



1990-92 Responses to the Arts Council

The main document here - 'Monstrous Regiment: Planning for the Future' - was sent by the company to the Arts Council early in 1991. It had been prepared by Mary McCusker, as executive director, and sets out the company's response to the Council's 1990 appraisal report.

Its proposals include the appointment of an artistic director, and a possible new pattern of work in which each year's touring production would be selected from a 'home season' of productions the previous year.

The Arts Council agreed to the appointment of an artistic director, but delayed a decision on the future funding of the company until later.

A copy of this document (including some appendices removed here) is in the company's archive at the V&A's Theatre and Performance Archives.

MONSTROUS REGIMENT

21st February 1991

Ian Brown
Drama Director
Arts Council Great Britain
14 Great Peter St
London SW1P 3NQ

Dear Ian Brown,

The company has closely examined the areas which have caused the Arts Council concern, and addressed the problems raised in the Appraisal Report. The enclosed planning document and the report by Ms Sue Beardon are a result of that process.

We remain committed to our former policy statements, and are convinced we have the skills and energy needed to revitalise the company, and continue to play a role in the theatrical arena.

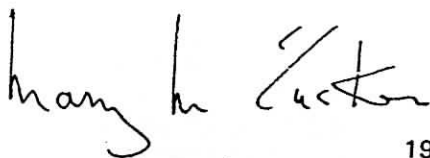
Obviously the new Artistic Director will make a significant impact on the final version of the plans. However in their present form they do give a clear indication of the company's priorities and Artistic aspirations.

The proposals cover a three year period from April 1991 to April 1994 ; and the changes involved will be carefully phased in over this period.

It is of course possible that this whole process might be accelerated by an upturn in the economy and a dynamic Artistic Director, however it seems wiser to predict a steady growth on both the economic and artistic fronts.

The key proposals are set out in the summary, I look forward to hearing your comments.

Yours Sincerely



Mary McCusker

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MONSTROUS REGIMENT: PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

BACKGROUND

Monstrous Regiment Theatre Company has been funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain for fifteen years. During this time the high quality of its productions, and its support for new writing and theatrical experiment, have made a valuable contribution to the growth of "alternative theatre" in this country. Its policy of putting the experience of women centre-stage, coupled with a mature theatrical approach which refuses to sacrifice artistic quality and skill in the name of commitment, has produced an impressive body of work.

The company was initially established as a permanent group of performers working closely with writers and directors. In more recent years it has operated instead as an unpaid managerial collective, with a single full-time administrator, and professional performers and directors employed on short-term contracts for each production. This structure has enabled the company to sustain the artistic quality of its work in relatively less favourable economic and cultural conditions. But it has not proved fully effective in meeting the challenges provided by this new environment.

The difficulties being experienced by the company, and the areas requiring attention, were pinpointed in the March 1990 report of the Arts Council's Appraisal Team. The need for a radical re-think of the company's future was further emphasized by the Drama Panel's decision, in May 1990, that funding could not be guaranteed beyond September 1991. As the Appraisal Team commented, the company had concentrated for too long on survival: now was the time for it to re-deploy its skills and energy in a more positive direction.

To enable the company to carry out the necessary process of self-assessment whilst continuing with its existing artistic and touring commitments, the Management Team appointed one of its founder members, Ms. Mary McCusker, as full-time Executive Director. Her brief has been to draw up plans for the re-shaping of the company on the basis of a rigorous examination of its present strengths and weaknesses. It has also employed the services of a management consultant, Ms. Sue Beardon, whose report is appended to this document.

The key proposals resulting from this process, which are set out below, are aimed at enhancing the artistic identity and impact of the company's work, and at increasing the scale and effectiveness of its promotion of new writing. They involve major changes in management structure and patterns of work; and they provide the basis for a coherent marketing strategy and improved income-generation. Their implementation will require an appropriate level of financial and other support from the ACGB.

The rationale for these proposals is provided in the following section, which presents a brief analysis of the company's development and of various factors which have contributed to its current difficulties.

ANALYSIS

The success of a touring company committed to the performance of new writing depends heavily on its work having a clearly recognizable artistic identity - one which potential bookers and audiences can relate to in advance of their experience of the particular production on offer.

In the earlier years of Monstrous Regiment's development, this need was met mainly by the existence of a permanent group of performers, with a distinctive method of working. Plays were written specifically for this performing company; and in the lengthy and intensive pre-rehearsal period associated with each production, there was a creative interplay between writers, performers, directors and designers. The final product which emerged from this process was stamped with a particular character - a company product, a Monstrous Regiment production.

In more recent years, with changes in the company's basic structure and organization, the artistic identity of its work has become increasingly fragmented. Different groups of performers have been recruited for each production, working with newly completed scripts produced in isolation from them. The unpaid management collective has continued to represent the spirit of Monstrous Regiment, and to encourage new writing with seedcorn money and commissions. But the relationship of the cast to the play has become an increasingly conventional one; and the method of work no longer feeds the company's artistic identity.

As a result of these changes, many bookers at touring venues no longer knew what kind of product they were being offered. Demand and income fluctuated. The theatrical excellence of one play did not guarantee the company's name being linked with it for the next season. In the new, harsher economic climate, bookers were experiencing their own financial difficulties, coupled with a cultural climate less favourable to the reception of new work. They were therefore far less willing to take the risks involved in buying an unknown product. In this situation, neither they nor the company have found it easy to develop an effective marketing strategy.

Despite the financial difficulties resulting from this situation, the company has maintained a high standard of production. This has been made possible partly by initiating a series of co-productions with provincial repertory theatres, and also by the commissioning of small-cast plays.

These measures have enabled the company to maintain its artistic standards whilst managing also to balance its annual budgets. Their success has owed much to the professional skills and commitment of all those involved in the company's work. But they have done little to solve the underlying problems confronting the company. To do this, a more radical set of changes is required.

The process of self-examination conducted by the company over the past six months has strongly confirmed its desire to continue. Its members remain committed to the artistic ideals set out in its founding policy statement; and they are confident that a coherent strategy has now been identified which will revitalise the company and enable it to play a major role in the new theatrical arena of the 90s.

PROPOSALS

The following proposals are concerned with three main areas of the company's operation: Artistic Identity, Management Structure, and Marketing. They cover a three year period from April 1991 to April 1994; and the changes involved will be carefully phased in over this period. A year-by-year outline of the stages in this development, and its budgetary implications, is provided later on in this document.

Artistic Identity and Pattern of Work

Two major steps will be taken to re-shape the artistic identity of the company and its public perception. They will be accompanied by a boldly conceived re-launch campaign designed to promote the new face of Monstrous Regiment to bookers, and to re-awaken a sense of theatrical excitement in audiences.

Marking a clear break with its past policy, the first step will be the appointment of an experienced Artistic Director, whose artistic talents and creative energy will be brought to bear on all aspects of the company's development, and whose high profile will give an immediately recognizable identity to its work.

The second step will be a major shift in the existing balance between its touring and non-touring work, designed both to expand the overall level of its artistic output, and to enhance the marketability of its touring productions. (This will require some renegotiation of the terms on which ACGF funds the company, as suggested in the Appraisal Team's report: see p.9, 6.6).

Under its Artistic Director, short seasons of new work will be performed at a single venue with an established regular audience. It is envisaged that in the initial years the company will target London venues (e.g. Soho Poly, Gate) for the production of these Home Seasons. But it will also aim to develop strong artistic links with regional venues for future years.

These Home Seasons will provide the main arena for the performance of new work in full-scale productions. Their introduction will enable the company to exercise greater control over resources, to create more opportunities to maximize publicity, and to develop specific venue-oriented strategies to increase audiences.

The company will also develop and produce new writing at a number of other levels: at rehearsed readings (already successfully in operation at the Drill Hall); at workshops with specific writers on their plays (starting this Spring); and by initiating collaboration on new work at an early stage with particular venues/companies (also started this year). It will apply for Arts Council support to appoint a Writer in Residence (as in 90-91), who will benefit from their access to the company and will in turn provide critical analysis and support for other writers and their scripts. It will also continue to set aside seed money to develop potential commissions. This commissioning process will be closely monitored, and each play will have a rehearsed reading at first draft stage. (See Appendix on new writing recommendations).

The touring productions of the company will build upon this substantial and extensive range of home-based work. National venues will be offered each year a single play which has already been successfully produced during the previous Home Season, and/or intensively worked on and developed at other levels. Venues will thus be presented with a tried and tested product, which can be marketed on the basis of full information and its clear relationship to the company's artistic identity.

The company will also continue to premiere foreign work, and will establish further links with European and American producers. It also plans to exploit the educational aspects of dual language productions, and the touring potential provided by this kind of work.

Taken together, these proposals will significantly enhance the artistic identity of the company, and represent an effective strategy for the development and production of new writing in the 90s. They offer a realistic prospect of increased income that is firmly based on genuine artistic growth. They will also make major demands on the company's managerial structure and personnel.

Company Structure and Management

Monstrous Regiment has clearly benefited from the continuing commitment of three of its founder members operating as part of a collective management. But as the Appraisal Team noted in 5.1 a) of their document, "an unpaid and part-time collective management does not equip the Company to meet the challenges it faces in an increasingly harsh commercial environment"; and the artistic growth envisaged over the next three years adds to the need for changes in this area.

The present structure of collective management plus full-time administrator will be replaced by one comprising a Management Board and an Executive Management Team. In the first year (91-92) this team will consist of the Artistic Director and the Administrator, with extra skills being brought in on a part-time basis. In 92-93 the team will be increased to three members. The specification for this third post will be determined after a careful appraisal of the company's progress in 91-92.

The Management Board will include the existing members of the management collective, which has already been expanded by the addition of a member of the company's Advisory Panel with administrative expertise. It will be further strengthened and expanded by the recruitment of two new members, with expertise in the areas of Marketing and Finance.

This will provide a strong Board able to bring to bear an extensive range of skills and experience on all areas of decision making; and a strong Executive Team able not only to implement policy decisions, but to generate and seize new artistic opportunities.

The Management Board will meet once a month, and with the Executive Management Team will determine company policy. Twice a year there will be special meetings of the Management Board to appraise the performance of the Executive Team. The Board will assess progress against previously agreed targets, review conditions of employment, and consider future training needs. The importance of such specialist training will be recognized by an increase in the budgetary allocation for this area.

In the light of these proposed changes the role of the company's Advisory Panel is now being reviewed. Its members represent a wide range of interests and experience; and with the new Artistic Director in place the Board will consider how best their various abilities can contribute to the company's development.

Marketing and Promotion

In the past two years the company has employed a firm of publicists (Taylors) to generate press interest and handle the increasingly complex area of publicity. It has also increased its Promotions/Publicity budget. But this kind of expenditure has not proved to be cost-effective. For example, money was often absorbed by demands from venues for larger numbers of leaflets and posters which, as researchers have pointed out, is not always the best way to reach audiences.

What is clearly needed is the development of a coherent marketing strategy that is fully integrated with the company's artistic character and direction. A recent application for financial assistance in this area from the Incentive Funding Scheme proved unsuccessful. But the proposed re-launching of the company with its new Artistic Director now provides an excellent opportunity to do this.

The Board will engage the services of an experienced marketing consultant, who will draw up proposals for an overall strategy for the company directly related to the re-shaping of its artistic identity outlined above. This will include the concentration of resources on particular venues where specific audiences can be targeted for Home Season productions, and the forging of new relationships with touring venues made possible by the pre-tour development of touring productions.

Implementation of this strategy will be the responsibility of the Executive Management Team; and its effectiveness will be monitored by the Management Board with its improved marketing and financial expertise.

This strategy will be developed in the context of the company's specific re-launch campaign in September 91, which will be timed to coincide with the publication, by Random House/Nick Hearn, of a book celebrating the past achievements of the company. The campaign will present the new face of Monstrous Regiment to potential bookers and audiences alike. It will focus both on the high profile of its new Artistic Director, and on the continued involvement of its highly regarded founder members.

SUMMARY

The main changes proposed are as follows:

Monstrous Regiment will re-shape its Artistic Identity.

First, by the appointment of an experienced, high profile Artistic Director.

Second, by a series of changes to its Pattern of Work.

The main change will be the development of Non Touring Work, by setting up short seasons of new work in a single venue - a Home Season.

There will be One Tour each year, normally selected from the previous year's Home Season.

New writing will be also be developed at a number of different levels

These changes will be linked to the creation of a coherent Marketing Strategy that is fully integrated with the company's new artistic identity. A Marketing Consultant will be engaged by the company.

The Management Structure will be strengthened by the recruitment of additional members to the Management Board with specific skills in Marketing and Finance.

This Board will determine the overall policy of the company, and conduct regular appraisals of the performance of its Executive Management Team.

The Executive Management Team will include the full-time Administrator and the Artistic Director. They will be supported in the first year (91-92) by one or more part-time staff.

In 92-93 the Team will be augmented by the appointment of a third full-time member, whose specific skills and responsibilities will be determined after an appraisal of progress in 91-92.

Members of the Advisory Panel will continue to be actively involved in specific areas of the company's work.