent and has a mysterious history of being arrested and released repeatedly. Aurora is a famous actress who has apparently been picked up because of her casual association with Olga, and Jimena is a pregnant women who, coming from the middle classes, claims to have no politics at all.

The play sketches the differences in "positionalities" that these women represent. While Olga has lived the most actively committed political life, her ambiguous status as double agent leaves her the most alienated and alone of the group, her existential experience at odds with her political work. "You don't trust me. They don't trust me . . . but I have to go on . . . Knowing all the time that you despise me . . . Strange the way things turn out: I always looked for love amongst companeros—And I have ended up alone."[17] Aurora, on the other hand, is a famous actress, who seems to the others pampered and spoiled. Afraid of torture, focused only on getting released, she seems an unlikely one to be the center of the secret plan to free "an important person," yet she is revealed to be the contact. Rosario, the politically shrewd and experienced *companera,* pronounces her view of artists and intellectuals: "They help popularize the ideas of the movement. . . . Usually political events leave them behind and they end up getting in the way."[18] Aurora, however, is important because she has been the conduit for money coming into the country from exiled comrades. Jimena is a middle-class woman whose political education takes place in the prison as she comes to respect and admire the commitment she sees, even while fearing for herself and her unborn child. Ironically, she is the one taken out and tortured until she dies. Her prematurely born daughter is left in the care of Rosario at the play's end. *My Song Is Free* represents these four women and their differences, brought together in intense crisis. The politicosocial as-

pects of the script are enhanced by lyrical and communal effects of music and sound. The theme song of the play, repeated several times, is a lullaby and a rallying song:

> Like a free bird
> flying free
> like a free bird
> is how I dream you

One of the most successful productions of Monstrous Regiment during the 1980s was *Origin of the Species,* written by Bryony Lavery for Hanna and McCusker. Its "origins" began in a three-week workshop with the two actresses, Lavery, and director Nona Shepphard, a typical beginning for Regiment productions. It was, Hanna quips, "intended to be a history of the world for two characters."[19] For source material they read widely, ranging from Capra's *The Turning Point* to various classical accounts of evolution to Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* to the work of Jane Goodall. Their workshop strategies included mask work and improvisations, wide ranging and without preliminary assumptions about character, plot, or setting. After the workshop Lavery went away and sketched in the script; three more weeks of rehearsals consolidated the project.

In its final form *Origin of the Species* represents the encounter between Molly, a Yorkshire archaeologist, and her four-million-year-old ancestor, whom she uncovers while on a dig with Louis and Mary Leakey at Olduvai Gorge. Molly smuggles her "baby" home and "raises" her, learning in exchange a great deal about human development as Victoria comes into her own. On New Year's Eve, 1984, the present time of the play, Molly sends Victoria out in the world, aware that she cannot keep her at home anymore.

The play works to both insinuate women into natural history and to critique patriarchal history. Digging up the ancient skeleton of originary "man," Molly gets "the shock of her life when this creature, whom she expects to be a man, is in fact a woman."[20] What if historical narrative were told with a woman as the first protagonist instead of a man? As for received stories, gender critique formulates them in a different light: at one point Molly tells Victoria "the clock story," which is an account of scientific investigation and appropriation of the earth by men who treat it as a clock (with suitable resonances to

Enlightenment Deism). A curious boy, called variously "Plato Aristotle Copernicus Galileo Bacon Descartes Newton," took the clocks apart and assembled new clocks until

> finally he made a clock which could
> make
> everything vanish
> this is my best clock he said
> my vanishing clock
> I must take this and show it to my mother
> and he ran with his vanishing clock
> hither and thither
> but his mother had vanished
> and he looked at his exploding clock
> and saw that he had very little time
> left[21]

To "discover" Victoria is thus to embark on an exploration of seeing the world and our accounts of it from the perspective of the female gaze. This is the working premise of the play.

McCusker, whose early training included three years at the Glasgow Academy of Speech and Drama, had a special acting challenge in creating a representation of the creature Victoria. "I had to try for a character who was child-like but not childish, who had an innocence because she didn't know or understand this world she'd been projected into, and who gradually through friendship leapfrogs into the 20th century."[22] McCusker did research on the physical development of her creature, especially on gorillas and on the native languages of the Olduvai Gorge, in order to help find physical attributes of movement and speech for Victoria. Her physical movement, created with the help of director Shepphard, featured bent legs but a straight back—"rather like a ballet dancer doing a plié"—which enabled her to move at high speed. She wore a hairy body suit for the part, from which some of the hair could be removed for the second act, as Victoria assimilates to modern life. Her vocal work started with basic words, which approximated the words of people from the regions where Victoria originated, and McCusker altered her sound production to create a new voice: "I couldn't alter my own physical being, but I could try to alter the physical energy in the mouth for

making sentences out of sounds." Reasoning that people who live in the open air must communicate across large distances, McCusker used her diaphragm, creating a "voice for fear which was earsplitting in the auditorium, giving some people quite a fright."[23]

This production is representative of the imagination and collaboration of the Monstrous Regiment at its best. For Hanna and McCusker the opportunity to work together is always a great satisfaction. Gillian Hanna on McCusker: "I think Mary's a terrific actor and it's lovely to be on stage with an actor that you know terribly well, have worked with a lot, and really trust."[24] The production was generally well received on tour and in London at the Drill Hall. Roy Asquith wrote of it: "it has much of the fascination of good science fiction, the moral resonance of a parable, a beautiful set that combines domestic bliss with the call of the wild and confirms Jenny Carey as one of the most innovative designers around, and marvelously funny performances from Gillian Hanna (Molly) and Mary McCusker (Victoria)."[25]

The Monstrous Regiment productions frequently involve staging nonliterary aspects that come from workshop and collaboration among the various artistic contributors. Sometimes their productions border on performance art. Chris Bowler, who has been a founding member and associated with the company throughout its existence, has fashioned several pieces for the company that illustrate this aspect of their work. During the 1980s she devised *Enslaved by Dreams* and *Point of Convergence* and during the last two years has been working on a new project, provisionally called *Isolation and Cruelty*. These theater pieces share an emphasis on spectacle, a fragmented and non-Aristotelian script, and various musical and aural affects. *Enslaved by Dreams* will serve as a concrete example of this style.

The original impulse for the play came from a workshop held in the 1970s at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), in which the company was working with Caryl Churchill on the notion of "a bunch of women in history meeting in a kind of no man's land" (possibly the genesis for the first part of *Top Girls*). Chris read a biography of Florence Nightingale, which was "lying about the office" and which affected her greatly: "I was very taken with her, her sense of not being able to get at what she wanted to do, being prevented by all sorts of things." She proposed it as a show and was designated producer/director, a new challenge for someone who had

primarily seen herself as an actress: "I had very strong ideas about the script, and I looked for a while for a writer, but I didn't want a well-made play." In the end she devised it herself. *Enslaved by Dreams* never names Florence Nightingale but, rather, presents three Florences, named in the program by the colors of their dresses but within the text established as sisters with names of Sally, Celia, and Tamsin.

Although set in Victorian times, the set combined various modern elements with the old ones—thus, a modern filing cabinet next to a nineteenth-century chaise; computer print-outs but old-fashioned pens. The floor of the set was covered with papers and writing then shellacked. The play is heavily dependent on music and special choreography for its tone, using a waltz motif to stitch together the scenic and monologic fragments of the women's experiences. In the "Tea Cup Waltz" actresses danced and did cartwheels while passing cups and saucers. Not every aspect of the mise-en-scène was immediately recognizable. Tubs with prop turds representing the lack of sanitation in Victorian hospitals sometimes went unacknowledged: "People didn't always know what they were seeing—some of it worked on an emotional but not on an intellectual level."[26]

The simultaneous portrayal of aspects of Nightingale separates out the young girl who loves to dance but yearns for permission to become a nurse, the hard-working matter-of-fact organizer, and the sickly, bedridden woman who beseeches for medical reforms by letter from her bedside. At times the script establishes concrete historical conditions:

> *Tamsin:* I am witnessing a calamity unparalleled in the history of calamities. The British Army has 11,000 men laying siege to Sebastopol, and 12,000 men in hospital. It is being destroyed. Not by losses in battle, but by sickness—and most of it avoidable.[27]

At other points the personal struggles of the characters are in focus:

> *Sally:* My God what is to become of me. My present life is suicide. Slowly I have opened my eyes to the fact that I cannot now deliver myself from the habit of dreaming, which like

> gin-drinking is eating out my vital strength. . . . I shall never do anything and am worse than dust and nothing. Oh for some strong thing to sweep this loathsome life into the past.[28]

The gist of the play deconstructs the myth of the historical Florence, while creating an experience, mood, and feeling of longing and frustration. It both distances and draws in; the nonverbal aspects of the production ensure the emotional intertext. Bowler characterizes it negatively as "not quite a movement piece but not quite a play."[29] This kind of production marks out the theatrical territory for collaborative, improvisatory work that rests on other-than-literary creation.

Bowler's next work, *Point of Convergence,* was a fantasy built around two groups of women, the Wild Girls and the Fighters, who encounter each other in an unspecified place. Bowler was interested in representing two generations of women, the older intellectual feminists, who have engaged in certain "battles" and survived, and younger women, who have other ways of doing things and take some of the goals of feminism for granted. This show was very physical—the Wild Girls trained to do acrobatics, tumbling, rolling, and wrestling because Bowler was interested in young bodies and the way they can move physically.

Starting in 1988, and still developing, an idea for a new project occurred to Bowler. After the birth of her own child, she read in the newspaper about a three-year-old child who starved to death, locked in a room for months while the people who were responsible lived just a few feet away. She began to want to explore the relationship between cruelty and morality and the way the country neglects its people—"the post-Thatcher climate of greed." Describing the relationship between the personal and the public, Bowler writes, "At home, we have the Conservative government consistently attacking and weakening those least able to protect themselves. I think their policies profoundly immoral. They make the sort of areas I'm concerned with (e.g., child-abuse) much more likely through the pressure of unemployment, and cuts in living standards. But I think they also give a model for . . . a degree of personal and domestic cruelty. The idea of the survival of the fittest has invaded both public and private life."[30] Her production ideas combine realistic material and characters—perhaps a child, an old woman living alone, and a social

worker or policewoman—with nonrealistic devices such as sound-taped interior monologue, jagged time-shifts, and even telepathic contact between living and dead characters. Bowler was able, with a seed money grant, to run a week's workshop with four actors in 1988. While the piece had not been produced as of 1991 it still remains on the Regiment planning boards. This project indicates that the style of production that Bowler represents continues to be an important part of the aesthetics of the Monstrous Regiment.

Postscript

Clare Venables, who had been a resident director at the Sheffield Crucible, was appointed as the new artistic director of Monstrous Regiment in April 1991. She had worked on such recent Regiment productions as *Beatrice* and *Love Story of the Century,* working closely with both Hanna and McCusker. In May the Arts Council conducted a major review of the company and its proposed new changes. An interim report, prepared by McCusker and submitted in April, outlined the major changes the company proposes to make over the next three years. These have been discussed above and include the switch to a management style employing an artistic director, a management advisory board, and an executive management team. The pattern of work for the company changed to emphasize nontouring work produced in a "Home Season" at such London venues as The Gate or the Soho Poly. One tour each season was to be offered, to be selected from the previous year's Home Season, in order to ensure its quality. New work continued to be developed through public readings, workshops, and commissions, including a slot for a writer-in-residence. In addition, a marketing consultant was engaged by the company to help create a coherent marketing strategy to accompany the new artistic identity of the Monstrous Regiment.

At the end of 1992, however, the Arts Council cut the revenue grant of Monstrous Regiment and changed their status to project client. This means that they can apply for money for single projects but not to maintain a staff of artistic director, administrative director, or other monies with which to run the company. The Monsters had expected at least three years of revenue funding under Claire Venables's direction but were cut off after two. Venables is no longer the artistic director of Monstrous Regiment. Her last production was

I've Got Nothing To Wear, a comic cabaret on the issue of clothes, which played in London till the end of the year (1992). She would probably not have stayed on anyway, since she wanted to change the name of the company, something the Board, composed of original members Hanna, McCusker, and Bowler, opposed.

However, with the revenue cut, not only Venables but the entire status of the company is severely endangered. The total funds allocated for 1993 represent half of what they requested; Mary McCusker thinks that they may lose their permanent offices. The future is bleak and McCusker acknowledges that their next project, planned for early in 1994, "might be the last thing that we do." The play will be called *More Light,* by Bryony Lavery, who has of course worked with the Monstrous Regiment over the years. It is about Chinese concubines who are buried alive when their emperors die. The women eat the cadavers of the men and acquire their knowledge. According to McCusker, it has a cast of fifteen women, three male corpses, and one live man. If it is truly to be their last production, at least it sounds like they'll go out with a bang. But then this group of women would never leave with a whimper.

NOTES

Epigraph from "The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women," in *The Works of John Knox,* ed. David Laing (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 4:368.

1. When the Monstrous Regiment was touring the United States in 1987 the Boston Globe proclaimed that "Monstrous Regiment is one of the leading political theatre companies in the English-speaking world." Considering the difficulty of sustaining political theater practice, this comment does not seem hyperbolic.

2. "Fat" only in the sense that more new playwrights and companies were able to flourish during that period than since that time—not "fat" in any sense of being over or even adequately funded.

3. *Carry on Understudies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 34.

4. Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* and Bryony Lavery's *Origin of the Species* have been published in Methuen's *Plays by Women* series, and Susan Todd's and David Edgar's *Teendreams* has been published as a Methuen playscript.

5. In addition to *Carry on Understudies,* see Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1980); Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988); Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

6. "The Dis-Play's the Thing: Gender and Public Sphere in Contemporary British Theater," *Theatre Journal* 42, no. 1 (1990): 30.

7. Richard Edmonds, *Birmingham Post,* 23 November 1984.

8. While I am well aware of the ascendancy of John Majors in place of Margaret Thatcher, I still consider these "Thatcher years" in much the same way that we in the United States were still living the "Reagan Era" throughout the Bush presidency.

9. See my comments about this project later in this essay.

10. Production costs and practices in the United States have contributed, I contend, to ensuring that the traditional models of domestic psychological drama continue to enjoy hegemony on American stages.

11. Interview in the *Guardian,* 11 October 1988.

12. Interview with Mary McCusker, 16 January 1991.

13. Ibid.

14. Quotes from the advertising pamphlet announcing the workshops and the Autumn season for 1990.

15. Interview with Gillian Hanna, 14 June 1989.

16. Jorge Diaz, unpub. MS, *My Song Is Free (All This Long Night);* English adaptation by Niger Geanly.

17. Ibid., 50.

18. Ibid., 45.

19. Interview with Gillian Hanna, 22 June 1989.

20. Ibid.

21. Bryony Lavery, "Origin of the Species," *Plays by Women,* ed. Mary Remnant (London: Methuen, 1987), 6:81.

22. Interview with Mary McCusker, 13 July 1989.

23. Ibid.

24. Interview with Hanna, 22 June 1989.

25. *Observer,* 31 March 1985.

26. Interview with Chris Bowler, 22 June 1989.

27. Unpub. MS, *Enslaved by Dreams,* 22.

28. Ibid., 14.

29. Interview with Bowler, 22 June 1989.

30. Chris Bowler, unpub. working notes.

31. Interview with McCusker, 12 February 1993.